

What the Wind Carries
by S.A. Payne

Doctor Thomas Lambry has lost most interest in caring about anyone, personally or professionally. His primary concern is to look out for himself and nothing more. But when he rescues a beautiful blonde damsel in distress his life gets turned upside down.

Alex isn't quite a damsel and while situations have taken a turn for the worse, he's far from helpless. Used to getting his own way and making something out of nothing, he's not used to a man scorning his advances. Challenged by Tom's indifference, Alex takes it upon himself to remind the older man what it means to be alive.

Set in the late 1800's in America, the two travel to find a home thought lost and unreachable and on the way find something more valuable and far more elusive.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter One

There was a quiet beauty to the rolling back woods mountains that Tom found appealing. The people that populated the hill country kept to themselves and lived nearly untouched by the world around them. He'd ridden west on a whim, following the roads that soon became little more than beaten trails west from Virginia, letting the road take him south to touch briefly into North Carolina and Tennessee and now he was securely riding around a beautiful Kentucky mountainside.

A damp, misting spring rain had been playing hide and seek with the sunshine all day and it was enough to settle the dust on the road but not enough to make the mud a real rain would spawn. He pulled the collar of his coat up a little bit but kept his horse, a dapple gelding he hadn't bothered to name, on a loose rein and steady pace. He wasn't really headed anywhere, just west and he wasn't in a hurry to get there.

The horse whickered slightly, a sound Tom had learned to trust in his short acquaintance with the animal, he slowed up and strained to listen. Sure enough, after another moment Tom heard the faster hoof beats coming up the trail behind him. He ran a hand through his dark brown, now slightly damp hair, and made a mental check of any sins he might have committed lately. He was pretty sure none were serious enough to send anyone charging after him.

When the road widened out he guided the animal to the side and eased them both to a halt. The horse was even tempered but he wouldn't be amused to have some crazy rider spooking the beast unnecessarily. He scratched his nose and waited, sitting easily in the worn leather saddle.

It wasn't a long wait. A single rider charged up the trail on a horse that was more made for the plough than a saddle. The man saw Tom, sitting idly with his coat open enough to show the butts of the pistols he wore and reigned his horse in tightly. The horse was skittish and had to be reigned in a tight circle to bring it under control but the man didn't seem worried about being thrown.

"Mister," He called out breathlessly. "I ain't meaning no trouble, Mister." His droopy eyes glanced to the displayed weapons. "I heard that a doctor been riding up this trail, have you seen him Mister?"

Tom took stock of the man, maybe nineteen or twenty, dirty short cut hair and a good three or four days stubble on his chin. He was a big fellow, wide and thick, strong in his arms and shoulders but Tom had a sneaking suspicion that the man wasn't the most quick witted of fellows. He leaned forward in the saddle, seeing the rifle tucked in the old saddle behind the stranger. "What're you looking for a doctor for?"

"Please, Mister, my brother's real sick, I ain't got time, have you seen him?"

"I'm sorry to hear about your brother but I'm not working right now."

Tom watched the information slowly sink into the farm boy's brain and when understanding dawned it was like a light going on. "Doc, please, doc, we ain't go much but we'll pay you. We're just over this hillside, a few hours ride, that's all, he's hurting real bad, Doc, you gotta help him."

"No, I don't and I don't need the money." He hitched the reins to the horse's side and the animal starting walking back out onto the trail.

The other man looked baffled for a moment but than a new angle formed. "It's going to rain awful hard tonight, Doc. Dumping rain tonight for sure, I wouldn't want to be caught out on the road in the rain that's coming. We got a good roof you could sleep under."

"A little water never hurt a soul." But Tom wasn't sure this fellow would grasp that comment, from the dirt that clung to him, it had been a while since he'd tangled with water long enough to bathe.

"You're in a hurry, Doc, I see that, this road, it'll take you two, three days out of your way. It curves all around these mountains. From our home, you just ride down the valley and up a hill and you pick this same road up on the other side. Ain't no one local follow the road lessen they have a wagon or cart. Shoot, single man on horse back would be wasting time this way. I'll show you, you help my brother and stay in out of the rain." The man followed behind Tom and the clean fresh afternoon air was clouded with the scent of unwashed body.

Tom sighed and pulled his horse up again. "You won't quit will you?" A faster way around the mountain would make it worth his while.

"No, doc, what do you say?"

The thick eyes looked hopeful. Tom nodded. "Very well, but you're still paying me."

The young man nodded hard enough to rattle most folks brains and grinned. "Thank you, doc, thank you. Come on, we should hurry, Abe's real sick."
"And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Billy, Billy McTaggart." He offered a paw like hand in greeting. "What should I call you, doc?"

Tom ignored it. "Thomas Lambry."

Billy withdrew his hand with a scowl and turned his horse off the trail. "Been a long time since we had a doctor down in these parts. I was riding to see old lady Miller but she said you'd been through not a day or two before and you'd be closer to home than she was. So I said I'd done right by Abe, and get him a real doctor if I could."

Tom sighed and followed Billy's steady pace off into the trees. The young man refused to shut up

and nothing rubbed him the wrong way than a man that prattled on. There was a peace in silence that he liked and as he'd seen too often, a man that ran at the mouth either was a simpleton or had something to hide. He already guessed Billy was a touch of the first, it made him wonder if he was also the second.

It was a long, not always easy, afternoon ride and Tom was ready to shoot the boy just to shut him up but he could see they were heading almost directly over the mountains instead of around them. As the day wore on, Tom caught a scent on the air and it only grew stronger until his informative guide broke into a clearing and Tom found himself in a small cabin's front yard. It was made of logs and had the appearance of having sat in that same spot for decades. The roof was in good repair but there were torn curtains in the open windows. A few hogs were separated in a pen to the side of the house and a larger than necessary barn sat across the clearing.

A man stepped out from the house onto the porch. His pants were dirty and his boots old. The suspenders crossed his graying long john top. Unlike the talkative Billy, this man had made no efforts to shave and a thick beard clung to his face. He scratched his stomach and stood on the porch one hand on the railing.

"What's this now?" He called out, eyeing Tom suspiciously.

Billy dismounted the horse and clutched at the reins. "Adam, this is Doctor Thomas Lambry." Billy said the name with extended care as if he'd been practicing it in his head the whole afternoon. "Doc, this is my brother Adam."

Adam sniffed. "He ain't no doctor."

"Old lady Miller says he is."

"What kind of doctor rides around wearing pistols like that?"

Tom stayed on his horse. "The kind that takes care of himself."

The man spat. "Damned Yankee too."

"I'll gladly ride on."

The threat hung in the air. Adam spit again. "You really know doctoring?"

"Better than some, not as well as others."

"I don't suppose Abe can wait for the old lady to get her tired bones up here. We put him in the barn but we'll bring him out for you."

"Don't bother, I can smell the stills. I don't care what you're brewing up here."

Adam scratched again and eyed his brother, wondering what the man might have said on the ride back. "Good, smart man staying to his own affairs."

Tom slid easily off the back of his horse, comforted now that he knew the secret that had Billy so nervous. He felt a distaste for this trio of brothers and he hadn't met the third yet. "I'll need water, boiled and clean."

"Creek's clean, we'll get some fetched up. Billy, see to the doc's horse." Adam turned. "Alice! Get out here!"

Tom untied his medical bag, soft sided and made of well made tan leather, and let Billy lead his horse away. There was a clinking, dragging sound and Tom turned around, his distaste grew at the sight before him.

Alice was a frightfully skinny young girl, given that neither of the brothers looked shortened on their meals, it made her thin skin stretched over bone appearance painful to see. The skirt hung from narrow hips, the hem frayed over bare, dirty feet. A blouse hung on her frame, exposing a glimpse of sharp collarbones. Her hands were slender but raw red from work and use and nearly as dirty as her bare feet. Hair the color of hay fell in tight waves half way down her back, it would have been pretty if it was tangled and filthy, pulled back by a cord that had tangled into the waves.

The face would be pretty when she matured, and put some weight on. A sharp, clever chin stood under full soft lips, a cute, small nose was dominated by high cheekbones and large eyes the color of walnuts. Cleaned up and fed, the child would be stunning one day, her skin, now pale from starvation would glow peaches and cream with some care. The dark, bruised half moons under her eyes would fade, her hair would shine with a good washing and brushing.

It wasn't the dirt, or even the starvation, that turned Tom's stomach. There was terror in the child's eyes and chains around her ankles. The cuffs of the shackles were three inches wide and hung loosely around the slender ankles. The chain was rusted but strong, thick linked and heavy. There was just enough slack to almost allow the child to take a full step, but not quiet.

The beauty of the girl stirred Tom, fascinated him and confused him. He'd never been interested in children, and his efforts to be interested in women had left him cold. It hadn't been an easy thing to accept, the conclusion that men were far more to his tastes than women, but it was something he'd come to terms with while he was still younger than Billy. It wasn't like him to be attracted to any child, let alone a dirty little mountain girl.

"Alice, go get the doctor water and heat it up now." Adam ordered.

The girl bobbed her head and tried to slip by, the chains rattling as she walked.

"Fine way to treat a young girl. She's your what? Your wife? Your sister?" Both, he added mentally, starting to really hate that he'd accepted this job.

Adam laughed and caught a thick hand into the blond tail and pulled. The child whimpered and fell stumbled back against the stronger man. "Alice ain't my sister, and Alice sure as the day is long ain't a young girl, but in a way Alice is our wife!" He groped at the girl and laughed a bit more before releasing his grip on the thick hair. "Go on now, get the water." The child hurried away, heading down the slight hill to where the creek cut around the mountain. Tom watched her and couldn't quite figure out what Adam had meant, there were no sign of breasts yet, so the child wasn't old enough to be called a woman. He was staring after the child trying to understand when Adam came up beside him and watched the retreating back.

"Almost would think he was a girl. Some nights, I forget." Adam nodded to the barn. "Abe's in here, we weren't getting no sleep with his moaning so we hauled him out here."

A boy, Alice was a boy. Tom could have been knocked down with a feather. He shook his head, oddly comforted that he wasn't thirty and suddenly finding women attractive and disturbed that he'd be even the least bit roused by a child of no more than twelve or thirteen. His feet followed Adam to the barn but his mind was too stunned to offer any direction.

The smell of the brewing moonshine whiskey was strong inside the dimly lit barn, but under it was the distinct smell of infection and fever. That broke Tom's train of thought and snapped him to the task at hand. He squinted into the dim interior. "Open all the doors and windows, let light and air in here and I'm going to need some lamps to see what I'm doing."

Adam didn't move. "The sick need to be shut up."

"Do you want to doctor him?" Tom snapped, his grey eyes flashing. "I didn't think so, now do what I said." His eyes had adjusted to the dimmer light and he was surprised to find a fireplace, cold and unlit, along the wall. "Get a fire going too." The barn wasn't cold, the small fires under the stills were keeping the chill out but the added light would be welcome. Tom glanced to the two able bodied brothers, one stalling the horses and one opening doors, and moved to the softly moaning lump of the third.

It was almost an hour before Alice lugged in a pot of steaming water, large enough that it should have weighed half her, his, weight. She set it down on the stones round the old fireplace, now burning crisply. Adam watched the child with narrowed eyes.

"Thank you." Tom responded to the water automatically and the child actually flinched from his voice.

"Billy, go help Alice get dinner together."

"Sure Adam."

The elder brother watched the younger drag the child from the barn and toward the house, it was starting to rain outside, softly now but looking to really pour soon. "We can't let Alice cook unwatched no more. It did that to Abe the last time."

Tom suddenly felt less sympathy for the man below his hands. The knife slash had been shallow enough, painful and bloody but not a killing blow. Infection was doing that for him, the wound was septic and angry red lines were streaking from the wound. Fever raged in the man and pain had him delirious.

"Is that why you keep her chained."

"We call Alice, it, not her," Adam grinned at his joke. "Naw, it came to us like that, Alice likes to fight but we're going to break it to be ridden."

Tom's stomach turned over but he settled it by telling himself it wasn't any of his concern.

"I named it Alice after a cow we once had. Damn fine cow." He nodded. "So, Doc, Abe going to make it?"

"Not without a miracle." Tom glanced up from where he knelt on his coat, his sleeves rolled up. "The wounds infected, badly. I can try but you'd be better off shooting him and putting him down."

Adam spit. "That's a hell of a thing to say."

Tom shrugged.

"Well, you try, you try hard. Abe's strong, he'll be fine." Adam spit again into the dirt of the floor. "I'll fetch you for supper."

Tom wasn't sorry to see the man leave. He kept washing the infected wound, pulling moans of pain from the semi-conscious man, but the pus wasn't showing signs of ending. His temper was too short to tolerate both annoyances at once.

He'd cleaned the reeking wound as best he could but the infection was so deep that there was no point in making a tincture or using any of the few real supplies he carried. There was no hope of finding a clean bandage either and the man's fate combined with the charm of his family, made Tom disinclined to use any from his supplies, but because he wasn't a total, heartless bastard, he washed out the bandage that had been in place when he arrived. Washed it better than the fabric had probably ever been washed and partially dried it by the fire before re-bandaging the wound.

The rattling of a chain broke into his work and he glanced up to see the boy, Alice, hovering uneasily in the open door way. The rain had splotched the thin blouse to the pale skin, leaving little doubt to the lack of female anatomy. Tom glanced back down.

"I won't hurt you." He rumbled out, feeling large and awkward next to the smaller boy.

"Supper's ready." The child spoke but the voice was feminine, soft, light, and with no more than a trace of a hint of the real gender in it.

"Thank you." But the child didn't leave and Tom glanced up again and saw the child had a battered pot clutched in one hand, steam rose slightly from it.

"I," The boy glanced down. "I heated some water, for you to wash up in. It's not boiling but it's not cold either." Shyly, the child carried the pot in and set it near Tom but well out of arm's reach.

"Thank you again." There was a lilting tone to the child's speech, an accent, soft and light, gently southern.

"I brought soap too." The child set the pale lavender colored slip of soap down near by.

"I didn't think they'd have anything like that on hand." Tom muttered as he knotted off the last of the bandages. He glanced up again and the child was hovering near the door like a spirit, a very tiny, very shy, smile touched his pretty face.

"It's mine, not theirs. They just haven't let me use it since I got here."

Tom glanced to the sliver of soap, scented in sharp lavender, and obviously a prized possession to the child. He felt like he'd been kicked in the chest. "I'll be right in as soon as I wash up." He gruffed out coldly, scaring the skittish child away.

He reminded himself it was none of his concern as he scrubbed the blood and infection from his hands and arms. The world was a bad, horrible place. Unfair, awful things happened to everyone and there wasn't a spot anywhere that was safe. None of it was his concern or problem, he only had to look out for one person and that person was him. As he rolled down his sleeves and darted across the lawn to the house, he'd managed to remind himself of his place and priorities.

The cabin wasn't much to look at outside and it was less so inside. The small space was split into two rooms, the front had a small cook stove with a bucket set beside it was slender sticks of chopped wood. They'd shuttered the glassless windows against the rain. The room was dominated by the plain wood table and two long benches. The table was set with three plates and three tin cups. An empty wood bucket sat in one corner with a scrub rag hung over the side to dry. It was cleaner than he'd expected, subtracting out the recent muddy footprints they were tracking in. The other room was obscured from easy sight by a blanket hanging in the rough hewed door frame in lieu of a door.

Alice was forking out slabs of ham from a sizzling frying pan, dropping one on each plate before forking out mounds of greens and cut up turnips that had been fried in the ham drippings. The child's stomach was growling at the smells but those wide brown eyes stayed lowered.

Tom didn't miss it, nor did he miss the limited amount of cooked meat and the heaping amounts

of greens. "What about the boy?" He asked and saw the child pause for a second before returning the pan with food still in it to the stove.

Adam poured out the strong home brewed whiskey they made into the tin cups. "It eats what we don't finish."

Tom watched the child quietly lower himself into the corner to sit and wait, watching. He lost his appetite but sat down at the table anyway. Adam and Billy folded their hands and bowed their heads, Tom just watched them, fascinated.

"God, thank You for this bounty and Your mercy. Thank You for bringing a doctor to tend to our brother Abe. Amen." The brother's raised their heads, scooping up the two tin forks and digging into their plates.

Tom ate more slowly. He sipped the moonshine carefully and actually found it to be quite good, he was betting it was a safer drink than the water. After the brother's initial glut Adam glanced up and grinned at Tom.

"Hey, doc, what say we let you have the first ride on Alice tonight? What do you say Billy?"

Billy laughed around a mouthful of food.

"No, thanks." He wasn't able to keep his disgust from his voice.

"It ain't like that doc, you can't tell it's not a girl." Billy mumbled around his food.

He hated his curiosity. It was better the less he knew but he needed to know. "Where'd you get him from? He sounds like he's from Virginia."

"This old coot brought him up here. The man was a drunk, he traded us Alice and the satchel it had with it for a couple of gallons of our shine. He lit out of here before we got to figuring she was an it but it's learning it's place. I don't think that old drunk even knew it weren't a girl, he was half blind and what." Adam boasted. "We made the best of the situation, seeing that we were cheated and all."

"Quite kind of you." Tom muttered sarcastically. Billy didn't notice the tone but Adam narrowed his eyes.

"You sure should take the first ride tonight." Adam nodded. "Ain't right for a man to be alone too long."

Tom downed the last of the shine in his cup in long, practiced swallows and put his fork down. "I can't, I should stay near your brother. Speaking of which, I need to return to him." He stood and with deliberate, cautious moves, and carried his plate to where the boy sat. As he would for a dog, he set his dinner plate on the floor. The child's eyes grew wide, Tom had left the better portion of his meat and most of his greens. The boy was shoveling the food into his mouth before he could reach the door.

"Thanks for dinner." Tom nodded before stepping out into the rain to hurry back to the barn.

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Chapter Two

Back in the safety of the barn, where Tom was pretty sure he wasn't going to shoot someone, he shook his head and checked on the dying man. He refused to think of the fellow as his patient. He didn't have patients anymore, he was hardly a doctor anymore by his own thoughts. The moaning man was little changed, maybe a touch weaker and Tom eased his head up to dribble some of the strong liquor past the parched lips. There was little other comfort to be offered, short of a bullet to the head.

When he was satisfied that there was nothing left for him to do, he checked on his horse. Fortunately, Billy treated animals better than skinny boys. The dapple gray was content, clean and warm, his soft nose nuzzled at Tom's hand and he figured he'd have to name the creature soon.

Since he could find nothing lacking for the beast, Tom untied his bedroll from his saddle that hung over the door to the stall. He shook it out and made up his place by the fire before moving to shutter some of the windows for the night. Once the sun had gone down, a lot of the spring warmth had faded into the chilly rain.

From the house came a banging crash, the sound of tin hitting wood and following closely came a protesting cry. The voice was too high pitched to be from the men, Tom stood in the door to the barn and glanced up at the slight glow seeping from the house. He heard one of the brothers cursing Alice out and the child crying for mercy again. They weren't happy sounds.

Tom pulled the barn door shut and went to the bedroll. He sat on it and checked over his pistols, a nightly ritual that eased him before falling asleep. It wasn't enough to settle his mind and he found himself glancing to the barn door.

"It's not my place." He muttered to the fevered man. "It's not my concern what sick bastards you are."

Stubbornly, Tom laid down and pillowed his head on his arm. The firelight crackled as he lay on his back, eyes open, waiting for sleep to come. He waited a long time and was still awake. He found the flat surface oddly lumpy and turned to get more comfortable. There was nothing he could do, Abe was a dead man, he'd ride out at first light. The sooner he was away from this homestead, the happier he'd be. He wiggled to settle in under his blanket and his eyes fell on the slip of soap.

"Aw, damn it." He cursed as he sat up and pushed the blankets off of him. He checked his pistols again before pulling his coat and hat back on.

The rain outside had slowed from dumping to a steady drumming but it was cold and wet crossing the yard. He should have been dry and warm, soundly asleep. It wasn't any of his affair what other folk did, but the words weren't comfort enough to let him sleep. He pushed the cabin door open.

The blanket door did nothing to muffle the sounds from behind. Grunts twisted with giggling, the wet slapping of flesh into flesh and quiet, heart wrenching sobbing. Tom's jaw was clenched so tightly his jaw ached but before he could push his way into the back room, Adam came out. The suspenders were loose at his hips now and from the contented grin on his face he'd already taken his turn. The grin turned to a knowing smile.

"Come in for that ride after all?"

The sounds and the smile urged Tom to start hitting the other man. "No. There's nothing more I can do for your brother. If you care for him, you'll end his pain, otherwise he'll linger, two, three,

maybe four more days. I'm riding out first light and I'm taking that boy with me. See to it his things are packed up and he's ready."

Adam shook his head. "I don't think you'll be wanting to do that, doc."

"Oh, no, I'll be doing it. That child isn't going to be spending another night under your care."

"It ain't got to be this way. Go, try Alice out, ride it until you're happy, but that skirt stays here. I won't let any man steal my horse, and I sure as hell won't be letting any northern slick doc run off with my whore."

"The boy will be riding out with me tomorrow morning."

Adam shrugged and quick as a bird taking to wing, reached for the rifle he kept propped against the wall. The shot fired before Tom even knew he'd drawn his pistol and Adam slumped back, stunned, gurgling red foam. There was no giggling now from the other room, the blanket dividing the cabin pushed aside. Billy, his pants still open, had just enough time to glance at Tom standing the door way and his brother laying dieing before Tom raised his pistol.

"Aw, no, no doc, you killed Adam, why'd you go and kill Adam." It sunk in slowly that the gun that had cut down his brother was aimed at him. "Naw, aw don't do it doc, don't, I don't want to die!"

Tom squeezed the trigger. The cabin was starting to smell like gun smoke now, smoke and blood. Billy stumbled back, eyes wide in panic and pain. His hand going to the blood pouring from his chest and he stared at the red stain in shock.

"You shot me." He sobbed out, his face going angry. "I'll kill you!" He staggered toward where Adam had knocked over the rifle. He didn't even get a full step away before Tom raised his gun and put another piece of lead into the man's head. Adam had stopped gurgling against the wall, the bloody foam was still, his eyes open and unseeing as Billy's body convulsed backward into the hidden room. The blanket tore down with him and he crashed to the ground in a heap.

"No, I've killed you." Tom shook his head and put the gun away, his lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line. Two men dead and not a scratch on him, some how it didn't seem right.

He stepped carefully around the growing pools of blood and moved to the back room. What remorse he might have felt for killing the two men faded at the sight that greeted him. There were no beds, just piles of bedding tossed over rough mattresses. The boy was tied at the wrists and the rope bound him to a small iron ring placed on the wall, low enough that the child couldn't stand and with virtually no slack to allow movements. He was curled up against the wall, brown eyes wide, face pale and frightened. He glanced to Billy's dead body than up to where Tom stood cold and deadly in the door way and acceptance settled on the delicate features. Those expressive eyes lowered and the boy slowly backed away from the wall. With clumsy movements, he raised himself up, his body stretched out between hands braced against the wall and his knees, ass in the air, waiting to be used.

The sight made Tom painfully hard and just as painfully ashamed. He was grateful the child's skirt was covering him, torn further in whatever fight had been made earlier but intact. Dirty, underfed, terrified, in spite of all the things that should have repulsed him, Tom wanted the boy. Even the sheer knowledge that the child was so young didn't stop his instinctual responses.

"Jesus!" Tom cursed and the boy glanced over his shoulder. The coffee warm eyes weren't afraid anymore, they looked inviting.

Tom drew a knife from the side of his boot, the boy's eyes went wide.

"No, no, please, no, I won't fight you, I'll be good, I swear, oh please no." The child begged in

that soft Southern accent and curled up against the wall again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please no, please, I'm sorry."

His boot steps sounded like gun shots in the silent cabin, accenting the child's painful begged. "I'm not going to hurt you." Tom's voice was frustrated, angry at his desire and the fact that even for a second he'd considered using the boy. He knelt down where the child was huddled, the pretty face tucked away into too skinny arms but the begging didn't stop. "I said I'm not going to hurt you!" He yelled back, wanting to smack some sense into the boy's head.

The yelling only reduced the begging to wordless whimpers which only pissed Tom off more. "God damn it!" Tom snapped again and shoved his knife forward. The child cried like a kicked dog and pulled away, the rope cut free and the boy tumbled back.

The child sat, stunned silent as Tom slipped his knife away. "I told you I wasn't going to hurt you!" The voice boomed, the boy's eyes were impossibly wide, he looked from Tom towering over him to his freed wrists and promptly fainted. "A damned fine mess you've gotten yourself into, Tom, damned fine. Couldn't just ride away, oh no, you got to stick your stinking nose in where it don't belong." He shook his head, ready to turn around and ride out than and there.

But the child slumped where he'd fallen. The face of an angel under the dirt. Too skinny bones sticking out with an obvious sign of long time neglect, wrists now red from pulling so hard against the rough rope. Everything about the boy screamed of vulnerability and Tom cursed himself again but he knew he wasn't going to be riding out and abandoning the child.

The child was limp when Tom tried to rouse him, stressed to far, obviously exhausted, the boy was out cold. He scooped the limp body up, tossing it over a shoulder the same way he would a sack of potatoes and carried the child out to the main room. The table had been cleared so Tom dumped the boy onto it. The room was warm and well lit. He found a battered tin pot, nearly as large as the first one the child had boiled water in for him, in a wood box near the cook stove. Tom filled it from the waiting water pail and set it on the cook stove to heat.

The rain outside had slowed even further and showed real signs of letting up well before morning but Tom still hurried back to the barn. Inside, he drew his gun and fired one more shot, ending the life of the third brother and startling the two horses in their stalls. He gathered up the sliver of lavender soap and his medical bag before he tromped back to the house.

The child hadn't stirred and showed no signs of waking anytime soon. Tom moved past him and began searching the small house. He found food supplies in one small cabinet, nothing impressive but speaking to a supply greater than their forced starvation of the child had indicated. In a wooden box in the sleeping room, he found extra blankets and sheets. He pulled the pile out, mindful of the blood near by and sorted it into two piles, one serviceable and one that should just be burned. From the serviceable pile he tugged out clean sleeping blankets for the child and any useable sheets he could use to restore his supply of bandages. Both arm loads were carried back to the front room and set away from Adam's body.

Corpses held no fear for Tom, he'd seen them his entire life, but there was something disconcerting about searching the still warm bodies of men recently murdered by his own hand. Billy held nothing of value or interest, no money, not even a flint but confirming the man's slower nature, Tom found a few, well battered, marbles. Adam's body provided more useful supplies. Not only did Tom find an old, iron knife, the antler handle was worn smooth and the blade was thinning from countless sharpening, but he also found a tobacco pouch and pipe.

Tom tossed the pipe aside and untied the leather cords of the pouch. He enjoyed a good smoke occasionally but even he wouldn't stoop to smoking a dead man's leaf, not yet anyway. He rummaged inside and among the brown leaves he found a gold coin, a wooden match safe, and an iron key. Since he hadn't seen a single lock anywhere on the homestead, Tom was betting what lock the key fit. He pocketed the coin, tossed the match safe on the pile of blankets and

palmed the key, leaving the tobacco to scatter over the dead man.

There were advantages and disadvantages to approaching the child while he was still unconscious. The advantages were clear, he could examine and treat the boy's wounds with ease and no fuss or modesty. He was free to just do his job and not worry about soothing the boy's fragile emotions, which wasn't something he was very skilled at. The disadvantages were simple, undressing the boy felt more perverted than clinical, treating his wounds made him feel far more the dirty old man than the doctor.

"Damned fool." Tom sighed and worked the rope off of the child's wrists, torn between taking care not to wake the boy and needing him alert to put the boundaries firmly back in place.

The skin over the thin wrists was red, bloody in spots and showed signs that tonight wasn't the first time the rough rope had held the boy still. He flipped the iron key in his hand and moved to the child's ankles. The lock turned uneasily, but it sprang open on first the one ankle, than the other, releasing the pale legs from their heavy burden. The skin under the iron was raw, torn apart, and it showed signs of early infection. He'd guessed the boy had worn those shackles for weeks, if not months. The thought disgusted him and he tossed the rattling iron onto the dead body.

The urge to stall was great, Tom took off his coat and hat and set them aside. He rolled up his sleeves slowly and took time to make sure the water he'd heated was warmed. Rather than dumping it out, he ladled it into a wash basin, refilling the pot on the stove in the same slow manner. He took too long in selecting which sheet to cut a wash rag from and longer to cut an even square of fabric free. Too soon he ran out of tasks to stall with and he moved to undress the boy.

The rag doll limp body was easy to manipulate. Tom pushed the child to sit up and pulled the ragged blouse over a lolling head and limp arms. The child's starvation was even more pronounced bare chested, ribs cut sharply into skin, the ridges and valleys too deep. The boy's stomach dipped starkly down to his sunken stomach, the tops of his hip bones stuck out where the skirt hung loosely.

"Jesus." Tom whispered, appalled at the sight displayed for him. He moved to clean the boy, dipping the rag into the warm water and lathering it was a slight amount of soap. He wasn't even going to tackle the hair for now, he swiped the cloth over the dirty, still face, full expecting the child to wake.

The boy remained soundly asleep, murmuring lazily at the touch but it wasn't a sound of fear. Carefully, Tom washed down the slender neck, feeling more than seeing the round sharpness of an adam's apple, too distinct for a woman but not the angled bulge most men developed. He washed across shoulders and the thin chest. The cloth teased over the pink nipples, they hardened at the touch and the boy moaned a little. Tom swallowed hard, took a deep breath and shut his emotions off. He was a doctor, this was just another body. Clinically, he looked in vain for any signs of breast development, still seeking any signs the child was abnormal or maybe even secretly female.

As the dirt washed away, the pale skin was revealed and with it an impressive collection of yellowing, healing bruises and fresh, purple pink ones. As he washed the side of the child, he found a tender welt, thick as his finger and swollen. He traced it by feel to the boy's back and that had him sitting the child up again. Only this time, he stood behind the boy and saw his back. Criss crossing it were inch wide, three or four inch long welts. None deep enough to break the skin but each a painful, slowly healing reminders of a solid switching. Welts decorated the boy's shoulders, down his back and disappeared over the curve of the small of his back under the skirt.

Tom lowered the child back down and spat at the corpse. "Lucky bastard, if I'd seen this you wouldn't have died so easily."

He rinsed the soap from the rag, using cleaner water he swiped quickly over the cleaner, but not quite, clean skin. The soapy, dirty water he tossed out the front door and took his time refilling the basin from the pot on the stove and then refilled the pot from the water barrel. There was no point in stalling, he was a professional. Sadly, he was a professional that had no clue how a woman's skirt came to be fastened. He had to slide his fingers along the waistband until he found a drawstring. It took a little work but he got it unknotted without having to cut the strings and carefully worked the skirt off.

There was no doubt now the child was male and perhaps older than Tom had originally thought. His limp sex wasn't one of a child, but of a teenager, a later teenager from the nest of soft downy blond curls it lay against. Tom required no mental reminders of his position, seeing the bruises and scratches on the child's hips, thighs and even his sex was enough to settle any lingering desire he may have felt. The only emotion that was in him now as cold anger.

He washed the boy gently, some of the scratches were raw. The legs were strong, slender, lean, far too skinny, but the boy was used to being active. Tom had always been a leg man, long, lean legs had always been his undoing. The boy would be able to break hearts with just a glimpse of his well shaped limbs, the soft, sparse blond hair only adding to the beauty. Those were thoughts for another day, Tom only touched the child to examine him, running quick, sensitive hands across those long legs, feeling for any signs of breaks or damage under the skin and purpling marks. He really felt like a lecher when he had to check the boy's genitals. The bruising around his groin was too extensive to ignore and if the child had been damaged, he needed to know now.

Tom drew a breath and quickly slid his hands over and then between the child's legs. His earlier erection returned and he knew he was going to hell for getting even the slightest bit of pleasure out of cupping between the child's legs. He palpated, and probed, his touch, if not his cock, stayed clinical and Tom was more than happy to withdraw his hand, grateful the boy hadn't woken up in the middle of that part of the exam.

He rinsed the soap from the rag and wiped the child's body down with the damp cloth. "Good thing you aren't awake. I don't mean it, boy, it's just been a damnable long time. A long, long time." He brushed a stray curl off the resting forehead before turning the child over.

The welts extended from the boy's neck to the middle of his thighs. His buttocks and thighs had scratches and bruises as well. Tom washed the wounds carefully with fresh water, running his hands along the child's body to check for injuries, then he rinsed the boy off, ignoring the softly slumbering face as well as the rounded, abused ass. Tom dug in his bag once the boy was clean and found the tin of salve. It was his own recipe, something he'd been proud of once.

He popped the lid off and scooped out a tiny amount, letting the warmth of his hands thin the thick cream. Once it had softened, he carefully began rubbing the salve into the welts and scratches. The boy mewed softly, low and quiet.

"Shhh, it's okay lad, it's just to help you heal." He knew the boy couldn't hear him but maybe he'd just know in his sleep that the voice wasn't connected to a man that was a danger to him. Tom hoped he wasn't a danger to the boy, he was aching now from having to rub so much of the exposed creamy skin. The child settled down and drifted back into deeper sleep, so maybe speaking did help.

The welts were treated easily, but there was another potential wound that should be checked. He rested a hand on the boy's ass and raised his eyes to heaven seeking a sign that proceeding was a worse idea than he suspected. He was a doctor, he'd done this plenty of times before, he tried to remind himself of all the hairy, dirty asses he'd had to examine over the years. None of them had looked like the round bottom below him.

He let his hand part those tender cheeks. The child moaned again in his sleep. "Shhh," he said softly into the sound of the rain. "It's okay, lad, it's okay, I just have to make sure they didn't hurt you. Shhhh, I promise, I'll try not to hurt you."

He imagined the worst. He'd washed the boy off so he knew the brothers had been using some form of lubricant, maybe lard from the feel and smell, but all the grease in the world wouldn't keep the child from harm. There was plenty of evidence to suggest that they hadn't been the slightest bit gentle with the boy.

The boy flinched ever so slightly when one of Tom's fingers slid into him, but he spoke soothingly and the boy settled down. "Aww lad, these weren't the first men to hurt you were they?" He sighed and shook his head, there was evidence of past scarring on the child and the passage was far to accustomed to being invaded. There was some damage there, but minor and certainly not the raw, bleeding wounds he'd feared he'd find.

He removed his finger with deliberate care. "That's it lad, that's it." He stepped away to wash his hands and switch out the wash water again. When he returned to the table he turned the boy back over, wrapping the chilled, nude body into a blanket as he did. Only, as he flipped the child over, the soft sex between the boy's legs wasn't so soft anymore. It wasn't fully hard but it was firm enough that it drew his eyes right to it. Tom had a violent urge to bend over the child and take that half awake erection in his mouth, to suck in and warm the flesh to full awareness with his tongue.

The tip of his tongue slipped out to wet his lips and he knew he was breathing too hard but Tom swaddled the boy into the blanket, tucking it firmly around him and leaving only the boy's face and head out. "Too damn long." The choice was an easy one to make. "Don't roll off there, boy, it's a long way down. I'll be right back."

He escaped out onto the porch and the fluttering rain's uneven fall matched the same pattern of his heart. The cooler air did nothing to settle the raging lust he felt but he was not going to molest anyone who was unconscious let alone a child. Sadly, he wasn't so naïve to think he could wash the boy's hair out while in his current state. He leaned against one of the porch's support beams, near the corner of the house and found his free hand already rubbing at his aching need through the fabric of his pants.

The buttons of his britches opened easily and he pulled the hard length out. It was purple red with need and the cool, damp air was a teasing caress. He leaned his weight against the side of the house with his left hand and with his right he firmly jerked himself off. He didn't deserve any pleasure from the act, he yanked at himself violently, forcing himself to come as quickly as possible. Given how hard he was and how long it had been since anything had stirred him to full arousal, it didn't take long.

He stood on the edge of the porch, letting the cool air chill him down and slow his breathing. "I know, Sam, I know, I'm a sick bastard." He sighed and felt a sharp pain like a kick to the stomach. "Sorry, love, he's here and you've been gone too long." He whispered into the night and rain. With short, unhappy motions he tucked himself into his pants and settled his clothes back around him as if nothing had happened.

"Alright lad," he spoke calmly as he stepped back into the cabin. "Let's see what I can do about that rat's nest."

Tom had pulled the living, wrapped bundle to the edge of the table to let the tangled mass of hair fall over the edge. He washed it skillfully, with practiced hands. He even managed to untangle the cord from the thick blonde waves without cutting cord or hair. It was a poor job but the hair was cleaner when he rinsed it and tackled untangling it with one of the two prong forks from dinner since a comb wasn't close at hand. There was no worry about the child stirring him again, the task was too similar to bad memories and he felt a heavy weight of shame that kept him

firmly settled down.

"There, that's about as good as it's going to be for now." Tom stood and moved about the cabin, blowing out lamps as he went. "I need to get some rest too." He scooped the child up and carefully carried the burden back across the yard to the barn.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Three

In his arms, Alice, he hated that name, cracked his eyes open every carefully. The tall doctor wasn't looking at him and didn't notice so he stared up at the strong, jaw and grimly set mouth as he was carried as easily as a child's doll out into the rain. He'd hidden the fact that he was awake because a man could be judged by how he acted when he wasn't being watched, that and he'd long since learned the value of the element of surprise.

He'd woken up at the cool touch to his bruised nipples and been surprised to find himself being washed. When nothing bad happened, he'd stayed limp and still, and pretended to be asleep. A survival skill he'd master easily, and the doctor hadn't noticed. But those hands were gentle and it had surprised him when they'd examined all of him, cupping between his legs in a touch so careful, so non-violating, that he'd believed the man about not being a threat.

That was a belief he didn't hand out easily and as attractive as he found the stranger, he'd known his place. Just because the man had made no move on him in the barn earlier when they'd been alone didn't mean he really wasn't a risk. Just because he'd refused, twice, to take a turn using him didn't mean he wasn't a risk. Just because he'd left more food on his plate than had been offered to him in days didn't mean he was so feral of a stray dog that food would make him forget the danger.

Than Billy had been shot dead. A sight he'd treasure for the rest of his life, he was certain, which at the time he expected to be very short. He'd been cowering, not because he was afraid to die or afraid of being hurt, but because the sight of him curled up in fear did things to men and it gave him an advantage. But the tall doctor had just stood there, not threatening, not approaching, just stood and watched with cold, angry eyes and something stirred in him that hadn't for a long time. He wanted. Frightened, in pain, having just been used, again, he wanted the doctor to take a turn.

But the strange man had only sworn and pulled a knife and that was bad. He didn't present himself to a man only to have said man draw a knife without it being really bad. There were plenty of people in the world that would happily kill a little whore like him for suggesting they use him and he'd thought that was what had walked into his life. The man only seemed to get angry when he begged, which really scared him because begging always worked, and than the knife had flashed but the only thing cut was the ropes. That was too much and he'd fainted, cold away.

And come to with a deliciously tender touch to his abused nipples. The deep self mocking voice amused him and the gentle brushing aside of a tickling curl on his forehead reinforced a sense of safety. He relaxed and enjoyed the gentle touch and had been surprised with the care given him. The welts still stung, even now, three days old since the last had been striped by Abe, and they hurt to be touched. The rumbling voice was soothing and so was the touch of those strong, calloused hands. Those hands spreading him open had sent a shiver of fear easily quieted by soft words. The finger that probed him so clinically didn't hurt and felt pleasant.

That was it. The doctor took his hands away and rolled him over into blanket that was warmer than anything he'd been wrapped in for a while. Even the sight of his slight arousal had changed anything. But he could feel the man's eyes on his skin, burning, hungry, and he heard the deep, rushing breaths that overcame the controlled man at the sight. It had been sheer torture to stay limp and pretending to unawareness, laying, helpless and vulnerable waiting for the man to make a move. Only, he hadn't, the only move made was to wrap the blanket around him and lay him down.

He wasn't fooled, when the doctor returned a short time later to wash and pick out some of the knots in his hair, the hand that brushed across his face smelled of clean, strong male and recent release. The burning gaze he'd felt was from desire but this stranger hadn't taken his desire out on him. It warmed him, made him fight off a smile and for the first time he felt tight muscles across his shoulders starting to relax as strong hands ran in his hair.

When the lamps had been blown out, there had been a moment of panic at being left alone in the dark cabin with the corpses. A moment quickly eased by being scooped up. So he found himself, held tightly against a broad chest, safe. The rain a cold splatter on the side of his face that ended as they crossed the threshold of the barn. He was set down with care near the fire and at the sounds of dragging he risked cracking open his eyes ever so slightly.

The sight of Abe being dragged from the barn by his heels, a bullet in his head, to be deposited in the rain made him feel nothing. He was curious about this stranger, a man who was a healer, who had washed and bandaged the wounds on his ankles so carefully and tended him with gentle touches, had shot down three men, dumping the one body into the rain, as coldly as ice. It almost seemed like two different men.

The doctor's return to where his own bedroll was tossed forced him to shut his own eyes. He listened as the man settled in with a groan and the sound of leather and wool rustling as he shifted into a comfortable position. Then, he waited, listening as he lay in the fireplaces dim light until the other man's breathing leveled out, then deepened to soft snores. Only then did the boy risk turning onto his side to take the pressure from his sore back and allow him to view the sleeping doctor. His last sight as sleep took him was the doctor's strong handsome face, stubbled and rough, relaxed in sleep.

The smell of coffee woke Tom up. For a moment he slipped into another time and place, where waking up to that smell had been normal but the cold reality of time's passage and the events of the last night, were quick to return. The smell was odd enough to shake the cover off his head and force him to face the day and the emotional wreck of the child he'd unwittingly saved.

There was little Tom hated more than weeping, hysterical women or children. He wasn't sure which category he was putting the boy in mentally, but he knew this was going to be a trying day. He'd seen and treated enough women, and a few children, that had been so horribly abused and to the one they were rightfully moody and cried constantly, with no hope of reason reaching them.

He stretched and yawned, scratched at his face and shook off sleep. It wasn't surprising that the boy was missing, and so was the blanket he'd been wrapped up in, the coffee smell had to be coming from somewhere and someone had to have made it. What was surprising was the light layer of hay that had been tossed down over the blood stain shooting Abe had made. He pushed himself to his feet and went to piss in the corner of the barn. There was no point in waiting until he found the outhouse, he wasn't staying long enough to worry about it.

Outside, the sun was shining painfully bright, the sky above the trees was sharply blue in a way that only a hard spring rain the night before could bring. Everything smelled washed clean and fresh and in the center of it, half way between house and barn, a fire burned brightly and a beautiful blonde tended it.

The child glanced up and smiled. "Morning." He bounced to his feet from where he was tending a pot and brushed his hands off on his skirt.

The boy was still in a skirt. This one was in better shape and cleaner but still old and a faded dark red. The blouse that hung on his thin frame was clean, nicer but like the skirt had obviously seen better days, the small white strips cut into the blue and the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. The boy had bathed, really bathed, his skin glowed, pale from being hungry for so long but really glowed with being clean and just from having beautiful skin. His hair had been thoroughly washed and combed out, the springy blond curls had been braided back but rebellious strands had worked free.

The sight was a far different one than he'd expected to be greeted with. The child stood, expectantly, and Tom glanced around the yard. Two more skirts and blouses, a pair of bloomers and a bonnet all hung drying in the morning breeze, tossed over a near by tree limbs. The blanket he'd left the boy wrapped in was spread out near the fire, a plate, tin cup and spoon sat on it waiting for use. Over near the pigs three bodies lined up and how the boy had managed that Tom didn't know.

The smile faltered. "I let you sleep but breakfast is ready." The voice was no longer a soft, shy whisper but even at a normal volume, still sounded more female than male. "I didn't have time to scrub up the blood inside so I thought you could eat here, like a picnic." He waved to the blanket, the smile gone to a look of uncertainty.

Tom closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He didn't remember being smacked on the head any time recently so it wasn't from some injury, which meant it was real. He opened his eyes and nothing had changed. "You've eaten?"

The boy shook his head. "Not yet, sir." Crouching down to scoop out a heaping plate of cooked oats with dried apples.

The one plate mocked him. "Well, go fetch another plate and cup and eat."

"Yes, sir!" The child took off running, full speed, back into the house. His bare feet slapped on the wood steps and almost as soon as he'd disappeared inside he returned, plate, spoon and cup clutched close to him.

Tom lowered himself to the blanket and poured coffee into the cup but he left both untouched until the boy had hurried back to join them. "Sit down." He nearly snapped, not awake and still off guard.

The boy instantly sat, on the ground.

"I'm not going to hurt you, sit on the blanket, the grounds still damp."

The boy nodded and obeyed.

Tom shoved the already filled plate and mug at the boy while pulling the empty pair from his nerveless fingers. "Eat." He ordered and scooped out his own plate and poured more coffee.

Wide eyes stared at the massive portion of food. "Thank you."

"Just, eat slowly, if you get sick it won't do you any good."

"Yes, sir."

Tom spooned up a mouthful of the hot, sweet smelling oats and found them quite well made. "This is good, thanks." He muttered out and sipped at the dark brew, slowly waking up.

The boy smiled into his plate. "I can cook, I just didn't let them know how well. The coffee is from their stores, they had some but it's mostly chicory."

Tom shrugged. "I like it that way. What's your name boy?"

"Alice." He forced out. "But you can call me whatever you want."

"No, your real name."

That made the boy look up, it had been a long time since anyone had asked that. "My mother named me Alex."

"You've a last name?"

"Horne, Alex Horne, you can laugh, it's a stupid name."

Tom just shrugged. "Do you know my name?"

"Doctor Thomas Lambry."

"Good, call me Tom."

"Yes sir."

Tom found himself at a loss of what to say to the child. "How old are you, Alex?"

"I don't know, sir, I have a birthday in the spring but I don't know what day it is now."

He was really listening to hear the boy in the voice but all he could hear was a sultry, slightly smoky woman's. "It's April seventeenth."

"I'm sixteen sir, I was born on the fifteenth of March, the day Caser was killed."

He about choked on his coffee. "I'm supposed to believe you're sixteen?" He'd been guessing, maybe fourteen, but had expected thirteen.

"I am, sir, but I'll tell people whatever age you wish." He smiled slightly and shrugged. "I don't look it, I know, I'm small for my age."

Small in height, slender in width, short of any serious signs of developing into a man, Tom shook his head. The memory of the boy naked in front of him returned. There had been a sign the boy's voice had changed and there was no doubt that his sex could belong to a sixteen year old and while he'd found little body hair, his legs had a fair covering. Still, the boy was short, the top of his head barely reached Tom's shoulder and he was so narrow.

"You could be sixteen." Tom finally agreed. So he felt less of a bastard for lusting for a child, the child was almost a man. The child was older than some of the boys he'd cut on during the war. "You're still dressed like a girl."

Alex's spoon lowered and he chewed the mouthful of oats before answering. "It's all I have, I've always dressed as a girl. I don't know how to dress as a boy and well, I like it this way."

"This wasn't something they did to you?" He'd been assuming it had been a way of humiliating the child.

"Not at all. My mother always raised me to be a girl, no one growing up knew I was a boy."

That was a curious thought. He burned his tongue on his coffee. "Huh."

The child only smiled, sweetly, at the odd look in the bright, grey eyes. "Look at me, I'd make a lousy boy. I tried for a while, one of the other men who kept me, he made me try. People kept thinking he was forcing a girl to dress as a boy. It made things more confusing and I was so miserable."

"Well, that's close to one of the oddest things I've ever heard." That chased away the bright smile. "You'd best be taking that horse in there and what money you can find and head on back to your mother, where in Virginia?"

"North Carolina, but I can't. She's dead. For a while now." The boy glanced to his food. "I sort of thought, well, that you'd be taking me with you."

Tom laughed, nearly inhaling his oatmeal. "Not likely, boy."

"I just thought, with how you shot them."

Tom put his finished plate down and stood, he was going to wash off proper in the creek before heading out, maybe even shave. "I didn't shoot them for your sake, boy and I wouldn't think you'd be so eager to sell yourself to someone new."

The idea that the gentle doctor didn't want to take him along had never occurred to Alex. "I'm no bother." He said weakly, growing afraid. "I actually do like men, just not those three. You wouldn't have to tie me down like they had."

The words were like hands on Tom's body and he hoped the creek was as cold as he thought it should be. He stopped half way in the barn and turned, pausing in his errand to fetch his own soap and a change of clothes. "You don't know a thing about me boy, I could be as bad as they were." He pointed to the line of bodies. "Or worse, I could be much, much worse. Take their horse, take their money and go home."

"You aren't worse, I know you aren't. You're a doctor, you took care of me."

"I pitied you!" He snapped, knowing he was being hurtful, he pulled his things out of his bag roughly and stalked back into the sunshine. "I'm a doctor that killed three men without thinking twice about it. Trust me, boy, I fall into that much worse category."

Alex watched the taller man stalk away, long strides carrying him toward the creek. He dropped his plate and scrambled to his feet. "I can cook, real good, and I clean well. I'll wash and mend your clothes."

"If I wanted a caretaker I'd have stayed with my mother or I'd marry some woman." Tom shouted.

"I'll help you with doctoring people, I can be a nurse. Just let me stay with you." He hurried after the older man.

"I don't need a nurse! Go home!"

"I can take care of your horse, you won't have to do anything."

"I can take care of my own God damned horse! Stay here if you won't go home!" What did he have to do, kick the puppy to get it to leave him alone?

Alex had almost caught up to the other man and his feet stopped. "I can keep you warm at night, I can keep you so warm you won't need a blanket." His voice was pitched low, sexy and for the first time, he really was as hungry for the touch as he pretended.

Tom stopped in his tracks.

"What are you, cold?" Sam had laughed. "Silly, I'll keep you so warm you won't need that blanket."

He turned around and stalked back the few paces to where the boy stood, looking so sexy, so beautiful that Tom's body wanted to grab those skinny arms and show the child how he was affected. It was the voices from his past, that was all, it wasn't the pretty blond.

"I don't bed children." He snarled. "Besides, the way those brothers were scratching, you probably have lice." He turned and started back to the water.

Alex stayed in place, shocked. Suddenly he felt lost, so totally lost and overwhelmed. His knees collapsed and he fell in an untidy heap in the damp grass. "Please," he whispered, not trying to be sexy, not trying to please but with every bit of the growing desperation he was feeling. "Please, I don't know what to do."

Tom stopped. The forced pleasantness, the cheerful willingness to be what ever he wanted, was gone from the boy's voice. It sounded raw and brittle and it froze his feet in place.

"I'm scared. You're the first person since my mama's died that's been nice to me without wanting anything. Please, just for a while, I won't bother you, I won't even speak if you'd like. I need to get to Memphis, let me travel with you as far as I can. I'm so tired, please." His hands were so thin in his lap he didn't even recognize them.

"Damn it." Tom took stock of how much of a bastard he was and found it wasn't quite enough of one. "Leave me alone to wash up and I'll think about it." He grudgingly admitted.

"Yes, sir." Alex answered softly, and drew a long slow breath and forced himself back to his feet. There were things he should be doing while the doctor was bathing and he wasn't going to just give up and sit in the grass all morning.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Four

There was no point in thinking about it, Tom knew he couldn't walk away, not any longer. He bathed quickly, the water was as mercifully cold as he'd hoped, and shaved while crouching near the creek bank, wearing only his pants and under britches. He took the chance to wash out the outfit he'd had on, wringing as much of the water out of the cloth as he could, taking some of his own frustrations at himself out on it.

He pulled on his under shirt and tugged the placket fronted shirt over it. He'd have to think about getting new clothes soon, these were old now and he'd never bothered to replace his suit. What he wore now was fine for riding around aimlessly but if he were to pick a direction he'd have to start looking better than something that had just rolled in off the trail.

His feet would have been happier in the soft spring grass but Tom pulled his socks and boots back on anyway. He figured he'd stalled long enough, the boy was probably a nervous mess by now, so he climbed back up the hill and stopped near the spread blanket.

Alex sat, daintily, on one side of it. He was deftly wielding a knife and cutting the extra linens up into good duplicates of Tom's bandages. Each section he had rolled up into a tight bundle and set on a pile near his hip.

"What are you doing?"

"Cutting bandages." He glanced up and had to smile at the clean shaven face. "You look nice."

"You don't need to do that."

Alex shrugged. "I tended to the horses already and fed the pigs but I'm guessing you'll be turning them loose. I've gone through the food they had and sorted out anything that could be taken along on the trail, it's on the corner of the porch. Also, I've pulled out some bottles of their whiskey, seeing that you're a doctor I figured you could use it."

"Busy little thing aren't you?"

"I like to be useful."

Tom shook his head and tossed his wet clothing over the tree limbs beside the boy's. "What's in Memphis?"

"My uncle's there." He finished quickly rolling the bandage he was working on and rose to his still bare feet. With a light step he went to the porch and pulled open a leather traveling bag. Having the bag back meant a great deal to him and from inside he pulled out the letter. "He wrote my mother."

Tom settled onto the blanket and accepted the offered letter. He scanned it, and the envelope it came in. "This is five years old."

"He'll be there."

"You're sure he'll take you in."

"He said, right there, that if mother needed a place to stay, she and her daughter were always welcome."

Tom shook his head. "Yes, but you aren't a daughter."

"It won't matter." He sat down and started back in on cutting the bandages.

"So, you'll lie to him and tell him you're a girl?"

The knife paused. "I don't know but he'll take me in. He's my only family, he has to."

"Blood ties don't always overlook things like boys who rather wear skirts."

"I know but at least I'll have tried." He wasn't so foolish to think he'd be welcomed with open arms but it was the only hope he had to cling to.

"Well, you're in luck, boy. I was on my way down to Louisiana anyway before I headed out west. If you don't annoy me too much you can ride with me to Memphis." He'd only just now decided to go back south but the idea felt right.

Alex nodded. "Thank you."

"Don't, my mother taught us to never pick up a stray kitten unless you planned on bringing it home with you. Well, boy, you're about the saddest stray kitten I've ever seen, I should have

known better." In spite of the insult, the boy was smiling slightly.

"Did you want to bury them?" Tom asked when silence had stretched between them, broken only by the cutting sounds of fabric.

Alex looked to where he'd dragged the bodies. "If you wish to."

"That isn't what I asked."

"No," he imagined their bodies left to wild animals and the spring elements. "I'd rather not, they don't deserve it."

"So be it, get together what you want. I'm riding out as soon as my clothes dry."

"After lunch?"

The breeze was steady. "Yeah, after lunch."

Tom kept a sharp eye on the boy but he could find little to criticize about Alex's efforts. His sorting of the supplies was clever and skillful. The boy sorted out what he needed and packed up his things tightly. When Tom came back from breaking the stills and turning loose the pigs, Alex had both horses saddled and waiting in the yard. Tom's freshly dried clothing was folded and tucked under one of the child's arms and all of the boy's things were tied to the horse and ready.

"Here sir." Alex handed over the clothes. "And I found this." He thrust out a leather pouch.

Tom took it and pulled it open, inside was a good sum of money, paper and hard coin. "Did you count it?"

"Eighty four dollars and twenty six cents, sir."

Tom weighed the heavy purse and tossed it back to the child. "Figure you need that more than me."

Alex caught it but his face screwed up unhappily. "I'll leave it here than. I'm not a whore."

"That wasn't what I meant. Sure, they owe you for the wrong they've done but I didn't mean it that way. You're going to need things and this is a lot of money." Tom tried not to snap at the boy.

"I'll not touch their coin." He dropped the pouch to the ground and moved to his horse.

Tom scooped the pouch from the ground and while muttering shoved it and his clothing away. He pulled himself up easily into the saddle and expected Alex to struggle to ride astride in the skirts he wore. Before he could suggest pants, the boy was in the saddle, the full skirt easily spacious enough to allow him to ride.

"Come on." He guessed the direction to the road and set off to find it, he didn't look back to see the three dead men laying out or the pretty boy following him.

Billy may have been slow, but he'd been well educated in his landscape. Going just from the scraps of information he'd given Tom, they found the road shortly before dark. Tom nodded, pleased that they had indeed appeared to have gone over the mountain instead of around it. If he'd been riding alone, he would have pressed on but the boy was failing.

Not that Alex had complained, in fact the child had been silent and if not for the sounds of his horse Tom would have thought the boy had turned back. He didn't need to complain, Tom wasn't sure how the boy had managed to do so much with how underfed and weakened he had to be. He refused to admire the boy or think about him with any affection, this was an obligation not to the child but to his own selfish pride. It was difficult enough looking himself in the eye while shaving now, it would be impossible if he'd abandoned the boy.

"We'll stop as soon as we reach a good spot." Tom spoke for the first time all afternoon.

Alex sighed. "Okay." He was so tired. There just hadn't been any real chance to rest for weeks and he'd been so wound up with nervous tension for so long that it wasn't until it was gone that he understood how much energy it consumed. He was simply exhausted and the half day's ride had drained him.

As much as Tom searched, the first good place to camp for the night was a half hour down the trail. The sun was setting, lighting the sky up in pinks and reds when he slowed the horses to a stop. He slid from the saddle, stretching his legs out and glanced to the boy. Only, Alex's chin was lolling against his chest, the reins were held in limp, relaxed hands, blonde lashes rested against the boy's cheeks in soft slumber.

"I'm a damned fool, I can hear you laughing over this." He muttered and untied the boy's roll of blankets from behind his saddle.

They opened with a crisp flick of the wrist and once spread, Tom slid the child from the saddle. He was shocked again by how light the boy was and how soundly he could sleep. Alex stirred a little as Tom laid him on the blankets but if he woke it was only shallowly. He drew the blankets over the boy and went about making camp.

Tom shook the boy's shoulder. The small fire he'd made burned cheerfully against the spring nighttime damp and the simple dinner he'd put together, while not fancy, was filling. It filled the breeze with its smell and wrapped a cheerful feel around them.

"No!" The boy started awake, fully awake, and slapped at the hand on his shoulder as he scurried to sit up.

"Supper's ready, you fell asleep." Tom explained simply, moving to scoop out the food from the pan.

"I'm sorry."

Tom shrugged. "You were tired, there's plenty, eat up."

The boy served himself carefully, watching Tom across the fire as if he were some odd and maybe poisonous snake. They ate silently, the sound of the fire the only noise that cracked the spring insects and singing frogs.

"How'd you end up out here, boy?" Tom asked, watching the child carefully re-fill his plate with more food.

Alex shrugged. "The wind carries all things." He answered vaguely.

"I don't care how skinny you are, the wind didn't blow you up here. Tell me."

He frowned. "The truth isn't kind, I try never to think about such things."

"Tell me." He was a bastard, there was no doubt about it now.

"My mama died of fever, the local preacher was the only one who knew I wasn't a girl. He took me in seeing that I've no family. After a time, that caused trouble because people starting talking about what he was doing with the girl he'd taken in so he passed me off to a friend of his who was passing through. He wasn't a nice man and one day we crossed paths with another man. This man was handsome and kind and I ran off with him but he wasn't as kind as he seemed." Alex smiled.

"He was still handsome though and kinder than most. He got himself killed, knifed, by a friend of his who took off with me. He bet me in a hand of poker that he lost which is how I ended up with that old man. He was going to go out west, said he had a daughter out there, and was taking me with him to keep him company on the trip. He promised he'd let me go when we got there.

"Well, after I run off a couple of times he got those shackles. Said they'd been worn by an old negro and they were sturdy. We were crossing the mountains and came up to the brother's house. The old man didn't trade me, they killed him. I weren't sorry to see him gone but it just always seems to go from bad to worse." His voice trailed off and he had to force himself to keep eating.

"Why didn't you try to run off from the others?"

Alex shrugged. "You get beat enough times, you listen better. I didn't fancy the others but they weren't like that old man or those brothers. It weren't bad, sometimes it was nice even. You know what I mean, you like men too, don't you?"

Cocoa eyes caught Tom, so much older than the face they sat in. "Get some sleep. We're riding out first thing." Those eyes were too tempting, Tom turned over and settled into his blankets but sleep was a long time arriving.

Tom did everything he could to ignore his new traveling companion. They quickly fell into a pattern. Tom would wake up and the boy would be awake before him, both horses were already tended to and breakfast would have been started. He'd grumbled about being able to take care of himself and they'd eat. They'd ride in silence during the morning, stopping for a quick, cold lunch, again in silence before riding until close to sundown. Then, the boy would tend the horses again while Tom fixed dinner, which made Alex fuss about it being his place. They'd eat in silence, go to bed in silence and start over.

The distance was working, the boy was silent and Tom wasn't nagged by temptation he didn't need. That didn't stop him from feeling guilty. As the days passed by slowly in his enforced silence, it became increasingly clear the boy wasn't happy. He never complained but he'd sit and stare at nothing while he ate. Now that he was well rested he was starting awake several times a night, waking Tom even if the older man pretended to sleep. He watched as the days passed and Alex slipped further into his own thoughts, a place that didn't seem very happy.

After over a week of the same pattern and the boy's growing unease, Tom finally broke into it. They sat on a back trail, eating dinner, Alex's eyes were distant and he'd already pulled a blanket over his shoulders even though the night air wasn't more than cool.

"We'll have to take to main roads soon, we're only a couple of days out of Owensboro."

Alex only nodded.

"Can you really fool folks?" He'd gotten used to thinking of the boy as male. He didn't see a

pretty young girl but a beautiful young man, in a skirt.

"You're a doctor and you thought I was a girl."

"True. I don't get it, is it that you want to be a girl?" It was a stupid question. Tom had known several men that liked to dress as women and had treated more than one soldier that looked, fought, suffered as much as any man but when he'd pulled away the wool had found a woman underneath. He wanted the boy to talk, he wanted that worrisome distance to fade from the nut brown eyes.

"I like being a boy but this is comfortable." He smiled thinly, mockingly. "I know, it must bother you."

Tom pulled out his tobacco pouch and began filling his pipe. "Down in New Orleans, there's a woman named Annie Mae. Six feet tall if she's an inch, hair the color of carrots, wears only the finest fashions from Europe." He lit the pipe with a brand from the fire, puffed on it a few times and got the leaves smoking. "Annie Mae grew up as Andrew Mark, she runs a brothel now. Only a handful of her clients know what she's got under those silks. I doesn't bother me in a little bit."

"You've been to New Orleans?"

Tom nodded, oddly pleased to see some life and interest in the child.

"Is that where you're going after you leave me in Memphis?"

"No, not so far south."

"I've never been."

"It's a good place, the rebellion was tough on it but it's pulling through. I haven't been in years." He blew out the fragrant smoke.

"I'd like to see it, I've never met anyone else like me." A smile flashed across his face. "And silk dresses from Europe, I bet they're lovely."

Tom shook his head. "I wouldn't know, I'm not a judge of ladies fashion. I don't know how anyone gets around in skirts."

"You should try it." Alex teased, trying to picture the handsome man in a dress. "It feels so nice, the colors. I had a yellow dress once, the color of buttercups, made from fine linen." The smile faded. "The man I ran off with, he sold it. He sold off anything I had of value, even the silver frame my mother's picture was in. I got to keep the picture though and that's all that mattered." He forced another smile.

Tom wasn't fooled, the brown eyes were bleak. "Those men didn't have any right to treat you that way."

"It happened, nothing I can do about it now." Alex drew a breath and took a risk, there was one sure cure for feeling blue. "How about you doc? Got a wife and kids up north?"

"No."

"Than how about some cute young man, sitting pining for you."

Tom about choked on his smoke. "Are you always so blunt?"

Alex leaned forward, letting the blanket slide off his shoulders. "Only when I want something."

The tip of a pink tongue slipped out to wet lips that weren't dry.

"No, there's no one missing me." Tom answered softly, his eyes lingering over that lovely face. "Why are you doing this?"

The smile that played on Alex's lips was playful. "I want you to like me."

"I like you just fine, you don't need to whore yourself."

The harsh words didn't phase him, he'd been called worse. "What if I want to be a whore to you." He whispered out. Riding behind the other man all day, watching his straight back and sure manner, Alex had never had that sort before and he was hungry to see what it would be like.

Tom forgot how to speak, the pipe was clutched in his hand but he didn't feel it. He was so hard he had to shift how he was sitting, spreading his legs a little bit, to ease the tightness in his pants.

With slow, graceful movements, Alex reached behind him and pulled the tie from his hair. He ran his fingers into the thick curls, letting the length spring loose to fall in wild disarray about his face. Tom's grey eyes were smoky and he felt them on his skin, drinking in every move. Alex drew a hand across the side of his face and down his neck and heard Tom's breathing grow short.

"I've been thinking about you." Alex whispered. "All the time." His hand slid down over the high collar of his blouse. "You've been thinking about me too. That's why you've been ignoring me."

"You're just a kid." Tom's voice shook.

"Don't let how I look fool you, I'm no child." The blanket fell from around him and he stood. He had no petticoats to wear, the skirt was thin and worn and there was no hiding the growing hardness under the long fabric. He watched as Tom's eyes fell to his groin and smiled at the look of pain that crossed the older man's face.

The fabric swirled around his hips as he walked the few paces around the fire to stand near where Tom sat, entranced. "Skirts have plenty of advantages over pants, they hide so much and yet," he hitched up the hem just far enough to show the slender curve of his lower leg. "They can show so much."

Tom's hands curled into fists, the pipe forgotten. It wasn't even like he'd never seen the boy's legs yet but there was something so enticing about the small flashes of skin. All the conversations he'd overheard from other men about accidentally catching a glimpse of a woman's ankle under her skirt and how erotic it was to see suddenly made tremendous sense. He wanted to grab the boy, pull him into his lap and run his hands up those slender legs, under the thin fabric.

The exposed leg extended and a bare foot pushed Tom's ankles apart. Alex knelt down to sit between the older man's knees, the game was going well. There wasn't a man alive he couldn't seduce, if he liked girls, Alex was a girl, if he liked boys, well, that was so much more fun. There was no doubt which Tom preferred.

He soothed the fabric of his skirt over his folded legs. "I've been very immodest lately, I haven't been wearing bloomers. There's nothing under this skirt but me."

"This isn't funny." Tom's breath was too fast, his heart was racing. The kid was playing him like a fiddle, he was hitting every erotic nerve.

"I'm not teasing you." Alex rose his ass from where it had been sitting on his heels and leaned forward. Tom didn't pull away but he hadn't reached out either. Alex was used to most men being on him almost as soon as he'd started. This was okay, he knew how to break the cold composure

of the doctor.

He leaned closer, his lips growing closer to Tom's and a strong hand buried itself in his hair. Not quite pulling but not controlled and careful, Alex let the grip pull his head to the side slightly, he closed his eyes to slits. The fingers tightened in his hair and he moaned softly. When his eyes locked on Tom's gray, they were hungry. He drew his lips close again, not quite touching the thinner pair below his own.

"I'm going to kiss you." He whispered, the words and his breath brushing in teasing contact when his lips weren't.

Tom pulled his hand from the soft curls and gripped the boy's still far too thin shoulder. With the last bit of his will he pushed that shoulder away and Alex stumbled backwards, falling hard on his tailbone. The moment had been seized, Tom stood up and stared down at the confused and slightly hurt look on the boy's face.

"I told you. I don't bed children. Don't do that again." He felt a muscle in his jaw twitching but he didn't stay around to debate the issue. Before Alex could react, he'd headed off into the woods carried on angry strides.

He didn't care where he went so long as it was away. Tom stumbled through the woods, tripping on night shadowed rocks and fallen limbs, hurrying a hundred, then two or three paces away from the fire before slowing and continuing deeper. When he finally stopped, the fire wasn't in sight and he collapsed with his back to a tree and covered his face with his hands.

For the first time in three years he felt like weeping but that was quickly swallowed up in anger. He grew angry at the boy for being so damned sexy, and worse for knowing how sexy he was. He was angry at himself for reacting and getting so aroused, angry that he almost crossed a line. Most of all, he was angry at Sam for leaving him. He'd never been in such ridiculous situations when Sam had been at his side.

From deep in his pocket, Tom pulled out a small tin case and popped it open. He'd been dragged to have the photo taken, grumbling and moaning the entire way. Sam had laughed at him and then told the photographer that they were cousins but the two men in the tin type in his hand didn't look a thing alike.

One side of the case was the two of them, Sam standing behind a younger, unhappy looking Tom, a hand protectively on his shoulder. Tom's hair was cut short, just brushing the tops of his ears but Sam had always worn his hair to his collar. The other picture was Sam alone, closer up so it was just his face. The small smile, a smirk really, that he always wore was present, as if he knew some joke no one else did. His light brown hair was combed back from his face and teased the back of his neck. He hadn't been the most handsome of men, even Tom was willing to admit that, but his personality had been stunning. He'd stolen Tom's heart with that silly smirk and never given it back.

The case snapped shut and Tom pressed the cold metal to his forehead. "Damned fool, running away from a skinny boy." But he was really cursing Sam, where ever he might be.

Tom lost track of just how long he hid out in the darkness. His butt had fallen asleep from sitting still for so long and the raging desire that had burned his blood had faded. When he finally returned to the camp, the fire was burning low. Alex was asleep, wrapped in blankets and looking innocent, a look Tom didn't believe for a moment.

He fed the fire a bit to chase away the night chill and pulled open his own blankets. Inside, sitting nestled safely, was his pipe. It had been tamped out and cleaned. Tom picked it up and wondered if the boy had done so because he felt it was his job or in some small apology for the attempted seduction. Neither motivation made him very happy and he glanced to the sleeping

boy again as he tucked the pipe away. When he laid down, he looked forward to slipping away in sleep and forgetting the situation for a few hours.

Sleep was a traitorous friend. Tom knew he was dreaming, he had to be. Sam's soft breath was on his neck. Moist, hot lips were teasing his earlobe, Sam always knew how much he hated that and always went for the oversensitive spot. A warm voice chuckled against his skin and a body, long and lean pressed into his. Hips rubbed teasingly into his own, hard erection throbbed along hard erection.

"Sam?"

"Shhh."

The mouth was kissing his belly. He couldn't recall when he'd stripped naked but he was. The hands that fluttered over his skin didn't leave him enough time to think about when or how. It had been so long, he'd missed the other man so much. His breath caught in his throat when sharp teeth nipped his hip bone. Those same hips arched up when the teasing mouth slipped around his aching cock, wet, velvety perfection.

"Oh, God, Sam," He reached out as he had a hundred times before. Needing to feel the soft, fine hair sliding like silk between his fingers, needing to connect with the amazing man that could make him feel so much. The hair that tangled around his hand wasn't fine, it wasn't loosely wavy.

Tom opened his eyes and it wasn't laughing hazel that met his but rich warm brown. The hair around his fingers wasn't light brown but sunshine blonde. The thick curls wove around his grasp, the length spilled around his hand and down the slender back.

"Sam!" Tom cried out, startled and now coldly awake. He was hoping he hadn't actually voiced the name but a glance to the other blanket wrapped shape told him he had. Sleepy, brown eyes locked with his for a moment before lazily shutting. Tom bundled himself back up and rolled over, putting his back to the boy. This time, sleep took forever to arrive.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Five

Whatever gratitude Tom might have felt toward the boy for simply falling back to sleep during the night melted when Tom locked eyes with the child the next morning. They'd been silent while eating and preparing for the day but just that look told Tom the silence wasn't going to last.

Slender fingers trailed across his horse's mane. "So, who's Sam?" His voice was casual but Alex's eyes glowed.

"No one."

He raised an eyebrow. "Sure didn't sound like no one last night. You were calling his name all easy like before you woke up. Is he the lover you've waiting for you? No, that's not it, more like a lover that broke your heart." He saw Tom flinch away from his words and knew he was dead on. "Oh, maybe he's just someone you pined after, if you were as timid with him as you are with me I can under," Alex's words cut off. One moment he was talking the next he was pinned to the nearest tree, a strong calloused hand wrapped loosely around his throat.

"Don't." Tom growled out. "Don't you even speak his name and God help you if you mock him because I surely won't."

Rather than be afraid, Alex smiled slightly. There was no real threat in the man pressing him to the tree's trunk, the hand at his throat aside. Tom wasn't the sort to kill without reason or threat, no matter how angered he was. Alex smiled because he'd gained a reaction, not the one he wanted but the one he'd been expecting.

"You loved him." He spoke carefully, locking his eyes with the angry grey. The hand on his throat twitched. "I'm not asking for your heart, the parts I'm interested in are lower." He arched his hips out, rubbing his half hard arousal against one of Tom's thighs, loving the strength there.

"Get it through your head, I don't bed children and I don't bed men anymore." He snapped out but Tom didn't let go. He didn't pull away from the slight body pinned against him, he didn't even pull away at the teasing contact with his leg.

"You want to, I want you to. It's been a long time since I've been taken by a man I've really wanted. We both know how good it will feel." The hand tightened but it wasn't in anger, Alex tasted the change in mood as clearly as a bloodhound scented a distant trail.

"How can you say that after the way those men hurt you?"

Alex shrugged. "I can't help that but it doesn't change what I like and I like you."

"Don't you understand?" Tom snapped. "It's wrong!"

"I'm not a child."

"Even if you weren't, it's wrong for two men to lay together!" The words cut him to say but they spilled out. "It's an abomination."

Alex slid a hand out and let his fingertips trace the hard length in Tom's pants, not missing how the older man's hips slipped forward slightly to increase the contact or the way his eyes narrowed as he struggled for control. "This doesn't feel like an abomination. This feels perfect to me." He pitched his voice down slightly, sounding more surely like a boy than he ever normally did. "It feels perfect to you as well."

Tom's hand slid from the throat, he wanted to kiss the boy, crush the mouth below his but he stepped away. "It's wrong, it only brings misery. I've no interest in such any more." He spat the words out but they made his stomach turn over. "If you're still following me, you'd better get moving." His voice was cold enough to freeze ice but when he glanced over, the boy was still smiling slightly.

They rode the day in forced silence and Tom didn't stop when they rode out into the main road and down into a small town. He waited for Alex to protest but the boy was silent. He waited for some of the locals to stare in shock at a boy dressed as a girl but no one said anything. In fact, no one even seemed to give them any more or less notice than a pretty young girl traveling with an older man would.

Tom pushed them onward, not even pausing for a meal and didn't stop until they were between small towns and able to camp along the road. Alex fell into their routine without question, obviously used to not questioning choices being made without him. When they'd settled in for the night, Tom fished a slender book from his belongs and sat, trying to read.

Only, now instead of staring into the fire, Alex was staring at him. Tom had been so worried about the boy's slow withdraw over the days that he hadn't expected to prefer it to the open scrutiny offered now. It was too much, too unnerving and he found himself re-reading the same

lines over and over again, even though he'd read the book in his hands a hundred times before.

"What?" He finally snapped, closing the book harshly.

Alex looked innocent.

"Don't stare at me boy, it's rude."

"You shouldn't call me that, we'll be in town soon."

"Call you what?"

"Boy, it'll confuse people."

Tom snorted and harshly settled into sleep. "Get some rest, boy, we'll reach the city tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." The harsh tone didn't fool Alex any, he wasn't so easily frightened away.

Tom had been in Owensboro years before and the city hadn't changed much with the passage of time. It had grown some now that the war was over and people again were hopefully and looking ahead. There was a liveliness to the town, like most of the towns on the river ways were. It was an energy he'd always liked, transient and moving, something he was comfortable with.

He watched people around them carefully but again, no one seemed to notice that Alex was a boy. When he glanced back to his unwitting companion he found the boy smiling widely, watching the city around them with excitement. He just shook his head and turned his focus back to leading them toward the water's edge and the ticket offices found there.

"Stay right here with the horses and don't talk to anyone." Tom barked out.

Alex slid down from his horse with ease. "We're going by riverboat?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, I just, I don't have any money."

"Did I ask you to pay?" Tom snapped and moved toward the door of the office. "Stay put!" He didn't want to wait for the boy to offer to pay his way again, he wasn't sure his resolve could handle it.

Alex did as he was told, he'd been in larger cities but he hadn't expected to be in one again for a long time. Even if the brothers hadn't stolen him, the old man would have dragged him west before turning him loose. For the first time in almost a year he actually believed he might make it to Memphis. The promises other men had made to help him reach his uncle had all been lies, or, if they'd meant well, they'd stalled on following through. He was going to make it this time, it would only be a few days by river, all because of Tom.

The tall doctor strode easily out of the office he'd disappeared into and Alex felt himself really smiling. It was like the lean doctor was some modern day knight in shining armor, he'd come into his life and saved him. More than that, Tom had been a good man to him, asking nothing for the help he was so freely delivering. It made Alex want to bed the man even more, if nothing more than in thanks.

"What're you grinning like an idiot for?" Tom growled out, he hated the way that bright smile made him feel warm. It was like walking into a sunbeam on a cold day.

"I just can't believe you're really doing all this for me." He sighed out, letting himself grin.

"Told you before, I wasn't doing it for you. Now, get back on your horse, the boat doesn't board passengers until tomorrow noon."

"Yes, sir, and thank you, sir." Alex spilled out, pulling himself easily back on the horses back.

"Don't call me sir, it makes me feel old." Tom muttered, unsure if the boy heard him or not and not caring if he did. He rode back into the town knowing his shadow was following but he didn't lead them to the hotel but the store front that he'd asked after.

Tom slid off his horse, he still hadn't thought up a name for the creature, and hitched the reins to the post. "Get down." Alex instantly obeyed but watched him with wide, cocoa eyes. Tom shook his head and tied up the boy's horse as well. "Come on."

"I don't understand."

"You can't go around bare foot, not here." He explained uncomfortably.

Alex stood on his bare feet in the hard packed street. It wasn't often that anyone managed to surprise him but this caught him off guard. "You're buying me shoes?"

"Don't get all soft on me, just get in here and get something on your feet."

"Yes, sir." He nodded and hurried into the store.

Tom wasn't willing to admit it but the small store front was a good place to test the boy's skills at pretending to be a girl. This shop specialized in pre-made ladies fashions, if Alex could pass here, he could pass anywhere. He pushed the door open and the bells over head rang and let the boy go in ahead of him.

"Ah, afternoon, sir, miss." An aging lady smiled and hurried over to greet them. She eyed Alex quickly and gave Tom a sad, understanding look. "How can I help you?"

Tom felt he might blush. "Ah, this is Alex, ah,"

Alex extended a delicate hand to the older woman. "Alexandria. Alexandria Horne."

"Well," the older lady smiled warmly and took the offered hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you Miss Horne, I'm Mrs. Appleson. How can I help you and your, uncle?"

"Godfather." Alex added easily, lying smoothly. "He's escorting me to my uncle."

"Shoes." Tom managed to get out. "Alex needs a pair of shoes, and sturdy socks."

Mrs. Appleson's face leveled out. "I'm sure we can find something, follow me?"

A half hour later Tom was ready to shoot someone. Not only was the helpful Mrs. Appleson totally fooled into believing that Alex was a girl, but she was complimenting the young blond on her taste and style. Alex was cooing over fancy, twelve button boots that were pretty but not very sturdy.

"No, you need something practical. The plain shoes are fine, do they fit?" A half hour for shoes, it was insane. He could almost have made shoes in the amount of time it was taking them to pick out one pair from the four styles offered.

"Awwww." Alex pouted a little bit, almost petting the more decorative boots. "These are so much prettier."

"You don't need pretty, you need something to keep your feet dry. We'll take the shoes, how about those socks?"

That led to twenty minutes of talking about and petting different stockings. Which led to looking at skirts and bodices. Tom's head was starting to ache. "Socks!" He finally snapped. "We just need a couple of pairs of socks!"

Alex's face fell and the running comparison to different types of lace stopped dead. "I'm sorry." He swallowed hard, not really afraid but disappointed. "Mrs. Appleson, I'm afraid my godfather is in a hurry, could I have two pairs of socks please?"

"Of course my dear, I'll just wrap them up for you."

"No need." Tom interrupted. "Alex, put them on, I don't like you running around bare footed."

"Yes, sir." Alex sat and pulled his new, usefully ugly shoes on over the plain, sturdy, if warm, socks while Tom paid for them. When the older man stomped from the store, Alex hurried to follow.

"I'm sorry." He began right away, wondering if Tom really had been pushed to far this time. "I don't mean to be ungrateful. You've done so much for me already, it's just, it was nice seeing such pretty things. I'm sorry."

Tom sighed. "Don't be sorry, just come on."

He led them to the Hotel Fairmount, a nice but not the nicest of places offered to travelers in the growing town. When he checked them in he purchased separate rooms but let Alex haul his bag upstairs for himself. Tom paused outside the boy's bedroom, right next door to his own.

"I've asked them to send up a bath for you, it won't be a full tub but it'll get the road dirt off of you."

"Thank you."

"I have to go out to run an errand, will you be okay by yourself?"

"Of course."

"Don't cause trouble but be ready to join me for dinner downstairs."

"I will." Alex lingered in the doorway to his room, hoping the older man would come inside, he didn't.

"Okay than." Tom nodded and moved to drop his things into the room next door, leaving Alex to stand in the door way of his own room or go inside as he wanted. He dropped his things onto the bed and quickly escaped back out of the room and out onto the town's busy streets.

He found the shop easily, the town had grown but wasn't large by any means and he pushed his way inside. The man was part silversmith, part tinsmith, part watchmaker and did general metal repair. The counters offered an odd mix of cigarette cases, pocket watches and silverware and he scanned around the counter while he waited for the lady to finish describing the ornate work she wanted fixed on her broach.

"Can I help you sir?"

Tom glanced up from the slender case he'd been admiring and pulled the tin case from his pocket. "I need the latch on this tightened. Can you do it?" It took a force of will to hand the photo case over to the stranger.

The man turned it over in his hands before working the latch and nodding. "It is loosening up a touch isn't it?"

"I need to keep it secure, it's dear to me. Can you do it?"

"Hmm, case has seen some wear, you might be better off just getting a new one."

"No," Tom answered a touch too quickly. "It was a gift. Can you fix it?"

"Certainly, come back in a couple of days and I'll have it ready."

"I don't have a couple of days." Tom sighed out. "My boat leaves tomorrow. I'll pay extra, can you do it today?"

The man opened the case to inspect the hinges, glanced at the pictures before he nodded. "Sure, son, sure. I'll get right on it, come back in an hour and we'll see how far I've gotten on it. It's a simple repair, I'm just drowning in work right now."

The worried, anxious feeling of being parted from that photo case for any length of time lifted. "Thank you" He managed to sound slightly civil before he turned and left.

A few doors down Tom found a general sales store and went inside to replace some of his supplies, oddly, he needed bullets more than he needed medical supplies. It was a sad statement to how he'd been living his life in recent months. He walked around the store just to stretch his legs and kill time, looking over the odd assortment of supplies offered for sale. He ended up adding a new shirt and pants to his purchases, plain, simple wear but newer and nicer than anything he still owned. Bachelor ware, the sort of clothes a man bought when he had no one to make clothing for him, it didn't bother Tom any.

As he was moving to pay for his selections, his eyes fell on a stack of paper wrapped soap. The labels were fancy, with flowing vines and flowers and long haired women smiling. The bars, some pink, some purple, were stacked into a small circle and he picked up a pink one and sniffed it. The rose scent was cloying and made him sneeze, making the shop keeper eye him oddly. Tom shook his head but he scooped up the purple one anyway and sniffed again.

It was Alex. The herbal lavender was subtle but strong and it hit a nerve in Tom's brain. This time he didn't sneeze but his eyes half shut and the image of the boy flashed swiftly across his thoughts. It figured the boy would even like expensive soap. Tom shook his head.

"It's French milled, it costs more but it lasts longer." The shopkeeper sold. "The ladies like the rose scent but the lavender is nice for a man or a woman."

"It's not for me." Tom snapped and he balanced the weight of the bar in his hand as the shopkeeper stepped back slightly from the flash in his eyes. "It's for," he paused, stumbling over the truth and the lie. "For my goddaughter. She likes lavender."

The shopkeeper nodded and smiled again. "Ah, well they say a lady who likes rose is looking for romance but one who chooses lavender instead will make a wonderful wife."

Tom laughed. "I wouldn't bet on that." He tossed the soap onto the counter next to his other things and was still smiling mildly as he took the wrapped stack out into the street with him.

He found himself walking past the ladies dress shop and he paused to glance at the burgundy

dress in the window. Would it really kill him to indulge Alex a little? The boy asked for nothing, had been no effort really and little bother. He was going to be meeting his uncle for the first time soon, it would be easier if he didn't look like a rag child. There was the issue of the sum of money that had been found on the brothers, it was only right that the bulk of that money be spent on Alex and he really did need new things. Since there was no hope of getting the boy to dress properly, he may as well dress as a girl.

It didn't take much to draw him back inside the dress shop. Tom felt too large inside, too tall and broad, too awkward and rough. The shop even smelled like a woman, softly powered and flowery and he just knew his rougher hands would snag onto fine fabrics if he touched anything.

"Ah, welcome back, you're Alexandria's godfather?" Mrs. Appleson smiled.

"Dr. Lambry." Tom introduced himself.

"Yes, I know, she told me, is there something I can do for you?"

Tom swiped the hat from his head and remembered his manners. "Yes, I, Alex, well, maybe I was bit harsh before. It's been a difficult trip."

"Of course, I can imagine how difficult it's been for you, what with the fire claiming the poor dear's mother and sisters and how you lost your best friend, her father, in the war and all."

The lie was more complex than Tom had thought the boy had time to create. "Yes, you've no idea how difficult." He muttered out, meaning the words fully. "Look, I don't know the first thing about any of this. What does Alex need?"

Mrs. Appleson smiled softly. "Why don't you send the young dear back here and I'll help her outfit, it might be a bit delicate for you."

"Ma'am, I am a doctor. I want it to be a surprise."

"Ah, very well than. What about her unmentionables?"

Tom never understood the stupidity of modesty about clothing. "All Alex has is a pair of drawers and a couple of skirts and shirts."

Mrs. Appleson actually blushed a little at his bluntness. "Well, you are a doctor so I guess this is proper." She moved to a drawer and pulled out two pairs of cotton drawers and laid them on the counter. "Bloomers, not drawers." She corrected softly, not meeting the handsome man's eyes. She continued to gather fabric as she moved. "She'll need at least one, better two chemises." She looked to Tom for confirmation.

"I'm not worried about the cost, whatever you think best."

"Two than, she's so slender."

"Well," for an absurd moment Tom almost told the truth. "She wasn't well after the accident and I was told she wasn't eating. Not to worry, she's gotten her appetite back now." The lies were getting easier to tell.

"Good, poor dear. She really doesn't need a corset but take this one along, no lady is proper without one. Hmm and stockings, cotton." Two pairs of black cotton stockings were tossed onto the growing pile followed by a pair of round elastic garters. "Will you allow the lady to have a pair of silk stockings? She seemed to really like them."

Tom shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"Here," The matron draped one cotton stocking into Tom's hand and a silk one in the other. "You must not be a married man, Dr. Lambry."

"No, I'm not." The cotton stocking was nice, but the silk one was soft and smooth. He had a moment's vision of running his hands under the skirts the boy wore, tracing his hands up over slender, silk covered legs. He could almost feel the edge of the cotton bloomers above the boy's knees as he traced his hands up those wonderful legs. Only, at the slit in the bloomers, there would be no soft, wet womanhood but the steel hard length of a man.

"If you think it's best." He managed to force out, chasing the traitorous thought away.

Mrs. Appleson smiled and laid a pair on the counter. "Now, camisoles, and petticoats, will she require ones for cold weather?"

"If she does her uncle can provide them." He answered, not looking at the soft fabrics being complied.

"Hmmm a riding skirt and bodice?" She held out a full skirt in a soft, brushed peachy brown with it's matching bodice.

"That's fine."

"And one other outfit? What about a bustle? They're quite popular."

"No bustles." The wired cage would hide the boy's frame better but Tom hated the idea.

"Okay than, how about this nice dress in navy blue?"

The fabric was somber and serious. "No, do you have anything in yellow?"

"Well, I have this one here in pale blue with yellow stripes?" She held out the lovely fabric, pale as robin's eggs with soft yellow strips crossing over themselves on it. "It's a little more pricey but it's very well made. It has some lovely detail work on it."

"That one's better. And," he paused, wondering what had come over him. "Those boots Alex was looking at earlier as well, please."

The matron smiled warmly. "Very well." She gathered the boots up as well as two pairs of gloves, one fabric and one leather. She paused, gathering the fabric together. "If I may sir, I know young women, what are your plans when you reach her uncle in Memphis?"

Tom shrugged. "My plans are to leave her in his care. Why?"

"It might be best if you stay in the city for a few weeks. It'll give the young lady a chance to adjust to her new home, it must have been very difficult for her, these past few months and all. She's obviously very fond of you, might I even say, sir, that she seems a bit smitten with you. It would be easier if you were near by as she adapted to her new life." She turned around and briefly met the stern grey eyes, wondering if the man really was the slender blonde's godfather at all. "Ah! A sewing kit, something small, she'll be able to adapt any of these articles to suit herself. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, there's nothing else." The woman's words had caught him off guard. The mere suggestion that the boy was smitten with him was ridiculous, she didn't know the truth of their situation. If she only knew that it was the only way the boy knew how to interact, she'd not assume that there was any emotional involvement at all.

With his arms now laden down with far too many packages and his wallet considerably lighter, Tom picked up the repaired photo case and returned to the hotel. He went straight to his room and dropped the packages onto the narrow bed, sorting out the smaller one that was his from the multitude of the ones he'd purchased for Alex.

Out in the hallway he found a maid and called her over. "Miss! Miss, would you please see to it that my goddaughter in the room next door here receives these packages before she dresses for dinner? Thanks!" Tom left the stack of packages in the maid's hands, unwilling to disturb Alex when he might be soaking in a tub of water. That was a mental image he didn't need to linger on. He shut himself into his room and flopped down onto the bed, unwilling to move until he had to for dinner.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Six

Tom washed up and shaved before pulling on the new clothes he'd bought himself, not certain he liked the fit or style of them. He waited around outside his room, hovering in the hallway until Alex's door opened but the skinny, dirty boy didn't emerge. The figure that joined him in the hallway, smiling widely, was a lovely young woman.

Even Tom had difficulty seeing beyond the illusion, Alex was stunningly beautiful and in the dress there was no chance anyone would mistake him for a boy. The corset cinched in the masculine waist and added slight female curves, the dress fell in beautiful color and only made the peachy smooth skin glow further. Alex's curls had been washed clean and brushed smooth, or as smooth as they were likely to get, before being turned up and pinned to his head. He looked like a fine young lady, lovely enough to cause fights and turn heads.

"Hello, sir." Alex whispered behind his smile. Tom's eyes were raking across him, leaving a warm trail behind. "Thank you. No one's ever been so nice to me, thank you."

The hallway suddenly felt too public, too exposed, for how intimate Alex's voice made Tom feel. "You liked it than?"

Alex nodded. "More than I can ever say. Look!" He tugged up the hem of his skirt, showing off the beautiful boots and the edge of a silk stocking clad ankle.

Tom swallowed hard and glanced away. "Stop that! People will see."

"I don't care, I wanted you to see. What do you think?" Alex spun lightly in a circle.

"You look like a fine, young, lady." A lady, something Tom had never found the least bit attractive, which didn't explain how strongly he was desiring to touch the boy. "If her ladyship pleases, I'm hungry." He spat out, mocking, hating that the words would chase the thrilled smile from the pretty face but needing it to go away.

Alex curtsied slightly and still smiled. "As milord wishes." Tom's grousing wasn't fooling him, not anymore.

Dinner in the hotel's restaurant wasn't the best meal Tom had ever had but since he didn't have to haul it, kill it or cook it, he wasn't going to complain. What surprised him was the conversation.

"Don't look so shocked, I used to read all the time." Alex tossed back, tilting his head, liking the growing interest in Tom's eyes.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't peg you as a bookworm."

"My mother used have tons of books, oh Shakespeare, I could read him all day. The comedies, I used to have them memorized I read them so often. Over hill, over dale, Thorough bush, thorough brier, Over park, over pale, Thorough flood, thorough fire, I do wander everywhere, Swifter than the moon's sphere; And I serve the fairy queen."

Tom laughed, he actually found himself chuckling. "Indeed you do, Alex, indeed you do."

"It's from A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"I know where it's from." He let himself chuckle on for a moment, pushing the remains of his food about his plate.

"I like hearing you laugh. You look different when you laugh."

"Laugh for me, Tom. God it makes me hard hearing you laugh." Sam's memory whispered in his ear and the laughter died in this throat.

"That's a silly thing to say, everyone looks different when they laugh."

Alex saw the ghost of something flicker across Tom's face, the laughter cut off and the solemn, sad, seriousness that he normally carried around returned. "I bet you like the tragedies." He said instead of asking the questions he wanted to. "Hamlet? Macbeth? Romeo and Juliet? Oh I love that one, so romantic."

"They all die in the end."

"But they die for love, is there any better reason to die?"

Tom lowered his eyes. "You're very young." He pushed himself away from the table and stood up. "You should stay in your room and get some sleep, tomorrow will be busy."

"Where're you going?" He asked quickly, for the first time, ever, really worried about someone else not because of how it would impact him but out of genuine concern.

"What difference does it make to you? Just stay in your room and out of trouble." He knew he was snapping at the boy but his nerves were frayed. Tom nodded to the steps. "Go."

Alex rose gracefully to his feet but he met those grey eyes square on. "Okay, but be careful."

"Don't worry." Tom snorted. "Your meal ticket isn't going to get himself shot tonight."

"Hmm, that isn't what I meant and we both know it." Alex said in a high manner, raised his chin and took himself upstairs.

It had been a productive night. Tom had floated from saloon to saloon and gaming table to gaming table. He'd won enough that he felt bored, there was no thrill in gambling any more but he still played. He'd drunk enough to numb himself a little but not enough to really get him drunk. Moderation and restraint, his long time companions followed him around the town.

So when he'd met Alex in the hallway at eleven the next morning, he'd mellowed enough to have forgotten his frustration at the boy. It would only be a few more days after all and honestly, the

boy wasn't that annoying. Not as annoying as he could have been given all he'd endured in his too short life and Tom could respect the buoyancy of Alex's will.

All of that melted when Alex emerged from his room, looking like a fine young lady in his new peachy tan riding outfit. His hair was brushed and swept up, gloves covered his hands and his walnut eyes were flashing. Apparently, Tom's mellowed mood didn't extend to his traveling companion. Alex sat his case down next to his booted feet and folded his thin arms across an equally thin chest.

"Are we ready?" He asked and arched an eyebrow.

Tom frowned. "Sure kid, here," he tossed the lavender soap at the still angry boy. "It was mixed up with my things." He bent down and scooped up the other case and carried both to the stairs, not waiting for the boy to follow.

Alex caught the paper wrapped object tossed at him and turned it over to read the label. The stubbornness melted from his expression as he brought the bar up to his nose and inhaled. Something small tore open inside his chest and bled. Tears swam up to cloud his vision before he could swallow them. "My soap." He wrapped gloved hands around the bar and pressed it to his chest.

Tom glanced over his shoulder to where the boy stood, near tears by such a simple thing. "Yeah, well, don't make a fuss over it."

Alex kept the bar pressed to his chest and crossed to where Tom stood on the first steps. The smile that curled a little at his lips was true and very small. One gloved hand reached out to cup the side of a recently shaved face and he locked his eyes onto the stormy grey of the older man's. "Thank you."

There was nothing artificial, nothing manipulative, in the boy's expression. The warm sincerity hit Tom like a bolt of lightening. Those deep warm eyes heated his blood, made him feel connected. The hand on his face was slender and touched him so gently it was barely there on his skin but the contact seared his flesh.

He wanted to kiss the boy. Right there, on the top of the stairs. He wanted to circle the slender, corseted waist and pull the lean body against his own. It would be so easy to crush those expressive lips against his, slid his tongue inside the other's mouth. As if Alex had read his thoughts, the tip of a pink tongue slipped out to wet dry lips.

All that Tom was, all that he'd been, wasn't so easily chased away. "It's just soap." He shook his head and hurried down the steps.

Alex hovered at the top of the stairs and watched the strong back, straight as an arrow, quickly descend. "It isn't to me." He whispered when he was certain the other man couldn't hear. "It isn't to me."

Alex had never traveled on a river before, the sight of the last of the cargo being loaded in and people swarming around fascinated him. The sight of the small clusters of family and friends seeing loved ones off made him feel oddly lonely, until his eyes fell on the strong back ahead of him and he found himself smiling. Sure there wouldn't be anyone waving farewell but who needed a goodbye when nothing was being left behind.

He followed Tom's example and stayed modestly quiet. The porter that took their horses to be stabled on a lower deck of the big river boat eyed Alex with a lustful gleam but rather than flirt back, Alex simply lowered his gaze. It wasn't like him, not at all but he was too busy following his tall patron to worry too much about the oddities of his own behavior. He wasn't sure Tom would actually leave him behind if he didn't follow but Alex wasn't going to risk it.

The boat was lovely. Tall and wide, shallow on it's draft and painted bright white with it's railings and trim a cheerful red. People moved on decks, passengers from earlier stops and there was an excitement in the air. There was promise here, in so much life and hope sailing the wide rivers, so many people with dreams and ambitions. Alex wanted to be a part of it, even if only for a few days and now in his lovely new clothes he'd actually fit in their fine world.

Alex certainly looked like he belonged among the fine dressed traveler far more than Tom did. Wearing the new pants and shirt he'd bought, his face clean shaven but his coat still old and dirty, Tom wore his hat low over his eyes and his guns within plain sight. It made the handsome doctor look more like a Nebraska lawman or some Texan cowboy. Someone wild and dangerous, someone who belonged to a less civilized world and there was an air of danger around him. A rightful one, Alex remembered, thinking about how coldly the doctor had killed.

The porter Tom was following led them up to the third deck and Alex watched the swirling life around him with wide eyes. He was expecting a small room, similar to his hotel room but when he followed Tom into the room the Porter opened, his mouth fell open. The floors were carpeted in ornate rugs, chairs sat clustered around tables and in small groups. It was a proper sitting room, the bookcase even had several books in neat lines behind securing railings. Two doors led from the sitting room and as Tom tipped the porter and shut the door behind him, Alex pulled the doors open to expose the neat, tidy little bedrooms on the other side.

"This is a suite!"

Tom grunted and picked the larger of the two rooms and threw his belongings inside.

"You got us a suite?"

"Obviously, how else was I supposed to keep an eye on you."

"But, this must have cost a fortune." The cost of the new clothes, the food he'd eaten, the hotel and now this weighed heavily in his mind. Tom wasn't being fair, he wasn't letting him repay him properly.

"I told you, I'm not worried about money." Tom saw the uncertainty in the warm brown eyes and tried to soften his expression. "Look, if it worries you, your uncle can pay me back."

"I," he started to suggest a better way to repay the debt but the words dried up in his throat. "I don't know why you're being nice to me. I've done nothing for you."

"Contrary to what you think, not everyone requires something in return for helping other people out." He muttered. "Get unpacked and I'll walk you around the ship. If you're going to keep on dressing like a girl, I can't have you running around unescorted."

Alex stood frozen in place by the odd concept of kindness for kindness sake but the offer to explore perked him up. "I'd like that!" He smiled widely and hurried into his room, feeling younger than he'd ever felt and happier than he had words for.

Alex hadn't changed, he was saving the pretty blue dress for dinner, and actually was very fond of the peachy tan riding outfit he had on. He unpacked in a hurry and actually beat Tom back out into the suite and was reading the spines of the books while he bounced his weight from foot to foot.

That was how Tom found him, and he froze in his door way to watch the boy. His head was tilted to the side and a gloved finger lightly trailed in the air above the spines of the books as he

studied them. The blonde curls were springing back up, twisting out of the careful style they'd been set in to tickle at the pretty face. The regular food was putting weight back on the slender frame but while the boy's face no longer looked gaunt, he was still too sharply angled for Tom's comfort. How long would he have survived out there, in the woods, had he not stepped in? The boy was obviously stronger than he pretended to, he'd managed to mortally wound one of his abusers before Tom arrived. Would he have stayed strong long enough to kill the other two? In the state he was in now, Tom would put his money on the boy but as weak as he had been, well, it hadn't been looking good.

"Ready?" Tom finally spoke, breaking the boy's focus and earning a wide grin.

"May I read a book later?"

Asking for permission bothered him. "That's what they're there for. Alex, I don't own you, you do what you want. So long as you don't cause trouble, I don't care what you do."

"Yes, sir."

Tom pulled his hat back on and offered his arm to the boy as he would to any young lady but he flinched when the slender gloved hand slid around to rest on the crook of his arm. He led them outside onto the deck, his shoulders tense at having to spend so much time, so close, to the boy.

Only, an hour later, after showing the boy the grand staircase all river boats seemed to have and the ornate carved wood in the railings around the open dining room, they were standing on the edge of the deck, at the railing, and Tom not only wasn't tense, he was actually having a good time. Alex's obvious and unaffected delight in the entire experience pleased him. The boy raised no concern over his true gender, even as they'd spoken to a few other passengers as they'd strolled. He watched as Alex laughed merrily at the boat's whistle blowing as they pulled away from the dock and Tom leaned on the railing and stared as the boy waved at the people on the dock as they steamed out into deeper water.

He hated admitting it, the boy was lovely. It wasn't that he made a lovely woman, he was a lovely man. Far more attractive than anyone Tom had ever been involved with, the boy's very delicacy made him feel strong and masculine, protective, and needed. For Tom, the outside of a person normally didn't matter. He wasn't one to be turned by a pretty face and that's what frightened him. As the boy was growing more comfortable around him, as he stopped trying to please and started to just be himself, Tom was finding the person under the pretty skin almost as attractive. It was a good thing they'd be in Memphis soon.

"Tom?" A male voice called from across the deck. "Tom Lambry?"

Tom glanced around at his name and his eyes fell on a man pushing his way across the lingering crowds on the deck. Alex was looking too and he spied the motion just as quickly but unlike Tom, he didn't step out to see who it was. Alex ducked his head and stepped slightly behind Tom, half hiding himself from plain view.

A woman in a dark green dress stepped aside and took the blocking screen of her white parasol with her and Tom's eyes fell on a face he hadn't expected to see again. The man's black hair was sloppy, hanging just a touch too long around his ears, brushing down onto his forehead. He was handsome, charming, in a slick, well bred manner. His prominent Roman nose only made him look more handsome not less and his bright, dark eyes sparkled with charm and mischief. He wasn't as tall as Tom, nor as wide in the shoulders, but the man had a hard, solid frame covered in a well cut suit. A gold watch chain hung from his waist and disappeared into a pocket.

"Oh my God, it can't be." Tom whispered but he was smiling. He pushed away from the railing and rushed over to meet his old friend. "James! James Darney you old fool, what are you doing here?"

James laughed warmly and grabbed his friend into a back slapping hug. "I could ask the same of you! Saints above, I didn't expect to see you here of all places. I thought you were headed out west? What was it California? Good God you look amazing! Who's this with you there? Don't tell me you've found yourself a woman? Pretty little thing isn't she? What's Sam have to say about that? Where is Sam anyway?"

The words poured out and Tom knew his friend well enough to let them spill. Only, the last question froze him in place and the laughter stopped. "You haven't heard?"
"I've heard not a word about anything. I've been out in Kansas for years, geesh let's see, I was headed out there they last time I saw you two, that was almost three years ago?"

"Almost four since I've seen you."

"Four than! I sent letters to your family but well, they said they hadn't heard from you. I figured you'd made it out West like you said. Sam was so set on seeing the California sunsets. Where is he?" The serious look in Tom's eyes worried him, he couldn't imagine it but he asked anyway. "Don't tell me he got tired of your ugly face and headed West without you?" But his eyes darted to the pretty creature lurking, silently behind Tom. He was all in favor of a pretty woman but if she's split up the couple, he'd have to hate her for it.

"James, Sam's dead." It made him ache with a pain that was fresh and raw having to say those words. Tom felt Alex glance up at him sharply and he watched the look of horror and grief spread across James' face.

"How? When? What happened?"

"It'll be three years this summer." He managed to say.

"How? Tom, what happened? Why didn't you send word to me?"

It was too much, he didn't talk about it. "Why don't you come have a drink with me after dinner tonight and I'll tell you about it. I don't want to speak of it now." His eyes darted around to the milling crowds and felt exposed.

Mercifully, James nodded. "Of course, of course, I'm sorry, it was rude of me to ask in public. Tom, I'm so sorry, you know I can't express how sorry I am."

"I know." Tom drew a breath and his eyes fell on the easiest of distractions. "James, let me introduce you to Miss Alexandria Horne. Alex this is my old friend, James Darney."

Alex extended a gloved hand which James took. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Darney."

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Horne." There was something to the girl that James couldn't pin down. Something he was missing, and it wasn't just finding such a pretty woman in Tom's company. "I don't think in all the years I've known you, Tom, that I've ever found you in the company of such a pretty woman."

Tom didn't miss the glance, the questioning silently and he smiled lightly at it. "I'm escorting Miss Horne to her uncle's house in Memphis." He had to admit, Alex was good. The boy even blushed slightly at the compliment and beyond that, if he'd fooled James, he'd be able to fool anyone.

"That sounds like the noble man I know. You couldn't be in better hands, Miss Horne."

"Of that, I'm assured, Mr. Darney."

James' smile widened. "You're amazing. How long did it take for Tom to figure out that you were

a boy? Or did he have to be told?"

Rather than being offended or upset, Alex just smiled in return. Liking the openness in the charming man. "He had to be told but to his credit, the circumstance of our meeting was unusual."

James reached over and gathered up the gloved hand again, pressing a kiss to the knuckles. "Well, my dear, your secrets are safe with me."

"How'd you know?" Tom interjected, surprised at how well the pair was handling the admissions and how uneasy he felt with James' gentle flirting.

"Please, Tom, I've taken to bed enough men and women to know either gender a mile away. But you Miss Horne, are exceptionally good. I almost was fooled. If it weren't for my vast experience I would have been." He dropped the hands and let his teasing drop with them. "Well, I'll look forward to your company after dinner. Now, please, forgive me, I still have to unpack."

They made their farewells and Tom watched his friend fade into the crowd with an easy step. Alex was watching too and smiled up at Tom but the smile wasn't touching the boy's eyes.

"I like him. Have you been friends for long?"

Tom nodded. "Our families are friends, we went to school together."

"Tom, I'm sorry about Sam."

"It was a long time ago, ready to go in?"

Alex nodded but he didn't care if they stayed or went. In his mind a lot of things were starting to make sense and he needed time to sort them all out. Normally, presented with the charming new option of attracting James and keeping his options flexible, Alex would be working out ways of playing the two men against each other. The situation wasn't normal, for as handsome and charming as James was, the idea of trying to attach himself to the man didn't hold any appeal. Alex's only thoughts were about Tom, he tried not to think about what that might mean.

Back in their suite, Tom disappeared into his room without even a warning to behave. The blonde stood in the sitting room and stared at the shut door, wondering if he'd get beaten for bothering the older man. It would have been a serious fear if he'd been dealing with anyone else but he just couldn't picture Tom beating him. In the end it was the hurt he'd seen in the cold grey eyes and knowledge of the other man's private nature that caused Alex to select a book, curl up in a chair and leave the other man alone.

Tom didn't emerge until it was time to leave for dinner, and Alex sat waiting for his escort, dressed and ready. There was a sadness in the solemn man and Alex stayed silent, accepting the offered arm with ease and grace. Dinner was lovely, the table they were seated at was filled with aging matrons and old men that were delighted at the pretty blonde's happy conversation. Alex chattered on, smiling, loving the attention and directing it away from Tom who seemed ready to crawl under a rock.

The food was excellent and Alex stuffed himself as best he could while wearing a corset. It was such a change, to be in public and not have to worry that the man he was with would fly off into a jealous rage. So often Alex had been forced to remain silent, eyes lowered, doing nothing to attract attention that tonight was yet another wonderful treat. When he'd glance over to Tom, the man almost seemed grateful that he didn't have to speak and Alex would flash a bright smile before diving back into the conversation.

"Well, dear, it's a good thing your godfather is such a concerned man! Too many villains roaming

around these days, too many." A graying man, addressed simply as the Captain, bobbed his head at Alex. The long, wispy moustaches twitched like mad caterpillars as he spoke but Alex was growing fond of the older man and his lovely, ageing wife.

"I am indeed, Captain. I'm certain that Dr. Lambry would do anything to protect me, I trust him fully." Alex smiled again at Tom but the older man was pushing the last of his food about his plate.

"Yes, quite right, though I've never met a doctor who travels armed before."

Alex turned his smile on the Captain. "As you've said sir, there are far too many villains around."

"Can't blame you, Doctor, not at all. I'd be armed as well traveling with such a young beauty. How many men have died in duels over you so far, dear?"

Alex raised his eyes coyly. "Now, Captain, a lady would never answer that question."

The table laughed and Alex knew he was blushing slightly. He was almost giddy with the attention and could have stayed the entire night. Tom changed that, he pushed his chair back and stood.

"Excuse us, but we should retire." The laughter died at a glance from his eyes.

"Won't you join us, Doctor, for a brandy and a good cigar?" The Captain invited, motioning to the other men around the table. "Don't worry, Doris will see to your goddaughter in our absence."

"Perhaps tomorrow night. I've run into an old friend and have already promised to spend the evening catching up with him. Thank you for the offer, however." He held out a hand. "Alex?"

Alex smiled warmly at the gracious manners and accepted the hand to rise.

"Dear," Doris, the Captain's wife spoke up. "Some of us ladies are gathering for tea tomorrow, I'd love to have you join us, say, around two?"

Alex felt his heart stutter a beat in excitement. "Oh, that would be grand, I'd love to. That is, if my godfather would permit it, I'd be honored to attend. Thank you."

Tom neither granted permission nor denied it on the spot but with nods and good nights led his young 'goddaughter' from the dining room and back to their suite. The hand on his arm was light and each time he glanced over and down to Alex, the boy was still smiling widely.

"You're pleased with yourself."

"Oh, Tom, that was so much fun! Tea! I haven't been able to have a ladies tea since my mother died. May I go? Please?"

"Do you think that's wise?" It would be safer to keep the boy tucked out of sight. If someone discovered the truth of his gender on board the ship it would be very bad indeed.

"I'm sure you're right, it was a silly idea."

Tom glanced over now and the smile was gone. It felt like winter had returned. "I didn't say you couldn't go, just, if you do, be careful."

"You really wouldn't mind?" Hopeful brown eyes studied Tom for any signs of anger and found now.

"I told you, I don't own you. Do what you want so long as it causes me no grief." He nearly snapped out, hating how pleased the smile's return made him feel.

"Well, don't you two make a pretty sight." James murmured from where he leaned against the wall of the hallway, his eyes raking over both. "I was certain that old windbag would keep you all night." He pushed away to stand straight and raised the bottle he'd held by his side. "Figured the night could use a little lubrication."

"As if you've ever required a reason to drink." Tom scowled but opened the suite's door and lead them inside.

Alex moved toward his rooms but James' voice stopped him.

"Do you drink, little one? Should I pour you a glass as well?"

He glanced to Tom who was deliberately not looking back. "I didn't think I was invited."

"Well, dear, you are. I'd never be so rude as to exclude a pretty face. So, are you drinking or not?" James had poured out the amber liquid into a glass and was pressing it into Tom's hand.

"I can be, if you wish it." The answer came automatically.

James laughed but Tom frowned and answered his friend. "Alex is just a babe, all he's drinking is milk."

"A babe! Please, you have to be what? Seventeen, eighteen?" James poured out a second glass before setting the bottle on the small table between the chair Tom had taken and the one he'd planned on taking.

"He's barely sixteen and he won't be drinking this swill until his health has recovered."

"Swill! This is fine scotch, thank you very much." James lowered himself into the chair with a sigh. "But, if the doctor so orders it, I'm sorry, dear."

Alex smiled slightly. "That's okay, I don't like being drunk. Excuse me, I want to get my sewing."

James about snorted scotch up his nose. He coughed, sputtered and ignored the bitter look Tom shot him. "Oh, I'm sorry, it's just, that was funny. I never thought you'd have a wife, Tom."

"It's not funny. The boy's never lived as anything but a woman. It's absolutely ridiculous." Tom watched as Alex returned, some of the new clothing tucked in his hands, and settled in to tailor it to a better fit. It didn't miss his attention that, like a woman, Alex chose a seat just far enough from the men to be outside their conversation but just close enough to be included. He glanced up and caught James watching the blonde.

"How's your wife doing, James?" He asked coldly.

"Oh, she's fine, better than fine now. The houseman, Conrad, did I tell you about him? Handsome Irish fellow, she's quite smitten by him, anyway, we just brought the rest of his family over here from Ireland. Apparently they're very happy together, made it damned awkward while I was home." He sighed and pulled his eyes from the pretty blonde.

"I thought she knew you were aware of Conrad?"

"Yes, we don't lie to one another. She knows what a whore I am and I know about her flings. It just made her uncomfortable having me home but I had to spend at least a month or two there, my son, George, he's almost nine believe it or not, he wouldn't have known me. I've five children now, well technically I've three and Conrad as two but they all have my name. As happy as they

were to welcome me home, only dear George wept when I announced I had to attend to business in Baton Rouge for at least the next six months."

"That's where you're headed?"

James nodded. "Yes, I've a house rented and all. Not sure where I'll go from there but than I never do. Father keeps me moving around a lot, the dramatic life of a wandering lawyer. But, enough of this Tom, tell me, what happened to Sam?"

Tom took a long swallow and let the strong drink burn it's way to his stomach. "He wanted to see his father before we headed West so we went to Baton Rouge. His father wasn't any changed in attitude but we stayed on in the city, making plans. The week we were to leave, I was gambling and Sam was being Sam. He got a bit carried away and made our relationship obvious. We were asked to leave and outside we were confronted by two men." The words felt hollow, the night was still sharp in his memory. "One of them shot him." He tried to down more of the scotch but found his glass empty.

James reached over and poured more from the bottle. "Tom, I'm so sorry. Were they arrested? I wish you'd sent word to me."

"There was no one to arrest. I killed them." He smiled bitterly but kept his eyes on his glass. "I beat them to death right there out side the gambling hall. If I'd been armed that night, Sam might have lived but I wasn't."

"This wasn't your fault!" James snapped out quickly.

Tom only shrugged. "If we hadn't been what we were, Sam would still be alive. They shot him because he loved me."

"Bigoted bastards, again not your fault!"

"It took him two days to die, James, I couldn't save him."

"Jesus, Tom, I'm sorry." Some part of James had worried his friend was dead, shortly after he'd settled in Kansas he'd been overwhelmed with the need to contact his oldest friend. All his efforts had turned up nothing but he'd known, some part of him had known, that Tom was hurt somewhere. He'd never have guessed this was the cause. "You've been alone this whole time since?"

Tom shrugged again. "Wandering around mostly. I keep meaning to go out West but it just hasn't happened. I might this time though, once I drop the boy off at his uncle's. I was going to go down to Baton Rouge and see Sam before maybe going West."

James looked to where the boy was carefully minding his stitches but he didn't miss the alert way he was sitting. "So, you and Alex aren't,?"

"No!" He shook his head. "He's just a kid that needed some help. I don't do that anymore, James."

"Do what?" He almost spat back, not believing what he was hearing.

"I don't lay with men anymore, least of all with such young men."

That made James laugh and he downed a swallow of his drink. "So, you're sticking to women now? How's that working for you?"

"I'm sticking to nothing. It's wrong James, it's because of what we were that Sam was murdered."

"You don't really believe that do you?" But the look in Tom's eyes was so broken, so hollowly hurt that James shook his head. "We'll debate it later." He refilled Tom's glass as well as his own. "Tell me how you found such a lovely traveling companion? I'm sure it's quite a story!" He forced a smile but it felt tight and fake on his face. When he glanced over to Alex, he saw the same tight, fake half smile on the boy's face. It confirmed that Tom's broken coldness was something the other man had seen during their travels. Maybe by working together, they could snap some sense into Tom's stubborn head.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Seven

The next day, before two, Alex swooped down to where Tom sat trying to write a letter to his mother and placed a quick, chaste kiss on the side of his face. Tom's head snapped up and he pulled away, startled. "What're you doing?"

"Saying goodbye to my favorite godfather. I'll be back after tea." He waved and sailed out of the room taking the warmth and cheer with him.

A few minutes later the door opened and Tom didn't even look up. "What? Forget your bonnet?"

"Well, no, but I'll wear one if you'd find it appealing." James teased.

"It wouldn't flatter your eyes." He grumbled back.

"Who're you writing?"

"Mother, or I'm trying to. Why is it she's the most difficult to speak to?"

"Well, maybe because you've been lying to her your entire life. Here, let me help, Dear Mummy, I'm sorry but I won't be marrying the neighbor girl anytime soon because I like to fornicate with boys. Love Tommy." He plucked at the pen in Tom's hand and forced the other man to hit him to get him to back away.

"I don't see you shouting your preferences to your parents."

"Hey, I've married, had the kids, I like women. I can't help it I like men too." He dropped himself, uninvited, into a chair. "So, you've really switched sides, huh?"

"James, I don't want to talk about this."

"Of course you do! So, if you're picking women now, why aren't you married, it'd make your parents happy." He leaned forward. "Or, maybe, we both know the truth. You can swear off sex but you can't change which gender attracts you. All you're doing is making yourself miserable."

"You forget, I'm not you. I haven't missed it much." He sighed and put the pen away and closed up the ink. He wasn't going to be able to finish his letter while James was provoking him.

"Can you honestly look me in the eyes and tell me that Alex doesn't arouse you?"

Tom couldn't, he glanced away. "He's just a boy."

"He's sixteen! Christ's sake Tom, you were bent over Dean Gordan's desk when you were sixteen. How old was he? Fifty?" He narrowed his eyes and studied Tom for the slightest of reactions.

"It wasn't like that."

"I had lunch with him while I was home. He asked after you." There, he saw it, the smallest clenching of Tom's jaw. "Why didn't you ever tell me?" He asked gently, uncertain if his suspicions were true.

"Tell you what? That if I didn't let the Dean hump me like a dog in heat he was going to expel me?"

"Yes! We would have stopped him!" He'd always known that Tom's first lover had been one of their professors. He hadn't learned until years later who it was and it wasn't until his lunch with Dean Gordan that he'd suspected it hadn't been an entirely consensual affair.

"He was friends with my father."

"He used you!"

"It wasn't unpleasant."

"He blackmailed you into sleeping with him."

"That might be a bit harsh, I wouldn't have picked him but it wasn't like he forced me. He was good to me."

James sighed, he'd nearly hit the distinguished Dean Gordan in the nose while they'd had lunch. The man was proud of how he'd 'gentled' Tom's stubbornness and eased him into accepting him as a lover. He could feel angry for his friend but he couldn't make Tom feel anger.

"My point is, when you were sixteen you were mixed up with a man thirty four years older than you and you were a virgin. Alex isn't a virgin and he's certainly a more mature sixteen than you ever were. I don't think using the boy's age is a valid statement."

"He's too young, he's been through too much. He doesn't know what he wants."

"You're the one that doesn't have clue about what he wants. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't desire the boy."

"I'm trying to do what's right, James, I'm not dead!" He snapped back. "You want to hear me say it, fine, the boy is too pretty for words. I'm dreaming about him, it's absurd!"

"Well, if you don't have an interest, mind if I take a swing at him?" He asked innocently.

"Leave him alone, friends or not James, I won't let you touch that boy." Even Tom was surprised at the real violence behind the threat.

"You do like him." James smiled in victory. "Sam's been gone for years, Tom, he wouldn't want you to mourn him so long."

"This isn't about Sam."

"Of course it is, I know you, you blame yourself for Sam's murder. It's not your fault. What better way to get back in the saddle than with some one as attractive as Alex, and God only knows

why, but he's attracted to you too."

"I told you, I'm not interested in laying with men."

"Bullshit." James pushed himself out his chair and stalked over to Tom.

"What're you doing?"

"Shut up." He snapped and buried one hand into his friend's lighter hair, tangling his fingers around the short length and pulling the stubborn face up. His grip tightened to what had to be a painful level and one of Tom's hands rose to grip the back of James' but all effort to loosen or remove the touch was forgotten when their lips met. James crushed the other man, smothered him, conquered him with his mouth. He sucked at the tight angry line of his friend's lips, teased with his tongue and Tom moaned, his lips eased just barely but they granted entry.

For a brief moment the two men hung in the pleasure of the surrender. Tom felt his knees go weak and his cock harden, and all James was doing was kissing him. He'd been walking around with such a lingering need since he'd met Alex that the comfortable feel of James so near him triggered all the old memories he'd tried to forget. Tom needed, he ached, he hungered and hated himself for it. There was no will to fight, not against James, no matter how wrong kissing a man was. Until James was willing to release him, he was enslaved.

The kiss broke, lips retreated but James stayed near by, sliding his hand in a forgiving caress across the abused hair he'd gripped too tightly. "Bullshit, you're not interested in men." He whispered.

Tom swung out and his fist connected with James' ribs. It knocked his friend back, the man fell over his own feet and landed on the rug. Angry now, shaken, Tom stood up and hovered over where James was rubbing his sore stomach. "Don't you ever do that again."

James surged up to his feet, catching Tom around the waist and bodily lifting the larger man to slam him down onto the floor. Tom landed on his stomach and was crushed down by James settling along his back. The slighter man stretched out on top of Tom, pinned him down and held him in place. He snatched out and caught Tom's wrists, trapping them beside his head. James slid his legs between Tom's and forced the man's thighs apart, leaning his weight down on them.

"Why, Tom? Like it too much? Don't you remember how hot we'd get? I do." He whispered into the nearest ear before suckling on it, running his tongue over it's contours.

"Get off of me!" Tom tried to buck upwards but James rubbed against him. The hard length of his fabric encased cock settled easily against his ass and the fight dissolved into a needy, hungry moan. "Stop." He forced out but there was no conviction in his speech.

"You can't change who you are, Tom." James arched his body against the one trapped below him again.

Tom groaned and surged upward, tossing his lighter friend off of him and scurrying to pin him below. He meant it as a way to stop this foolishness but the sight of James, his face red, his lips parted, pinned beneath him set Tom's blood on fire.

"I said stop." He panted and watched the teasing lust in his friend's dark eyes.

"Kiss me."

"No."

James arched his hips up and hard length collided along hard length. Tom moaned and pressed

down hard on the trapped body. Without thinking about it, his lips found and met James', his tongue slid inside and claimed the eager mouth. The force of the kiss left them both breathless, panting.

"I don't want to be this way." Tom murmured but his lips were tracing James' jaw line, sucking, licking, nipping his way to his friend's ear. He'd missed the scent of the other man, the taste of him, the feel of him below him. He'd missed the feel of another man, not just James but the hard, strong lines that were man.

One of James' hands snaked up to stroke along Tom's face and he smiled warmly. "The only person who can shame you for what you desire is you, my dear friend." His fingers traced across tight, unhappy lips but they parted and sucked the digits into their hot depths

James arched again as a demanding tongue swirled around his fingers and memories of how skilled Tom could be using that tongue elsewhere came to mind. He moaned and half closed his eyes, his free hand fumbling with the front of his pants, aching to free himself. The fabric finally surrendered but before James could even groan at the new found freedom, a strong, calloused hand that wasn't his own engulfed his length.

"Tom!" He thrust up into the hand, surprised at the boldness. His head lolled to the side. "I'd forgotten how much you like to take matters into your own hands." The words were weak and breathy.

"At least I remembered that you never shut up during sex." Tom grumbled back. He felt like his body had faded away to two parts. The fiery heat from his hand, the length sliding easily across fingers and palm that felt too large, too sensitized and the throbbing, aching, raw need between his legs. Nothing else felt connected or real, not the breath that pulled in sharp gasps from his lungs, or the scrap of the carpet under his arm and free hand, in such a short order he'd been reduced to so little.

He opened his eyes to watch James. The dark head was tossed to the side, his eyes shut and those teasing lips were parted. Muffled moans escaped his friend, hushed from long practice but Tom knew given a safe place and a little encouragement, James was really a screamer. That's how he'd always known how far gone the darker man was, when the words, teasing and dirty, faded to begging moans it was a sure sign of the other's state.

Below him those night black eyes opened, glowing with a hungry fire. "Do you remember, also, what I'd do when you'd drive me mad like this?"

Tom's blood froze. "No." It wasn't a denial of a memory but of a current action. There was no doubt from the lust in James' eyes and the stark loss of control in Tom's that both men knew what was going to happen next. The two knew each other too well for too long to attempt denials.

James growled and pushed Tom up, reversing their positions again. "Let me remind you." He deliberately misunderstood the spoken denial, sliding the stunned thighs apart and kneeling between them.

"James, no, I don't want this."

"Bullshit."

"James." He tried to protest again but as the cooler air surged over his overheated flesh words were forgotten. Tom lifted his head as he tried to form another protest, his eyes fell on James just as the man took his desperate length into his mouth. "No, oh God, no, I don't want this." He moaned but even to his own ears it sounded more like a begging plea than a protest.

It was a favorite game for James. He liked being teased until the pleasure was almost pain, he

liked being made so hot he thought he might erupt into flames and instead of letting himself fall over that sweet edge, he liked to back off. It was a game Tom used to understand and play well, taking James to that brink over and over and denying him an outlet, or better, letting him deny himself the outlet. It was too much to ask for right now, even blinded by his desire, James understood that.

Tom's desperate hunger, the shame for his desires that he'd lost control of, the depths of his loneliness all combined into the headiest of aphrodisiacs for James. Even if he'd wanted to, there was no way he'd be able to last right now. Tossed on the carpet, the room dripping with need and guilt, shame and lust, it was as dirty as he liked it and seldom found. Tom's quiet protests that were dissolving into desperate sounds of need tasted as good as the flesh sliding over his tongue.

With one hand firmly teasing his surrendered friend and the other stroking himself hard and fast, James opened his eyes to see Tom watching him. It was like lightening, elemental fire seared both men. James moaned, the flesh in his mouth conducting the sound up to draw an echo from Tom. As he watched those cold grey eyes fluttered shut and the hands, already gripping into the carpet, fisted up and went white knuckled. That's when James' world became one of taste and warmth and he too fell over the edge. It was only by having his mouth busy with other things that allowed him to remain quiet to let his own release pool between his fingers to drip, forgotten, to the carpet below.

A hand tangled into his hair didn't surprise James and he gave into the gentle tugging. If one of his oddities was the desire to be teased until he nearly screamed for release, one of Tom's was the desire to taste himself in his lover's mouth. He was nearly obsessive about it and a simple thing for James to indulge him with. With eyes shut and lips parted he allowed his best friend to plunder his mouth, just as he'd always done.

When the hand slid from his hair, James opened his eyes to stare at the tortured face below him. Tom was hiding his eyes behind one of his hands, unwilling to face what they'd just done. The smile on James' mouth was gentle and he caressed the side of the face below him.

"Tom, you can tear yourself apart doing this. You can't change what you desire anymore than you can change the color of your eyes." He whispered, trying to be gentle when he wanted to slap some sense into his friend.

"It's wrong." A gruff voice answered.

"It's only wrong if you make it wrong." He leaned down and kissed the nearest side of Tom's face. "We'll talk more later. You should get some rest, you look like hell. Take the afternoon, think about Sam. Do you really think he'd want you to feel this way? Think about how your current mindset reflects on what the two of you shared. You loved each other, saying it's wrong now is offensive to that. Man or woman, I'd do nearly anything to have for a moment what you two shared for years. Think about that."

That was far too close to the truth that James never wanted to face. He retrieved his snow white handkerchief, quickly cleaned off hand and body before re-ordering his person. When he finished and sat back on his heels, he knew he'd pass muster from even the most judgmental of gossips. He had long practice looking presentable on a moments notice.

Tom, obviously, hadn't. He still lay where he'd sprawled on the carpet. His eyes were still hidden behind a hand and he gave no indication that he planned to move anytime soon. As he'd done in school, James quickly put his friend back into order as well. He clasped and gently squeezed a shoulder.

"Think about it a little." He muttered as stood up and left with as much invitation as he'd arrived.

Tom heard the latch to the door click shut but kept a hand thrown over his eyes and was unwilling to move. There was something broken and empty in his chest, a feeling he knew well from those days when Sam was slowly dying. It was born from grief and helplessness and Tom hated it with more strength than he thought he could muster.

It was in James' nature to push him. The dark haired man had always done so and seemed would continue to play that role. Like a child always asking why, James was never happy with being told something, he needed to know for himself. It seemed that included Tom's desires, hidden as poorly as they were.

Long moments passed while Tom lay, weakened and empty, on the carpet of his riverboat suite. If will alone could have made it so, he'd have slipped past the floorboards, down through the decks like a phantom and fallen silently into the murky waters of the river below. Since the floorboards refused to obey his desire to slip into unnoticed oblivion, he pushed himself up from the floor. He staggered like a drunk man to his bedroom and made it as far as the bed. There he flung himself, across coverlet and pillows, to lay still.

It was easy for James to be so casual with his scolding. It was easy to preach of remembering when it wasn't his own memories. Not a day went by when Tom didn't remember Sam, the man haunted him. Waking or sleeping, the memories were his only constant and they burned him rather than comfort. From his pocket he retrieved the metal case that protected the precious tintypes. Tom didn't need to open it to feel close to the man pictured inside, he simply pressed the cold metal to his chest and let it's unnaturally heavy weight press him down into unhappy sleep.

Virginia, November, 1864

To say Tom was up to his elbows in blood wasn't true, he was up to his shoulders, up to his ears, in blood and gore. There wasn't enough water, hot or cold, in the world able to scrub all of the remains of the wounded from his skin between men. He was grateful for whatever chance he had to wipe to cooling blood away before turning to the next horrific wound.

The last he'd taken time to look, he was on hour sixty something of continuous wounded and that was some time ago. He was exhausted, his vision was dull and his movements sluggish but the bullet in the man below him had to come out. He'd stopped seeing their faces, stopped hearing there moans and screams years ago and there was no room for new sensitivity with his current exhaustion.

"Tom."

Tom grunted back but didn't look up.

"Tom, stop it already. He's gone."

"What?" Tom snapped and glanced up.

Dr. Parsons, a gray, slender man that looked more grandfather than doctor put one of his frail appearing hands over Tom's stronger. "He's gone. You need to stop."

"No, he's," Tom glanced to the man below him, not just to the wound and sighed. "Damn."

"It's okay, son, there wasn't much hope for him anyways. Frankly, I'm surprised he lived long enough to get on the table. Go on now, get cleaned up, eat something and get some sleep."

We're caught up for now." Parsons watched how the gray eyes flicked from the dead man to the floor. "I'll get some of the boys to take him out back. Come on now."

Tom sighed and knew he was getting to his limits. He was pretty useless like this. A long eternity ago he'd been hungry but there had been no time to stop to eat and now he was too tired to be hungry. He only prayed he wasn't so over tired that he wouldn't be able to sleep. "Grab the other end, would you? We'll take him out and then I'll go rest."

Parsons nodded. "Alright, son, let's go." As the senior doctor, Parsons was in charge of all the younger. Most of the men sent to him were of two sorts; men that had been doctoring for a time and set in their not so perfect ways or men straight from school that were either shy or over eager. Tom was neither. He was young, and sent to Parsons care a few years ago from his medical school but he had a skill and easy grace of a doctor far older than his years. He quickly became a man Parsons would trust to treat his own wounds and that was singing the highest of praises.

The two men took up the wooden litter, Tom knew he was exhausted by how heavy the dead man felt. It was nearly more than he was able to manage. The handles were heavy in his hands, the wood so obviously quickly and roughly made had been worn smooth by untold numbers of hands, polished by untold drops of shed blood. The wooden litter that had carried so many wounded and dead had as long of story to tell as any of them in uniforms.

Tom shook his head, overwhelmed, and carried the latest corpse to the pile behind the surgical tent. He'd seen the sight often enough to no longer be shocked or amazed at it. Men, no longer breathing or laughing, fit together like the beams of a log cabin, chinked together in cooling blood and gore. The would pile there, a sight to churn the stomach of a more humane soul than Tom felt he still possessed, waiting for their turn at a burial. Off, down the flattened grass way that was serving as a road, another cartload was being driven to their graves in the weak morning light.

When he'd first laid his eyes upon such a horrible sight, it had comforted his thoughts to say they were only cord wood, stacked and ready. Not even flesh or bone, just orderly wood being but up for winter and that had allowed him to view such things calmly. There was no longer room for such luxury. They were meat, cold, still, and very real and the only mercy left to Tom was that there was nothing left in his soul to weep for such visions.

He was too tired to lead them to the proper place in the line of stacked bodies awaiting their turn to ride to cart, the nearest section would have to do. His failed efforts would at least mean the fellow would see a grave sooner than some others but he was certain they would remain forgivingly patient.

Parsons grabbed the man's feet and Tom his shoulders and with well practiced nods the pair lifted and tossed the man onto the pile. Tom's eye's fell onto the now empty litter, blood pooled on it. It was soaking ever further into the grain of the wood. He wondered if left alone and untouched what the result would be. Would there be maggots feasting there in an hour or would the wood stain a beautiful shade of red, the color of summer poppies?

A groan from the pile of corpses broke into his thoughts. Tom's head snapped toward the dead men at the sound, startled from his morbid exhaustion. "Did you hear that?"

Parsons nodded and waved it off. "It's just the dead settling." He bent to scoop up the handles on his end of the litter, shaking off the thickening blood. "Look at you, jumping at it like a first year student." He chuckled as the groan was repeated.

Tom shook his head and moved closer to the cold still wall. "No, it's different."

"You're tired, go get some sleep."

By the third moan, softer this time, Tom was pulling at stiff limbs and ignoring his superior.

"Tom, come away." It was something Parsons had seen before, a good doctor, pushed too hard, faced with too much death.

Tom's grasping fingers brushed something warm. He pulled back, startled but quickly pushed the covering corpse aside. The dead man rolled from his place on the pile but the warm something turned out to be a hand. Tom glanced to Parsons before touching the too pink flesh but he jumped back frightened when the fingers tried to curl around his own.

Parsons' jaw fell open. "Good God, is there a pulse?" But he pushed Tom aside to feel along the warm flesh to the bloody wrist. "He's alive!"

Tom hadn't needed to be told that, he was already pulling at corpses. Grabbing fabric and flesh and yanking, using weight where his strength was lacking. Two layers down they followed the arm to a shoulder. The body that emerged was coated in mud and crusted with dried blood. With Parsons' help, Tom worked the man free and laid him on the ground next to the spilled bodies.

Both men instantly fell to the soldier's wounds, talking softly to each other in low, half sentences. The man was a mess. A long bloody gash split open his temple and blood had poured freely from it before clotting over. It had washed the man's face and neck in red and soaked into his shirt. Tom probed the wound and fresh blood began to appear, sluggishly but it was there.

"The skull doesn't feel broken." He muttered, moving to where Parsons' was peeling back torn and encrusted fabric to reveal the more serious wound.

Tom had to brush the maggots away to see the wound clearly. Long and messy, it had bleed extensively but as he and Parsons probed it, it didn't appear fatal.

"There's no signs of infection." Parsons declared, surprised. Even in the cleanest of settings they were able to provide, with the most care offered to wash and tend wounds and bandages, half of the men developed infection.

"How did he end up here?" Tom snapped, checking the man's limbs for further wounds and finding none.

"Tom." Parsons had peeled back the man's collar. Deep in the crack where mud and blood had been slow to reach the color was clearly grey, not blue.

"You don't think one of us would have sent him out here because of that?" He whispered back.

Parsons shrugged, no longer shocked by much of anything. "Or an ambulance driver, maybe. I'm not certain this fellow shall recover."

"You're suggesting we leave him here? None of these wounds should be fatal."

"He's weakened, the wound to the head may be more severe than first appears. Just because infection hasn't occurred to date does not mean it won't tomorrow. If word should spread that a living man was sent to be buried by the medical staff, our medical staff,"

There was no need to finish the thought. Too many were already frightened of their care, of the awful and unforgiving things that sometimes must be done to try to save a life. Tom nodded in understanding. "I don't care what color wool or what is said. Tell them it was my mistake, let the blame fall to me."

Parsons smiled warmly, knowing the young man across from him wouldn't fail his expectations. "There is another way."

"Tell me."

"Meet your long lost and most beloved cousin. Mrs. Mummert would fully understand us bringing your relation to the bordering house to be tended and she won't care what colors he wears. We tend him there." It was easier not to think of it as such but it was treason they were suggesting.

"And if he recovers?"

"Now, Tom, why don't we cross that bridge when we get to it. If he's a threat, we'll see he's properly handed over. I'm not willing to bet a plugged nickel he'll live until tomorrow." He eyed the younger doctor carefully, knowing that any other man on his team would reject the idea outright and leave the wounded man where he'd been found. At best, the most idealistic of them would place the man somewhere quiet and allow him to die at his own pace. They weren't bad people, just broken from too much work and too much death.

"It seems I have a cousin."

Parsons' smile split his face. "Good man, good. Let's get him moved before anyone questions what us fools are up to."

It took surprisingly little effort to commandeer a cart for a short time. Parsons reputation was respected and since he so rarely asked for anything, those around him were more willing to grant the odd favor or two. Tom rode in the covered back and let Parsons sit up front with the driver. The body of the fallen man was as still as the corpses he'd been abandoned to and he made no further sound or responses for the short ride to the boarding house.

A trip made shorter because the gentle rocking motion of the wagon lulled Tom to sleep. He awoke with a start when the motion halted and glanced around startled. It took a moment to remember what he was doing. His new 'cousin' was pale and limp on the floorboards beside him and he wondered at Parsons logic at such a move. It was too late, like so many other things, to back away from the task at hand now.

Awareness was slow to return for the wounded man. He had a few hazy moments of knowing he was warm and resting on something soft, both of which were unusual occurrences. Sometimes he became aware of someone encouraging him to drink a warm spicy tea that spread warmth across his stomach. They were cotton padded and unconnected memories, his first real awareness came as a pain in his head. On the side of his head to be exact, sharp and stabbing and he slapped away at the offending touch that caused it.

A gentle, but demanding, hand caught his wrist and pulled his weak limb away.

"Easy, I'm almost done." A deep voice whispered out.

He settled at the words but still winced away from the bandage being replaced. The head wound accounted for not knowing who the man tending him was or what room he found himself in but he had to admit the man was handsome and room was cozy.

Then he felt something. Past the throbbing in his head, the pain of the fresh bandage, past the burning aching pain from the wound in his stomach arose an itchy, crawling feeling. He covered his belly with a weak hand, confused and with certain clarity he understood.

"Oh, God, get it out!" He started to claw at the bandage.

"Easy." Warm voice and strong hands tried to comfort.

"There's something in there, get it out! Get it out!" He struggled against the hands holding him but weakness and pain overwhelmed the sensation of something crawling in his insides.

"Easy, another day or so, that's all."

He studied the stormy grey eyes and dark brown hair, the handsome, steady face and what he saw there eased his primal terror. "There's something in the wound." He whined out again.

The grey eyed man nodded. "I know. There are three maggots there."

His stomach turned over and he pulled on the restraining hands again. "No!"

"Easy! You should be thanking those critters not cursing them. Don't worry, I'm changing them out every day."

"What?" Somehow the words didn't connect in his aching head to make any logical sense.

"When I clean your wound, I remove the three that are in there and replace them with three more." The deep voice answered slowly as if he were speaking to a simpleton. "Are you in much pain? How's your head feel?"

"Why?" He gasped out. "Why would you do that?"

The grey eyed man sighed and released the arms he held. "I can't prove it, but it's my belief the maggots only consume the dead tissue. Your wound should be infected, it's not, it's actually healing very nicely, but there is a great deal of damage. Now, I can take a knife in there and cut out the dead tissue, with a safe amount of healthy tissue, or we can let those three friends of yours do their jobs."

All he could do was whimper and turn his head. "I can feel them."

"I'm told the sensation of them is intermittent, that feeling them is a sign of healthy tissue and healing. Now, how are you feeling?"

"My head hurts but I'm alive, I shouldn't be, I," memory returned. It stole his breath and caused his body to thrash. "No!"

Warm hands again held him still. "Easy," and they didn't let go until exhaustion stilled him. "You okay?"

"You're Union?"

"Yes and you aren't. What's your name?"

"Deveroux, Samuel Deveroux, I'm with the,"

"No, I don't want to hear it. You're just a poor Southern boy that wandered into the fighting, I don't want to hear anything that'll get me hung for treason."

Sam nodded. "You aren't turning me in?"

"Let's cross that bridge when we get to it." He repeated Parsons.

"They shot me." Carefully, he raised a hand to his bandaged head. "Why aren't I dead, they shot

me.”

“That’s generally what people do to one another in a battle.”

“No, this,” his hand traced his stomach trying to ignore the itchy terrible feeling there. “This is from the fight. The Yanks that pulled me from the field did this, one of them, stood over me and shot my head off.” His thoughts shied away from that memory. It wasn’t something he wanted to visit anytime soon.

“Not fully off, lucky for you the bullet deflected off your skull. All the damage is superficial, didn’t even break the bone. You’re a lucky man, Mr. Deveroux.”

He offered his hand to the handsome Northerner. “Sam, just Sam.”

The strong hand accepted his. “Tom, Dr. Thomas Lambry.”

“I’m indebted to you, Dr. Lambry.” He sighed out and closed his eyes, suddenly weary and exhausted. “Indebted.”

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Eight

“Evening, cousin.” Sam greeted. It was late, one of the lady of the house’s two daughters had long since brought his dinner and left again to eat herself. He wasn’t sure of the hour but it was late and like most nights, Tom didn’t return until late.

The doctor was obviously exhausted. His sleeves, rolled up to his elbows still, were bloodied but his hands were clean. “I told you, you don’t need to call me that.”

Sam nodded from where he was propped in bed. “Mistress left dinner for you on the dresser. Said you were to eat.”

Tom glanced to the fabric draped plate and grimaced. “How’re you feeling?”

“Tired but glad to have those worms out of me.” Today had been the first day Tom hadn’t replaced the maggots. He’d drawn out the few days to almost a week.

“Any fever? Have you been ill today?” Tom moved to tend his final patient without thinking. Bandages needed to be changed, wounds washed and treated, they were things he could do no matter how tired.

Sam had learned not to protest or lie, which wasn’t something he was good at anyway. He just let the doctor do what he needed to do without fuss, knowing the man was longing for sleep and yet still was making an effort to be kind.

“None, and I ate well today. Very well.” Sam sighed and felt a more disturbing gnawing than any maggot. He was being sheltered, well fed, tended to. Tom had given up his own bed and worse, he’d learned from the widow that Tom was paying for the room from his own funds. He didn’t rank high enough to demand such private quarters but apparently his family’s reputation did, for a price.

"Good, you need to eat as much as you can without feeling ill. You're underweight and if you develop a fever now, I'm not sure you're strong enough to survive it." He ignored how the too slender man flinched from the painful tending but noted how he never protested.

"Yes, sir." Sam answered in his deep Southern accent. "You should take the bed. I'm better now. I'll sleep on the trundle."

Tom only gave a non-committal grunt as he finished his duties. "You'll be staying put for at least another two weeks. You've lost a frightful amount of blood, you've been badly wounded, you need to rest. Besides, I keep odd hours and frankly I'm so tired I could sleep on the floor and not notice." That thought made him yawn.

"Mistress will be mad at me if you don't eat her supper before you sleep."

Tom just shook his head. "I'll take it with me tomorrow, she'll never know. I'm so tired the thought of food is repulsive." He groaned as he slid the braces off his shoulders and stripped off the soiled shirt.

Sam watched covertly as the doctor washed up again, splashing the waiting water over his unshaven face. Watched the way his shoulders sagged and his head lolled as he finished cleaning up. There was no changing tonight, Tom remained shirtless as he pulled the trundle bed from under the main and quickly made up the plain mattress.

That was a pleasant sight, indeed. Sam had been surprised to find what was obviously an educated, well to do man, in such prime condition. There was strength in the shoulders, force in the arms that came from work not learning. The skin was smooth and well tended, the chest mostly hairless but with just enough of a covering to beg to be touched. Everything about his savior fair shouted masculinity and Sam was sure that if the good doctor had any notion of the thoughts the sight of him bare chested inspired, well, the results wouldn't be good.

Tom felt the careful eyes on him and ignored it. He couldn't decide if Sam watched out of interest or concern. There was something hidden in the scrutiny, something almost fearful so he chalked it up to worry not the own deviant path of his desires. He plunked himself down, pulled off his boots and that was as ready for bed as he was going to make himself.

"Sleep well, Sam." Tom muttered as he blew out the lantern and slipped into the cold bed.

"Goodnight, Doctor." Sam whispered back but darkness didn't bring instant sleep for him the way it did Tom. Sam lay awake long into the night and just listened to the other man's steady breathing.

The days slipped away and Sam grew stronger with each one. Never one to linger in a sick bed, he pushed himself during the long, empty afternoons. Once he'd slept as long as he could, he'd force himself from bed to walk in unsteady, weak steps about the room. Gradually, the steps became easier and his time out of bed longer until he was almost begging the ladies of the house for books to read to end his boredom.

"Evenin', Doc." Sam greeted as the door opened behind him.

Tom entered the bedroom without knocking and found himself frowning. Sam wasn't in bed like he was supposed to be. He was standing by the dressing table, and met his eye in the mirror.

"You're supposed to be resting." He scolded to the melancholy grin that met him.

"I can only sleep so much. Thank you for the clothes, it's right kind of you." He motioned to the under britches he wore and the stack of proper clothes on the dresser.

Still frowning, Tom gathered a blanket off the bed and tossed it about the barely dressed man. "Stay wrapped up. Don't risk a chill."

"We're above the kitchen, it's plenty warm in here." He glanced from the unhappy grey eyes to the small basket he'd been riffling through.

"I wasn't looking for a debate." He shook his head. "Now, back in bed, I'll be sharing dinner with you tonight."

Sam nodded but he took the basket with him. He knew this conversation had been coming ever since the neat row of stitches had been removed from his stomach. He settled back into the soft bed with only a small grimace and watched as Tom easily turned a side table and the loose chair in the room into a dinning surface.

"Dr. Lambry?"
"Hm?"

"I want you to take this." Sam thrust out his hand and the gold coin in it. "As a means of repaying all you've done for me."

Tom saw the coin and knew where it had come from. They'd found little in the way of personal effects on the wounded man. There was a dozen or so letters, smudged and well worn, which is how they'd learned his name before he'd regained awareness. They'd found the cover to a small bible, inscribed, but the book itself had been torn out and was missing. In one pocket they'd retrieved a tobacco pouch that held a battered old pipe, no leaf and a smooth round stone. It was with the old pipe that they'd found the only money. A twenty dollar gold coin, in Federal money.

"Put that away. I get paid for my services." He muttered out.

"Please, take it." Sam couldn't meet those empty eyes. He'd hoarded that coin for so long, it meant so much more than money to him. In the end, he'd part with it willingly in repayment for his life. "I know you're paying for this room out of your own money."

Tom took the coin and quickly dropped it back into the basket the widow had provided for storing Sam's things. "I pay for this room because I choose to."

The refusal twisted Sam's face up. "Please, I'd rather you have it than have a guard steal it. Also, sir, if you would, see to it my other things are returned to my family? The address is on the letters." He pushed the entire basket across the table and knew he was clenching his jaw.

Tom stopped, eyed the basket and sighed. "You're an educated man, I shouldn't have tried to delay this." They hadn't discussed much beyond Sam's wounds and healing, the widow and weather but Tom could tell from how the man spoke, how he handled himself, that he wasn't a farmer's son.

"Not formally, sir, but I know the way of things. When will they be arriving for me?" He tried to see the answer in those hidden eyes and couldn't. The doctor gave nothing away and Sam felt a moment's regret that he'd never have a chance to play the man in a game of poker.

"I've spoken with my superior, Dr. Parsons, do you remember him?" Parsons hadn't been by to see Sam since the earliest of days. Tom pulled the chair to the side of the bed and sat down.

"Yes, sir, elder fellow?"

"That's him. In another place, I'd call him an eccentric, he's a good man and a fine doctor."

"Sir? Really, it's okay, I understand."

"No, you don't!" Tom snapped before drawing a deep breath. "I don't like lying but like Parsons, I hate waste more. Neither one of us is inclined to hand you over to rot in a prisoner camp. This war won't last much longer, a year, maybe less, maybe a little more, too long to sit in a camp and die. I need your word that you won't take up arms again, if you'll give it, I'll be expecting this room to be empty one day. Do we understand one another?" Tom tried to read the face but the emotions that flicked across it were too fleeting.

The unexpected release left Sam light headed and dizzy. A dreaded weight suddenly was gone and it made him giddy. That was, only until reality returned and then he just felt tired.

Slowly he nodded but he kept his eyes lowered. "That's a very kind offer but you'd best send for a guard."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Tom snapped back. He'd heard stories about some of the prisoner camps. The worst were coming north from the south but none were pleasant places to be.

"I heard you, but I simply can not make such a promise to you. I'm sorry."

"One more man won't change things now. Just go home, you won't be so lucky a second time."

Sam smiled thinly. "It's not like that. I can't go home, not like that. My family is very like Sparta, with your shield or on it. They'd turn me in themselves as a deserter if I showed up and I've no where else to go. There's only two places left for me, Doctor, back with my regiment or in a prisoner camp. I'm sorry."

There was little in the world that Tom had learned to hate as much as having to tell Parsons that he was right. "Dr. Parsons said you might feel that way. Tell me, how much of an education have you had?"

"I don't understand."

"Have you attended school?"

Sam shook his head. "Only grammar school, my father is a minister. He's taught us from little on up. I don't understand what that has to do with anything."

"But you never had any higher education?"

"There wasn't time for it." Sam smiled again. "I look older than I am, I was sixteen when the war came, been fighting since."

Something terrible settled in Tom's stomach. "You've been fighting since '61?"

"Subtracting out a few months here and there where I've been wounded, yes."

Tom forced his lungs to breath but he found he had a new hatred for the war. It just made him more certain Parsons idea was the best choice. If they could spare just one person, something good would have come out of it all.

"I have some authority, Dr. Parsons has more. It wouldn't be questioned too closely if my dear cousin, raised in the South but neutral in his political beliefs, would serve as my medical assistant. We're all supposed to have one but I can't seem to keep a man with me for any length of time." Tom knew he snapped at people, the exhaustion of the war had only made his temper shorter. Most assistants lasted only a few weeks before demanding a transfer to escape him, Parsons felt the young Southerner would make the best captive audience.

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. "You're offering me a job?"

Tom shrugged. "Dr. Parsons doesn't think he can get you a salary but he can get you official papers. Don't worry, you'll be fed and housed. I'd be responsible for you, if you betray us, it'll be my neck that'll stretch."

"You'd take such a risk for me? You don't even know me."

"You're right, I don't. It doesn't matter what you've been before, if you agree, your life starts over. What do you say?" He wasn't thrilled with the idea but he was exhausted and not so proud as to deny the fact.

"I don't know a thing about doctoring."

"You won't have to. Your job would be to hand me the equipment I need, help me in surgery, help me clean up, help as I need you. It'll be a lot of bandaging, that sort of thing. So long as you don't grow faint at the sight of blood, you can learn it." How much time would he free up with someone to help? The idea almost made him feel human again.

Sam sat silent and tried to judge the stern and serious man across from him. When he found little to work with he spoke up. "I won't be threatened or mistreated. If I agree to this, I won't have arrest hanging over my head. I'll turn myself in first."

Tom actually smiled at that. "I wouldn't dream of doing such. I really do need an assistant. What's your answer?"

A month later, Sam was wondering what he'd been thinking by accepting such an insane offer. There was little time to fully recover, as soon as he could move with a manageable amount of ease and Tom gave his say, Sam was ready to start his new life. He wore blue now, a color he hated, and while it wasn't officially a uniform, it marked him as belonging to the Union side of things.

He found Dr. Lambry to be highly skilled but short on tolerance for errors. He'd easily and fully explain things to Sam, answering any question from simple to complicated but he'd do it once. The other surgeons hid smirks and the other assistants would offer sympathetic smiles as Sam struggled to take in all that was suddenly required and to tolerate Tom's angry ranting when he failed.

By the end of his first week, he was shouting back and the two men weren't speaking outside of the surgical tent. Every fiber in Sam wanted to quit, anything had to be better than being shouted at all day for failing when he had little idea of the proper way of things.

"No!" Tom shouted again and brushed Sam aside, taking up the ends of the bandages to re-wrap the wound. "My God, a child could do this! What are you trying to do? Kill the poor bastard?"

The soldier's eyes widened at the sharp exchange but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Sam dug his heels in from where he'd been pushed aside. "Yeah! That's just what I was doing! Death by bad bandaging!"

Tom glanced up, his grey eyes sharp and angry. "Get out of my surgery." He forced out between clenched jaws.

"FINE!" Sam shouted back loud enough to wake the slumbering man in the nearest cot and pushed his way out of the tent, past rows of recently wounded.

Outside, the cold air of the winter night helped to settle some of his anger but none of his temper. "Stubborn, self important, arrogant, self righteous," he muttered and kicked at a tent pole.

A voice chuckled out of the shadows. "Well, Dr. Lambry is all that and more." The man moved forward into the dim light cast by fires and moon, dressed as Sam was and of similar age. The Boston accent marked his place of birth as clearly as Sam's Southern.

Sam watched uneasily as the fellow lowered a smoking pipe and offered a hand. "Adams, Ike Adams."

"Sam Deveroux."

"Nice to actually meet you, Sam. Dr. Lambry is all that you said and more." He offered the pipe over. "You smoke."

Sam shook his head. "No, thank you."

Ike shrugged and took the pipe back. "Course, you'd know that better than us, given that you're cousins."

It was a dangerous subject and set Sam's nerves on edge. "We haven't seen much of each other since we were children." It was the story Dr. Parsons had come up with and both men were getting easier telling it.

Ike puffed again, narrowed his eyes and then shrugged. "Than you don't know him as a doctor." "Not really."

"He's the best we got but he's the best because he accepts nothing less than perfection from everyone, including himself."

"Thanks for the delightful insight." Sam mocked back. "It's quite helpful."

Ike just chuckled again. "You two might be cousins at that. You've the same temper."

Sam sighed out the breath he was holding. "I'm sorry, it isn't right my taking it out on you."

"Naw, don't worry about it. We've a bet running, you know. I'm breaking the rules telling you but my money is on you lasting. One of the others has already lost since you survived the first week. Dr. Lambry drove off the last poor soul in five days."

"I believe that." He rubbed at his head, it still ached but the gash was a scabbed over wound, smaller and turning into an angry scar. "I'm trying, I really am."

"I know, we all do, you're doing fine. Look, you didn't ask but here's my thoughts. Men like Dr. Lambry, there's only one thing they hate more than having to rely on someone else's skills and that's learning to rely on someone and having them disappoint. He doesn't really expect you to do everything right so soon."

"Could have tricked me there."

"He doesn't, he just doesn't want to get used to knowing you can do your job and have you give up. All the doctors are like that to one degree or another, Dr. Lambry is just a touch extreme."

That made Sam laugh for the first time in days.

"Don't let him get to you, no matter how much of a hornet's nest he acts. Don't let him run you off, you stand your ground. He'll come around." Ike finished his pipe and tapped it out on his shoe. "Well, I need to be getting back but Sam, if you are sticking around, learn quickly. Rumor is they're moving us again soon and that'll mean wounded from the field." He nodded and slipped back into the tent.

Leaving Sam with a lot to think over and only the cold moon for a companion. Ike was right, Tom was pushing him away, trying to drive him off. Worse, the doctor was doing just that, Sam was playing his game. They already weren't speaking, he was already pulling away from the demanding doctor. What would happen if he did the opposite? Instead of letting Tom push him away, how would things change if he tried to draw closer to the skilled Doctor?

Sam let the thought settle and finally came to the conclusion that it may be the best option. No one said he had to actually like the stubborn man but he could be civil with him, even friendly. From what he'd seen, Dr. Lambry allowed few people to be friendly to him on a personal level and Sam set his mind to change that. It was a plan at least, a new course of action and one with some small hope of success. It was a plan built on the basic theory that Sam wouldn't strangle the other man first so he kept his expectations low.

Three weeks later, Ike's rumor settled in as truth. The entire surgical facility was torn down and loaded into wagons, doctors and all. They rolled to the train yard and were shipped on board the same as the tents. Only, Sam wasn't convinced he couldn't do his job. Tom wasn't yelling so much anymore, now he merely grumbled.

The reverse in his reactions from cold stand offish anger to smiles and superficial acceptance of the doctors intolerance had brought about dramatic changes. The two actually spoke, admittedly about casual, unimportant matters, but real conversations. Tom was more willing to correct and instruct than dismiss and shout which increased Sam's learning ten fold. Most surprising of all, Tom was actually starting to warm up to his new assistant and Sam, who was certain he could respect the other man without liking him, was actually beginning to enjoy the taller man's company.

The last time Sam had traveled by train he'd been loaded in like cattle and shipped closer to the front, patted on the back and told to go off and die. This time was different. The surgeons were valued and traveled in a passenger car. Sam sat in comfort and let the landscape roll past him, enjoying the comfort far more than he should have. He'd learned that this unit was non-commissioned doctors, civilian men that had volunteered and whose ties to the army were on a slightly less formal nature. They went where they were told, did as they were ordered but none were under the strict rules of a commissioned doctor or even a simple soldier like he had been.

By afternoon, Sam was feeling guilty. From a coat pocket he retrieved one of his few letters but simply couldn't bring himself to open it.

"Why do you do that?" Tom asked from the seat beside him.

Sam had assumed the older man was still asleep. Tom had sunk down, folded his arms and closed his eyes almost before the train got moving. He glanced over to find those difficult to face grey eyes watching him from under half lowered eyelids.

"Do what?"

"That." He nodded to the letter. "Whenever you feel guilty you pull that letter out. Why?"

"I don't feel guilty." He denied a bit too quickly.

Tom just snorted and closed his eyes again. "When Mrs. Mummert made Christmas dinner, you spent the entire night fondling that letter. It's okay, you know, you don't have to answer. I was just wondering."

Sam hadn't thought anyone, least of all the self absorbed Dr. Lambry, would have noticed. He ran a thumb over the neat and orderly handwriting on the envelope. "It's from my father." The words came out with difficulty. "It's the only letter he's written me."

That made Tom sit up straighter in his seat and forget about trying to get back to sleep. "I'm sure the mail's as slow on your side as it is on ours. It's more likely they just got lost along the way."

Sam shook his head. "No, my father and I, we aren't on the best of terms. Going to the war was the last way I had left to redeem myself in my father's eyes."

"We should switch fathers." Tom muttered but forced a small grin. "Mine offered me anything to get me to change my mind. He was sore over it for years." Talking about himself wasn't a comfortable subject so Tom turned it back around. "What did he have to say?"

"He wrote to tell me my mother had died, last spring."

"I'm sorry."

Sam shrugged and put the letter away. "She used to write me, without Father's knowing. That's the only way I learned two of my brothers had been killed, I haven't heard about the other two."

"You've four brothers?"

"And a sister." Sam nodded and smiled again. It was forced but he was good at it and the effort rarely showed. "Youngest child of six, they all gave me hell growing up."

"I'm the youngest, I've two older brothers and an older sister."

"Are any of them with the army, too?"

Tom shook his head. "No, both my father and brothers are working part or full time at veterans hospitals but nothing like this."

"They're doctors too?" The idea almost made Sam laugh.

It wasn't a joke to Tom, he nodded. "My sister married a doctor too. It's sort of a family tradition."

Sam did laugh now. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Tom sighed and settled back in for a nap.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Nine

It was too much. Sam stood in the middle of a field of death unlike anything he'd ever seen. The surgical tents had been closed off to everything but treatment and the field around the tents was covered in wounded, bleeding men. They were moaning, screaming, some begged and clutched at passing people, clutched at Sam's legs. Their blood soaked into the ground, turning to a muddy slushy mess in the gratefully mild winter air. In the distance cannons boomed and the acrid smell of gun smoke burned his eyes.

It swept over him like a wave, triggered panic and terror unlike anything he'd ever felt. Every

moment saw a few more wounded arrive. Men he'd gotten to know, doctors and assistants, ambulance drivers and volunteers, called to one another. They shouted over the distant sounds of fighting and intimate sounds of dying. They barked out orders, placement, slowly by sheer will they were struggling to make chaos into order.

None of it touched Sam. He stood, teetering on the edge of some mental cliff that he knew he couldn't climb back up from. A part of his mind that hadn't believed in a Hell once he'd seen a battle field, suddenly believed again. Only now, he was standing in the center of it and expected to help rule over it. He stumbled backwards, knocking into a still, corpse pale body and nearly fell into the bloody slush.

Hands steadied him. Sam glanced up strong arms, sleeves already rolled up, to wide shoulders and then settled on solid grey eyes. "You okay?"

Sam just shook his head. He tried to speak but no words came out.

The steady hands moved to his shoulders and shook him gently. "Get a hold of yourself! Are you okay?"

"I," Sam glanced around again.

"Look at me!"

He did. There was no disorder, no fear or chaos in the steady face. Something in him settled. "I can't do this." He forced out. Cannons boomed closer and he tried to crouch down, tried to lower away from a shell that wasn't going to explode anywhere near him.

Tom held tightly to the flinching body, understanding. He shook his assistant again, harder this time. "Sam! You can do this, you're good at it. Now, I need your help. These men need your help, can you keep it together?"

That was a question he wasn't certain of the answer to but seeing understanding in the normally cold face brought a level of comfort. He swallowed hard. "I don't know but I can try."

Tom smiled. "Good." He spoke as gently as he could over the dim. "Stay close to me, we'll get through this. I promise."

The smell of chloroform and gore made Sam step away several times to be ill. No one, not even Tom, seemed to change how they viewed him from losing control of his stomach. That was more of a surprise than becoming ill, he had expected Tom to at least ask sharply if he was certain he wanted to continue. All he received as he returned to Dr. Lambry's side was a carefully worded question of his well being.

Sam would nod. "I'm fine." He'd whisper out, words made more soft by his accent and go back to whatever it was Tom needed.

No one commented on how every echoing boom of the distant cannon forced Sam to shudder. As the sound grew closer rather than more distant, Sam actually was flinching from the volleys. Again, he found an oddly sympathetic corner.

"John!" Tom called out as Dr. Parsons hurried by but he kept his eyes on the man below him.

"Yes." Parsons snapped back but he smiled at seeing Tom working so well with someone.

"That cannon is getting closer. Are we pulling back?"

The question surprised him, Tom had always been willing to stay and work even if the battle had threatened to surge around them. He was like a mountain once he started focusing on the work

before him and nothing was strong enough to make him move. Another volley sounded and Parsons' quick eyes saw how Sam flinched, understanding dawned. Sam refused to meet his eye and Tom never glanced up.

"If it moves closer, we'll move back, orders or no. For now, it's okay." He nodded and moved on.

Sam glanced up to meet Tom's eyes. "Thank you." He muttered softly, embarrassed at how unmanned he was becoming but unable to stop it.

"Damn it, Sam, hold that light closer!" Tom snapped back but there was no harshness in the tone.

The day slipped away, the cannons grew closer but as evening moved in on them they began to retreat. Night brought a stillness from the battlefield but not from the sea of wounded that lined up to wait. Some waited to see a surgeon, some simply were waiting to die. Sam stopped worrying about doing everything perfectly and just focused on doing. The night slipped into dawn, the cloth they were using to wipe up with soaked and dripping the same blood red as the morning sky. Hours slipped away unnoticed as both men worked at a grueling pace.

It wasn't until the sun was setting again that Parsons came around. "Tom, you're off until morning."

"But," he protested as the latest man was carried away.

"Ah, none of that, Adams and Jillinery are back from resting, it's your turn. Eat something too, while you're at it." He eyed Sam, as blood soaked and exhausted as Tom. "That goes for you as well." He pointed a finger at the Southerner and left.

Tom sighed but he could see the exhaustion in Sam's eyes, in the way he was holding his shoulders. "Come along, I'll pump water so you can clean up if you'll do the same for me."

Sam just nodded, grateful to be escaping the endless stream of wounded. He followed blindly behind Tom, squinting in the early evening sunlight. It was shining at a harsh angle, close to sinking into the early darkness of late winter.

The water from the pump was icy cold and shocked some sense back into him. It ran from his body in reddish streams, flowing off to soak into the thawing ground. Someone else had thought to lay out a coarse, short bristled brush and a bar of soap. Sam put it to good use, trying to scrub the blood from his hands and arms.

"Stop." Tom ordered gently. "That's about all you're going to get off. It's just stains now." The younger man was set to scrub his own skin off but getting used to the subtle hint of blood in every line of exposed skin took time.

Sam just glanced up and nodded weakly. He hurriedly washed the soap off before tossing handfuls up to wash off his face and hair one last time. The cold was making him shiver now but as he glanced to the wounded and the dead he felt no cause to complain.

They switched places and Tom scrubbed far more efficiently and quickly. He washed the blood from the leather of their aprons and hung them on a hook by the tents before making the walk to their rented room. There was no point in speaking, Sam would follow and neither man was in the mood for conversation.

Tom had again secured them a prime room. Set in a larger home that had been used before the war as a boarding house, the rest of the rooms were taken by other surgeons and various support staff. Their room had its own private sitting room, really more of a small parlor. The bedroom held two single beds, Tom still wasn't comfortable with allowing Sam too far from his

sight. Not that Sam complained now that they were on better terms. Tom's silent uncertainty meant he received a more comfortable place to sleep, better food and a chance to watch the moody doctor without being noticed.

Tonight it meant that a simple, cold supper sat waiting for them on the desk in the parlor. Sam's stomach growled as he moved to fill it.

"You should eat." He tossed to the retreating back.

"Unless there's scotch included, I'm not hungry." He muttered back. Tom went straight for the bedroom, stripping off his soiled shirt to toss into the waiting pail of cold water the landlady kept in the surgeons rooms in a vain effort to save their clothing.

Sam just shrugged and shoved as much food into his unhappy stomach as he could, as fast as he could. Exhaustion was pulling him down and sleep was calling but unlike Tom, he was never too tired to eat something. When he'd managed all he could, he stripped as well. Pants as well as shirt went into the pail, there was no thought to modesty around Tom. The man showed no signs of noticing bared skin on anyone, least of all on Sam, and would have mocked any inefficiency.

Into the bedroom Sam went, wearing only his under britches, shivering a little, carrying his boots and found Tom sitting on the edge of his bed, staring into space. Sam paused, uncertain. Another step into the room brought no reaction so he cleared his throat a little.

"Dr. Lambry?"

Tom started at his name, but let exhaustion pull his head forward. He rubbed at his sore neck idly. "Yes, Sam?"

"Will you be needing anything else, sir, before I go to sleep?" He already knew the answer but seeing the direct and active man so still worried him.

"Only for you to not snore, I'm too tired to be kept awake." The voice replied with none of it's normal snap.

Sam smiled. They both knew which one of them snored and it wasn't him. "I'll try sir." His amusement was heavy in the words. He dropped the boots by the foot of his bed and gratefully sank under the heavy quilts. Sleep didn't delay for either man.

Something woke Tom, something unhappy pulled him up from the hazy layers of sleep. He lay half aware, foggy, on his bed trying to sort out why he wasn't soundly away in exhausted sleep. There was nothing, no sounds of distant fighting, no noises from the street below to show unusual activity, no banging knocks on the door that too often roused a needed surgeon. His eyes strained as sharply as his ears but both told him nothing and sleep began to claw him backwards.

Until a whimper broke the night. Low, desperate, aching, it was the sound of something wounded. Tom's eyes flew open and he was sitting up before he understood what he'd heard. He tracked the sound to the other bed and in the sliver of moonlight could just make out Sam curled up in a tight ball, his back to him. The other man was having a dream, an unpleasant one from the sound of it and Tom's overly strung nerves had caught on it.

He teetered between waking the other man and laying back down when Sam whimpered again. There was no way Tom could sleep with that so close by. He rose to wake Sam from his nightmare not out of kindness but exhausted self preservation.

"Hey, Sam," He whispered out, not wanting to startle the man further. "You're having a bad dream." That was stating the obvious and Tom felt stupid for saying it. "Wake up." He reached out and shook the nearest shoulder. The muscles were tense under his hand.

Sam sprang awake with a scream. His arm flung out and smacked away Tom's hand. In blind terror he sprang from the bed and scrambled away, hitting the wall with jarring force before sliding down it.

The violent reaction frightened Tom, he jumped back as Sam scurried away. One glance at where the man sat, back to the wall, knees drawn up, did little to assure him his assistant was awake. Tom approached him more carefully, kneeling down to his own level but the wide, panicked eyes were unseeing.

"Sam!" He called again and took a firm hold on both shoulders. It took two or three solid shakes to wake the man up. "Wake up, damn it!"

Sam woke with another frightened cry. His breath surged in fearful gasps and he met cold grey eyes without knowing them for several heartbeats.

"Tom?" He whispered out and then caught himself, remembered himself. "Dr. Lambry?"

Tom nodded. "You were having a bad dream." He felt just as stupid the second time.

Sam only nodded. Too frightened to move from the lingering effects of the nightmare. "They were shooting me again, I couldn't move. They were laughing and all I could see was the revolver, I just laid there waiting for them to shoot me. Oh God." He moaned and buried his face in his hands. The nightmare had twisted the day's struggles to snatch wounded from the grave and his own recent brush with death. It forced to light things he had rather not think about. He wanted to weep but there was no tears left in him.

A warm hand soothed across his back. A touch so gentle that Sam actually flinched slightly at the contact. Rather than retreat, the hand began to sooth in small circles.

"It's okay. The first time's always the hardest. I didn't sleep for two days afterwards. Every time I close my eyes I see the ones I wasn't good enough to save. You did good today, real good. I was proud of how well you handled it." Tom's deep voice rumbled out. He let that one hand connect them, a touch that burned his fingers and reminded him of why touching was a bad thing.

Unbidden, his hand wandered up to rub at the overly tense muscles of the younger man's neck but Tom knew it was just because he wanted to feel that light brown hair. The strands that curled over his fingers were soft, far softer than he'd expected and rather than push the contact away, Sam was actually relaxing under it. Moments of quiet touch passed and the fear drained from the room. Tom dared to actually caress the back of Sam's head, running his fingers through the slightly too long hair and telling himself it was no different than what an older brother would do.

"Come on," Tom whispered when he saw the fear had faded and exhaustion was returning. He caught Sam's arm and pulled the man to his feet. "We both need to sleep, tomorrow will be another long day."

Sam practically fell into his bed and Tom hid the small smile that came to his lips as the younger man clutched at the quilts and was almost instantly asleep. He returned to his own bed, curled up on his side and beat his pillow into grudging submission but sleep didn't so easily return. He was growing far too fond of Sam, far too used to his easy company and casual understanding. Maybe tomorrow he should speak to Parsons about switching assistants but even as the thought occurred, Tom knew he wouldn't. He liked knowing someone was near by that understood him, it was something he'd missed.

Sam had tried to thank Tom the next day. The sun was shining as they walked in their normal silence back to the surgery tents. Sam had tried to offer his thanks and his apologies for waking the other man up but Tom refused to hear anything about it. He waved it off and just quickened his steps. When Sam tried to apologize the next morning for the second night of waking them both up from his own nightmares, Tom again refused to hear of it.

When they faced their third night of restless sleep and terrified waking, Sam held back before going to sleep. "Would you mind if I kept a lamp on, read for a while?" He was bone tired but more frightened of embarrassing himself again for the third night in a row.

Tom just shook his head. "Not at all." He crawled, exhausted, into bed and was asleep instantly.

When he awoke, hours later, it wasn't to fear drenched whimpering from the sleeping man. The lamp still burned and Sam lay asleep, on top of his covers, book rumped under him. The sight made Tom smile and he slipped across the room to retrieve the book and cover the other man. He paused to extinguish the lamp but changed his mind and left it burning. If Sam had slept soundly because of the light, he'd make sure one burned every night until the current wave of wounded eased.

It didn't miss Sam's notice that he was sleeping soundly or that Tom was lighting the lamp every night before laying down. He said he was doing it so he could read a little before sleep but the lamp was always still burning when he awoke and Tom's marker in his book never made any progress.

For such a subtle, kind, action, it touched Sam and as the flood of wounded began to ease and rumors that they were going to be stationed in the same place for the next coming months became more solid, it convinced Sam he had to find a proper way to thank Tom. That wasn't an easy thing to fulfill, the first idea that came to mind, while thrilling to think about, would most likely get him a bloody nose at best or arrested at worst. Tom had given no inclination that he had any interest in men so Sam seriously doubted he'd accept a thank you blow job.

It took a little thinking, but when he stumbled on an idea that seemed proper, Sam made his way to the supply clerk's office the first chance he had. It was late afternoon, past dinner but they'd worked late again. Sam was surprised when he knocked on the door that the man inside called out, still inside and working at such a late hour.

The building was crammed full with various small goods. Large orders were written a slip and delivered to a warehouse but for smaller, more personal items, they could be received in person from the supply clerk. The desk was neat, ordered and the goods were properly stacked with everything in its own place.

The man that glanced up from behind the desk was older than Sam, pushing into his late thirties or early forties. His hair was thinning and wire rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He was fit, for having a desk job, and his blue uniform outlined his form. He wasn't an unpleasant man and something about the set of his eyes or the careful way he had his hands folded told Sam he could manipulate this man.

"Can I help you?" The clerk asked, carefully eyeing Sam over.

Sam swiped his hat from his head, checking to see his hair was in place and nodded his head. "Sir, I'm Dr. Lambry's assistant sir."

The clerk raised his eyebrows and sat back in his chair. "His Johnny Reb cousin, I've heard of you."

"Yes sir." He tried to make himself look shy and humbled.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir, Dr. Lambry's been working right hard. I was hoping to do something nice to cheer him up. I was thinking maybe you had some jam, it might cheer him up some." Sam let his hands crinkle the hat he was holding up in open nerves and hid the smile he wanted to show. Supply clerks were supply clerks, no matter what color they wore and they all had access to goods not on the official lists. It was easier to get what he wanted at a price he was willing to pay if the other man underestimated him.

The clerk leaned forward and eyed Sam over again. "I might but it would have to be a fair trade. Jam is a tough commodity these days, what with it being the end of winter and all."

"Does that mean you have some, sir?"

He rose from his seat and disappeared behind a shelf. When he returned, he set the ceramic pint jar down on his desk. "Blackberry."

Sam's mouth watered. "That would work just fine."

"There's the issue of trade." The clerk sat down again.

"Yes, sir, what's your price, sir?"

"Come here boy." Sam didn't move and the clerk waved him over again. "Come on, now, I don't bite. I want to show you this."

Sam moved closer to the desk and the tintype in the man's hand. "Sir?"

"This here, is my wife. Emily."

The woman in the picture wasn't lovely but she looked steady, someone to be counted on. "She's a fine looking woman, sir."

"I don't believe in straying from the marriage bed." The clerk glanced from the picture to Sam. "Too much whoring is going on, it isn't right."

"No sir." Sam was starting to get where the conversation was going and he quickly made up his mind.

"There are options for men, so long away from wives, that do not break the marriage vows." The clerk stood and moved into Sam's space. "You're a handsome lad." He whispered out.

Sam pulled away from the caressing touch to his face. "Sir?"

The voice of the older man lowered. "Surely you've seen it, men with other men. It's not wrong in these situations."

Sam had to lower his eyes to hide his amusement. "Sir? I don't understand."

The clerk moved past Sam and slid the lock closed on the door. "Tell me, son, have you lain with a woman?"

"No, sir." Sam lied easily, suspecting where the man's kink was hidden.

"How about with a man?" The voice whispered close to Sam's ear, the taller body nearly pressing against Sam's back.

"N, no sir." Sam stuttered out and didn't have to fake the blush that crept onto his face. He was getting hard and he always blushed when he got turned on. It had been so long and he hadn't expected to find any safe outlets for a long time to come.

The clerk sighed, his breath ruffling Sam's hair. "It's pleasant, you'll enjoy it but I can see you're shy."

Warm hands settled on his shoulders and Sam nearly gave the game away by pressing back against the other body. The clerk seemed to have a thing for virgins so Sam would pretend to shyness he didn't feel. "Sir?"

"Shhh, it's only jam and you're as sweet as it is. I won't ask much in exchange for the jam."

The hands on his shoulders drew him backwards until the edge of the desk bumped into Sam's ass. The clerk had climbed up to sit on it's flat surface, his legs spread wide and Sam pulled to stand between them.

"I don't know if this is right, sir, I," Sam whispered out but gentle lips closed over one of his ears, nibbled softly on his neck and he moaned softly. The warm hands slid down from shoulders to his chest, sliding loosely over already hard nipples so well hidden under the layers of fabric. "Oh!" Sam forgot that he was supposed to be playing a virgin and arched backwards, pressing his back against the older man and letting his head loll onto a strong shoulder.

The clerk chuckled warmly. "I knew you'd enjoy this, I knew you were the right sort." He whispered again.

"Sir?" Sam moaned out and got just the right amount of uncertainty into the tone.

"Oh, you're so sweet, I'm such a lucky man." The clerk murmured right into Sam's ear. "I'm going to be just as sweet to you. Tell me, if you don't want the jam, we'll stop."

A hand slid across Sam's neck and his head followed the touch. "I want the jam." He managed to force out, wondering idly if he was going to be prostituting himself for blackberries.

"Good, but I won't demand too high of a price for such a simple thing." A hot tongue swiped Sam's neck. "Are you hard? Down there? Do you like this?" Fingers pressed on an aching nipple but stayed far to far away from where Sam really wanted them to be.

"Yes," He answered softly. "Oh, this is wrong." That almost made him laugh but his would be instructor in the arts of love moaned.

"Not wrong when men are denied proper company, does this feel wrong?"

"I," Sam struggled a little, writhing against the teasing touch but hiding it in a fake display of uncertainty. "I don't know."

"Trust me, it's okay, it's okay." The voice caressed. "Open your pants."

"What?" God, Sam was hard but opening his pants wasn't what he'd been expecting to be asked.

A roving hand slid through Sam's hair. "Shhhh, it's okay, I said I'd only ask for a fair exchange. Open your pants, let me see how hard you are for me?"

He loved dirty talk and he didn't have to fake his hands shaking as he opened his pants. Sam fumbled a little more than he needed to but soon had the front of his britches unbuttoned. The hard, aching length of his arousal slide heavily free from the fabric and he closed his eyes, waiting to feel a hand close around it.

"Beautiful." The clerk said, wrapping his arms around Sam's chest and pulling him tightly against his own body. "Touch yourself."

"What?"

"Every man does it, I know you know what to do. Take a hold of yourself, stroke it for me."

It wasn't quite what Sam had been thinking of but it was better than he'd had in a while. Tentatively, Sam wrapped his hand around his desire as he began to stroke himself, he heard the clerk's breathing grow more rapid.

"That's it, just like that, shhhh, just like that."

Warm hands pulled Sam's head back to rest on the supportive shoulder and the body behind him slid forward. The hard length pressing against his lower back would have confused a true virgin but not Sam. He moaned in whispery denial and arched back into the other body, starting to really enjoy the absurd little encounter. Arms wrapped around his waist and chest and behind him, that hard length started to rub in even strokes against his back.

The clerk was still dressed, Sam could feel the fabric of his pants catching on the fabric of his jacket, but the man was humping him just the same. It was unbelievably dirty and made Sam ever hotter. There was no words now, just gasped moans and soft cries. The clerk started to grunt slightly in suppressed desire, pulling Sam's body back tighter against his own and Sam allowed him the false submission.

The clerk was pressing into the small of Sam's back with enough force now that he was off the desk and standing behind him, half bending Sam forward and every thrust pressed the cloth hidden length closer and closer to being against Sam's ass. Sam allowed himself to be moved, his legs to be spread out, his body to be bent forward and as his hand slide over his own length the thought that this should be Tom using him, making him hard, making him come, did him in.

With a hidden, shuddering cry, Sam finished. His entire body bucked, come jetted out and splashed across his hand and spotted the dark wood of the floor below. He arched and pressed against the still writhing body behind him and bit his tongue to keep from calling Tom's name.

"Oh!" The clerk called out. "Oh! Yes!" He pushed hard into Sam, biting the nearest ear, making the inside of his pants slick and sticky. His arms held on to Sam while their breathing slowed but gradually, he released his grip and let Sam slip away.

With his eyes lowered to hide the happy teasing he felt, Sam pretended to embarrassment as he cleaned himself up with his handkerchief. "I'm sorry, I," he started to stutter out and was rewarded by those warm hands cupping his face and a soft kiss being placed on the top of his head.

"Don't be, there's nothing to be sorry for. You are as sweet as the jam. Take it and when you need anything further, I know we can come to an understanding. It's what men do, my boy."

Sam nodded, humbly, as he buttoned up his pants. He snatched the jar of jam from the desk, threw open the lock to the door and hurried away. He made it halfway to the rooms he shared with Tom before the smile he was hiding broke free and he started whistling. His only concern now was how to think up with things they didn't really need and how long to wait between each request to progress his new relationship.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Ten

Weeks melted away as the weather slowly warmed up and the nights grew shorter. The gossiped rumors of the surgical staff being held in place turned out to be true and Tom grumbled over it, feeling wasted being kept from the more critical cases. As the wounded became more supportive and follow up than life or death, Sam was allowed to work more and more on his own.

"My, hello there." A warm voice teased behind him and Sam glanced up from where he was finishing tying off a bandage.

The man was close to his own height, thick black hair hung around his ears and his equally black eyes danced with amusement. He stood, supporting his weight on a cane and smiled as Sam stood.

"Can I help you, sir?" He tacked the sir on simply because the man's uniform required it. Sam understood the warm look in the dark eyes and knew the man across from him wasn't to be fooled with.

"I've a personal issue. I'm told a Dr. Lambry is attached to this unit? I require his services." The dark eyes flicked over the younger man, slowly.

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Dr. Lambry is occupied, I'll see about finding some who can deal with you."

"No, I'm sorry, it's a personal issue, only Dr. Lambry can solve it."

Sam folded his arms across his chest and opened his mouth to reply with something cutting and rude. Before he could get the words out he was stopped by Tom pushing over toward them.

"James!"

Sam watched as the serious and normally unemotional doctor laughed warmly and snatched the smug, dark haired man up into a hug. There was laughter and greetings and Sam watched it all, he hadn't been certain Tom even knew how to laugh.

"What're you doing here?" Tom finally asked, still smiling.

"He has a personal issue." Sam muttered.

Amazingly, Tom laughed again. "I warned you about those sorts of women."

James arched an eyebrow again at the Southern man. "I'm laid over until tomorrow noon, waiting on the train. I heard you were stuck here too so I thought I would find you and see if I can drag you from work for a few hours." His eyes fell pointedly on Sam. "Unless you've made other plans?"

"No, nothing. James, this is Sam Deveroux, the cousin I've spoken so much about." Tom smiled wider at how James' expression didn't alter. "He's working as my assistant. Sam, this is my oldest, and dearest, friend, James Darney. Are you finished for the day, Sam? You should join us for dinner."

"Yes, dear cousin Sam, you must join us. There's so much catching up to do." James smiled but none of it touched his eyes.

"Of course, sir. Let me wash up."

So began an evening where Sam was forced to smother his growing jealousy over the deep rooted friendship before him. Tom, his Tom, that he had to drag any sign of life out of, was now filled with laughter and animation. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair and Sam knew he was growing silent and sullen. He had no claim to the man and wasn't it just like him to grow so fond of man that couldn't even offer friendship in return.

He pushed his dinner around. It was easy to ignore James' amusement over Tom's almost adoption of him but it wasn't so easy to ignore the smooth way the two men talked about places and people they shared that Sam had no part of.

"Sam?" Tom finally noticed. "You haven't eaten."

"Not really hungry, sir. Just sorta tired." He kept his eyes down because Tom might not have known the emotion in them but he was certain the dark eyed James would be too quick to understand.

"We've been thoughtless. I'm sorry, Sam. Why don't you go to bed, we're going to be up half the night playing cards anyway. Where're you spending the night James? Have you made arrangements?"

James shook his head. "Not yet. I figured if I could locate you, we'd spend most of the night out anyway so I'd just sleep on the train."

"There really isn't much to do in this town, stay here, I'll lighten your wallet a little at poker than we'll have the landlady send up a cot."

Sam hated himself, hated Tom, hated James but he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep in the same room with Tom. He was too jealous, too angry, too hurt by what he couldn't ever have and that would make him far too likely to say something he couldn't take back.

"No, no sir, I won't hear of it. Why doesn't Mr. Darney take my bed, I'll sleep out here. That way, the two of you can spend the night catching up." Sam swallowed his heart but knew it was the only way he could make it until James' train rolled out without blurting out what couldn't be spoken.

"You're certain?"

"Of course, sir."

James rose and clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "Right kind of you, my thanks." James tossed a heated look so clear to understand that even Tom grasped his thoughts. He smiled as his friend glanced away before glancing to Sam to make sure the other hadn't noticed. "Right kind, Tom and I have a great deal of lost time to make up for."

Sam gritted his teeth and moved to make up a pallet on the floor of the sitting room. Once he was settled to sleep on the floor, the old friends disappeared into the bedroom without even noticing him. Sam lay in the darkness, silent, unhappy but trying to sleep and accept. He hated being excluded but hated having to sit and pretend as much.

Most days he was fine. Tom was not what could be called social, by any means and Sam liked that the person Tom spoke to most was him. If there was some complaint, some small noticed joy, Tom shared it with him. He thought they were growing to be good friends until James arrived and showed him, painfully, how distant Tom still was.

"Two beds?" James raised an eyebrow. "I assume that means you haven't seduced your sullen assistant."

Tom sighed and glanced to the closed bedroom door and the darkness in the room beyond. "He's not normally like this."

"I bring out the worst in people. I'd almost say he's jealous of me."

"Nonsense." Tom snorted and shuffled the deck of cards. His deck, he knew James well enough to always use his own cards. "Sam isn't like that."

"Could have fooled me." James sat on the edge of Tom's bed, pulled off his boots, and settled in the way they had a thousand times while in school. "So you haven't even flirted with him?"

"James."

"He's not bad looking."

"He isn't like that."

"Now who's speaking nonsense. I saw how he was watching you."

"He's a sweet boy. Grateful for having his life saved, grateful for not being sent to prison, but that's all it is. As soon as a cease fire is signed he'll go home and I doubt he'll ever give a second thought to the months he's spent here." Tom's thoughts wandered over the surprising jar of jam Sam had turned up. It wasn't just the jam, the younger man had been finding other delicacies to share, food or supplies, that were in high demand.

James nodded and stopped pushing the issue. If the boy was as jealous as he'd been trying desperately to hide there was nothing he could say to get Tom to see it. Nothing short of Sam pouncing on the stubborn, blind, doctor would work.

"You look well, tired, but well." James said instead.

"I am, having an assistant is helping out tremendously. I just wish it hadn't taken so long to find one that could do the job." Tom nodded to where the cane was propped within easy reach.

"How's the leg?"

James shrugged and rubbed at his injured thigh. "Still attached so I can't complain."

"I'm serious."

"So am I." He sighed. "It aches, down right hurts some days, but it's getting better. I could barely go a dozen steps on it a year ago. You did good work."

"Still doing those stretches I showed you?"

"Yes, sir, doctor sir, every night."

"Good." He ignored the sarcasm. "Maybe in another year you'll be away from that cane."

"You think?" He didn't want false hope and he was so grateful that Tom had been able to save the leg at all.

"I do, but I want to take a look at it before you go."

James smiled, languid and sultry. "Sure thing, doctor, you know you can examine me anytime."

Tom's breath stopped. "Sam's right outside that door and unless things have changed you can't keep your mouth shut."

"I've grown up some. I've missed you. Tell me you won't deny me?"
Tom glanced to the cards in his hands. "Winner of this hand gets to top."

That made James laugh. "Deal." It was a promise that Tom would win, James knew what he wanted from the night.

Sam was trying to sleep, he tried but his emotions were too unstable. A sound from the bedroom caught his attention and he glanced to the closed door. Finally, in the dark alone, he overcame what was proper and snuck to the door itself. Light, dim and low, spilled out from inside and Sam pressed his eye to the gap in the keyhole. What he saw froze his blood.

Tom had James pressed to the bed below him. Cards lay scattered and forgotten, James' cane had fallen from where it had been propped and it was its clattering to the floor that had drawn Sam's notice. It looked like Tom had merely pounced on the smaller man but James was offering no refusal. His mouth was parted and waiting before Tom could cover it with his own, claiming a deep kiss. Hands roved over fabric covered bodies, pulling at buttons and ties in a desperate plea to bare skin. James moaned and Tom chuckled.

"Told you, shhh you'll wake Sam."

"Oh, God, let him wake. He can join us."

Sam suddenly got painfully hard. He almost opened the door, his hand was on the latch.

"He's not like that." Tom whispered back, his mouth teasing his friend's neck.

"I might need his help, Tom, how long has it been? Oh, fuck, yes, right there." James arched off the bed as a rough hand finally slid across his bared chest.

"Seven months, a quick encounter with a Captain in an alley after a poker game."

"You dirty, dirty boy!" James moaned but his mouth was quickly covered by Tom's hand.

"Shhhh. Don't make me stop."

"You wouldn't dare."

Tom pulled away from his friend but from where Sam was spying he couldn't see his face.
"Wouldn't I?"

There was a tense moment of broken, stuttering breath before James shook his head. "Damn, you would too." James laughed softly, chuckling in the dim light. "Can't have that."

"James, no, I," Tom protested but he let his friend push him back on the bed. Hands with enough strength to push away anything unwanted lay limp and useless at his side while James pulled roughly at the front of Tom's pants.

Sam couldn't see everything. He could see Tom's head loll back onto the bed, heard his soft, whispery moan. There was nothing blocking the sight of James sliding his head into the now exposed but unseen groin of his friend and nothing to disguise the obvious motions of the act. Sam couldn't see their faces, James' back was to him and with his head on the bed Tom's face was out of view. Sadly, short of joining them in the room, he couldn't actually see Tom's length

disappearing into James' mouth. What he could see was enough to shorten his breath even further.

Tom's body began to writhe. The man who did everything with such deliberate care, the one who wasted no movement, no word or action, was writhing. Sam watched, entranced, as the strong back arched off the bed. The movement transferred up to his shoulders and as his spine was settling against the covers, his shoulders were arching. Over and over, one part of his body would rebel just as he was gaining control of another. It put his limbs, his chest, in a constant swirl of skin and need.

Tom's entire body arched up. His head fell to the side but no sound escaped. Sam watched his protector come and wished it had been his mouth that had brought such extravagance to the other man. James knew what he was doing, Sam was willing to admit that much. The dark headed man was sighing, moaning as he swallowed quickly. His mouth still working every moment of pleasure from the willing flesh below his own.

Gradually, Tom began to relax. He reached down and buried a hand roughly into James' hair and used the grip to pull the other man up and on top of him. The kiss he demanded was crushing. Tom held James' head in place and ravaged his mouth with enough desire, enough force that Sam's own mouth went dry watching.

"Dirty boy." James teased when his mouth was freed.

Tom only chuckled as he sank into the soft bed. "Learned from the best." He stretched his neck rolling the stretch down to his shoulders and arms as his breathing gradually slowed.

James laid where he'd been placed. Both men were still more than half clothed and the glimpses of flesh behind fabric was only more erotic. Time passed and just when Sam was starting to wonder if Tom was truly that selfish of a lover the doctor sighed and stroked a hand across the dark head pillowed on his chest.

"Are you ready?" Tom asked softly, a deep rumbled whisper into the night.

James nodded. "You're going to make me beg again aren't you?" His voice was half shivery anticipation, half fear. Few men could drive him as far or as hard as Tom could, the smell of his friend alone made him want to come.

"No, you get to loud when you beg." Tom sat up and carried his friend with him. "I'm going to make you cry because if you make too much noise, I'll stop."

"Bastard."

Sam finally could see Tom's face, flushed, hair mussed, lips parted in a smile. "Shut up and strip."

James leaned back, a hand tracing across his chest, sliding inside the fabric to brush against skin. "Make me beg, Tom."

"Are you naked yet?"

There was no offense taken, James laughed again. The ease and comfort between them was something only gained from a long relationship. It was a side to Tom that Sam hadn't even know existed and it started making him think about having the same thing with the older man.

James hopped to obey. He scurried off of the prone body and quickly stripped away the clothing that continued to cling to him. Sam watched in lewd fascination as the other's body was bared for his viewing. More slender than Tom, James' skin was duskier as well, the soft covering of dark

hair on his limbs only made the man more desirable.

He turned, standing under Tom's watchful eyes, and Sam saw the scar on the other's right thigh. It was fading pink, thick and puckered. The wound looked to Sam's eye to have been caused from shrapnel and to have been serious enough to warrant the loss of the leg. It marked it's way up from slightly above the knee almost to his hip. Even as he stood, showing off the proud length of his erection, it was easy to see he carried his weight mostly on his left side.

"You're favoring that leg."

"Christ sake, Tom, I'm naked. Can't you stop being a doctor just for once?"

It was a sharp reply that would have earned anyone else an equally sharp response. Instead, Tom just smiled warmly and whipped out a strong hand. He caught James' wrist and tugged. The darker man stumbled, off balance and unable to right himself with his bad leg, and tumbled onto the bed, smack across Tom's legs.

"Hold still."

"Ow! That hurt!"

Tom nodded, pulling his friend across his lap to poke at the healed wound. "I thought you said it almost never hurt? You didn't lie to me did you?"

"Of course I lied to you. It hurts, every day, it hurts but it's still attached and working and getting better every day. I'm not going to complain." James winced at the hands poking into his leg but he knew enough to hold still while Tom did what he felt he needed to do.

"It's getting better." Tom finally announced.

"I told you that." James rolled over, sprawled out over Tom's legs. "Now, doctor, what about my other aches?"

Tom leaned down and kissed his friend. "You're sure?"

James just nodded. "Make me cry, if you can."

"I can."

Sam saw the way James visibly shivered at the threat. Tom slid his friend's body fully on the bed and pulled off his own clothing, something Sam couldn't view nearly as clearly as he wanted to. Slowly, Tom teased James. Kisses that went from gentle to demanding and back slid to torture the long exposed length of James' neck. From the motions, Sam imagined their hips sliding together, teasing without release, but it was out of his field of vision.

Bit by bit, James' soft talking, a running litany of nonsense muttered out barely above a whisper, tore apart into broken moans and hushed gasps. It was only then that Tom slid away and propped his back against the headboard of the narrow bed. His legs sprawled wide and Sam watched as he took a firm hold on his now withered and very aroused friend. It was brute force that moved James, the man did little to help, and got him resting against Tom. His back pressed into Tom's chest, his head rested on a shoulder. The small of his back pressed back into Tom's groin and his legs were encased in Tom's own thighs.

Sam could only see snatches. He could make out Tom's hands teasing the body displayed before him. Fingers circling nipples already taut and aching, palms dragging over hips to hold them in place but never did his hands wander too low until James was nearly growling in frustrated need.

"Shhh, don't wake Sam." Tom warned again, sliding his hands lower. They dipped under the other man's thighs, across the battered wound and draped each leg wide over his own. It spread James out, opened his body to any touch he wanted to deliver. The vulnerability drew a gasp nearly equal to the sound that escaped the now sweat slick body at the first touch of hand to cock.

It was almost too much to watch. Sam wanted to stroke himself but was deathly afraid his own moans would give him away. He really couldn't see much of the two men, held so closely together, on the bed but he could see the look on James' face and the motion in Tom's arm. It showed him enough.

James' whimpers of need grew more demanding, more urgent. Tom continued to kiss any flesh that floated too close to his lips, continued to stroke the other man. Sam was nearly at the edge just from watching, he wasn't sure what was keeping James from finding release. Closer James drew, more needy and hungry, his body clenching up as it approached a peak that Sam longed just as much for.

Tom stopped. His hands fell away from their demanding strokes and teasing torture. He stopped kissing the neck and ear near his face. James twisted in his need, draped naked and exposed over his friend's body. Sweat pooled together to run across his arms and down his chest in small glistening trails. His breath came in short gasps and Sam watched, waiting to see the expressive face go from tortured brink to blissful fall.

It didn't happen. Slowly, James' breathing eased, just marginally and then noticeably. The seeking desperate motions of his hips and back gentled down to smaller and smaller flutters. The long fingered hands that had been grasping for everything and nothing relaxed into light fists and hung limply along Tom's sides.

Long moments passed and James eased back from release and the further he got from it the more Tom began to respond again. His arms went from laying widely to the side of their bodies to wrapped tightly around his friend's chest. His mouth again offered gentle, soothing kisses to the damp, dark hair.

"Your control's stronger. You're normally asking for release by now."

James chuckled a little around his still too rapid breathing. "I'm not eighteen any longer." He sighed and the tension slowly drained from his body. "Sweet mercy, I forgot how good you are. I've missed you."

"I'm just getting started. Ready?"

James nodded weakly, his eyes sliding shut. He kept them closed as Tom slid from behind him, sighing a soft moan at the feel of Tom's hardness dragging along his back. He kept them closed as Tom slid him to sit where he'd been sitting, back to the headboard. He didn't even open his eyes when Tom lifted and rested each of his limp arms up to wrap his willing fingers around the wood.

He did open his eyes when Tom slid his legs wider apart and the sight of Tom stretched out in front of him started his breathing to quicken. "Tom, no, don't, I," that was as far as he made it with his protest before Tom's mouth closed over his erection.

Sam's control nearly broke. He wanted to see them so badly he almost pushed the door open. The hints he had weren't enough, they only fed his imagination without providing to many real facts. James' leg was in sight, his face was clear, lost in it's own world of need but Tom was almost totally out of sight. He knew what was happening but he was denied any real connection and he almost wanted to beg them to move to where he could see better.

"Oh, God, no, I can't, Tom, please, I need it, please, I'm going to come." James hissed out and his body rose upward. It carried Tom into Sam's field of vision.

Sam's hand moved to his own lap of its own accord. The sight was too much. Tom had swallowed every inch of James into his mouth. His eyes were closed in obvious delight, his face flushed with desire. The image of Tom doing that to him, sucking the aching length he was stroking now, drew a small moan from Sam.

He put his hands back on the door and watched in frightened worry to see if either man had noticed. They hadn't but Tom was sliding his mouth off of his friend.

"Shhh." He warned again before turning back to his teasing. Only this time, it was only teasing, soft licks, gentle nips, nothing strong enough to take James over the edge.

It was too much. James' hands released the headboard and moved to his own need to finish it. They didn't make it that far. Tom caught them and brushed them aside. His back went from ram rod straight to sagging with exhaustion and back as he tried desperately to get Tom to return to the pleasure of a moment before.

"Please, please, it's enough, please," James begged.

All it earned him was a stopping of the teasing licks. "Remember, no begging. Do it again and I'll stop."

James whimpered. Again, as Sam watched, Tom left the man alone as his desire slowly eased. As moments ticked away it was clear that James was either adjusting to the heightened arousal or it was slowly decreasing but it was equally clear it was no longer a game he wanted. His hands kept trying to creep into his own lap, only to be set aside gently but firmly. His hips kept bucking, seeking any contact and being denied. Along the floor his toes curled and scrapped as even the rub of thigh on thigh was denied him.

Finally, James steadied. His body eased weak and exhausted on the bed. He hadn't begged again but his lips had continued to move, forming pleas that he gave no voice to. It was a painfully erotic sight for Sam and he had no idea how Tom refused him, but refuse him he did. Tom just lay there, pillowed on one of James' thighs and watched the display he'd caused.

Sam was grinding his teeth before Tom spoke again.

"Turn over." Tom's voice was the rumbled words of a mythical god in the depths of James' need.

The darker man moved weakly to obey. Reversing his grip on the headboard, now facing the wall and let Tom move his body. His weight was on his knees but Tom pushed them roughly apart, his hips were close to the headboard but Tom pulled them further back. James only hung his head and held on.

Sam finally got to see Tom as the other man slid from the bed to retrieve a salve that he made himself. The doctor was fit, healthy, strong. His arousal stood proudly, the tip moist with need. It made Sam long to be in James' place, knowing what was about to happen.

James whimpered when he felt the weight return to the bed but every thought was focused on the internal debate to continue fighting release or give in. From where Tom knelt behind his friend, Sam could see the long lines of his back, the strong curve of his ass, the tops of his thighs but as pleasant as the sight was, it blocked a view of what was happening.

He didn't need to see for his eyes to widen in understanding. It was clear from the hushed sob of need that slipped from James' throat and the gulf of space between their two bodies. In Sam's

mind it was his ass that Tom was carefully preparing, his throat that sung out that aching want. Each new digit added made James' voice more broken, marked the slow progression. When he tried to thrust back onto those fingers, Tom simply held him in place. If his hands slipped from the headboard, Tom simply replaced them. Nothing James did was enough to change the painfully slow pace he'd set. Sam was gasping almost as sharply as James when the fingers finally retreated but nothing could prepare him for the sight of Tom sliding forward and into his friend.

James was sobbing, his breath reduced to short gasping hitches. It was too much, his head was no longer attached to his body and the only way he was aware that it hadn't simply fallen off his shoulders was because he had it resting on his arms over the headboard. There was nothing left in him, Tom filled him, took him to the depths of endurance. He had no thoughts, no words left to beg for release and was no longer certain the moisture on his face was from sweat.

Tom groaned low in his throat. The reward for such a slow overwhelming taking of his friend was that at this point, he didn't have to hold back. There was no slow build up, no easy taking. He slid easily into his friend's willing body, closed his eyes and fucked him.

The way Tom, reserved, careful Tom, cradled his lover in his arms. The way he supported the exhausted and surrendered body before him, was erotic enough to fuel a thousand of Sam's fantasies but it was how he let go that stole his breath. There was no self consciousness, nothing held back. It was rawly intimate. Sam watched enthralled, lonely and longing.

It didn't take long but for the men on the bed it felt like an eternity. Tom knew he was close, how could he not be and James was barely able to breath let alone whimper any longer. He stroked a hand down the man's side, drawing out a full shiver.

"Finish it." He ordered, directly into the other's ear.

James sobbed in over come need. One of his hands found it's way from headboard to cock with a will of it's own. A few strokes later, his entire body seized up, the world ended and he died with the feel of Tom's hot release deep in his flesh. Then, his lungs rasped and drew in air, the world recreated itself and he was reborn. Sweaty, exhausted, trembling still with unspeakable pleasure, he fell into Tom's arms and together they fell onto the bed.

Sam clutched the doorframe and watched as Tom buried his face into his friends hair, while he held his body so tightly to his own. He hovered outside of their closeness, wanting, before he found himself moving. Masturbation wasn't going to be enough tonight, he wondered if it would ever be enough again.

The late winter damp chill did little to chase off the aching need of his desire as Sam watched his supply clerk's poker game break up. He moved from the shadows as the older man was saying goodnight to his friends and knew the moment the other man's eyes fell onto him. Sam was let into the cluttered office without a word.

"I," he started, suddenly hating this game he'd been playing. "I don't want anything. I,"

The clerk's eyes took in his rather obvious state and he smiled gently. "But you do need something."

Sam nodded and accepted the gentle kiss that pressed to his lips. He wanted it to be rough, needy, demanding but his clerk liked the idea of the gentle seduction.

"I only wish it was me that created such a response but I am delighted my sweet boy came to me for help."

Sam wanted to snarl at him, to snap that he just wanted fucked and order the other man to shut

up but he didn't. He lowered his eyes in mock uncertainty, in false modesty and let the older man undress him.

It was easy after that to close his eyes and pretend it wasn't the desk he was gripping but the wood of a headboard. In his mind Sam pretended he was James and the cock sliding hot and hard into his ass was Tom's. It reduced him to a thing of moaning need. It was enough for him to believe and it almost satisfied an emptiness he felt below his physical flesh.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Eleven

In the morning, Sam's mood swung from the happy delight of being well and thoroughly fucked and the emptiness of it not having been someone he cared for doing the fucking. The last thing he needed was to see the smug look in James' dark eyes so he rose early and made ready for the day.

Tom had a habit of not eating unless he was nagged after so Sam fetched breakfast up, not for one or three but two and set the tray outside the still closed bedroom door. He rose his hand to knock but paused and again knelt to peer through the keyhole. And instantly wished he hadn't, as the two men inside were facing opposite directions and enjoying the mutual delights of fellatio.

Sam closed his eyes and moved from the door, knowing he couldn't do anything about a raging hard on before seven in the morning. He sat, isolated and alone and waited. His ears strained to hear the muffled, hushed sounds from the bedroom and when he was fairly certain it was safe, he peeked again.

This time, both men lay exhausted and sated. James' one arm and his head lolled from the side of the bed and his face had a wide, happy smile. The sight of his chest, sweaty and heaving for breath, was erotic enough to almost force Sam to retreat again but he judged it safe enough to act. He wanted to be gone as soon as he could.

Sam knocked, softly. He heard the guilty starting from inside the room and smiled. "Sir?" He called out above a whisper.

"Sam?"

"I don't mean to wake you, sir." He smirked at that. "It's just, I know you've had a long night. There's fresh wash water brought up and breakfast is on a tray out here. I'm going to head over to the surgery and let them know you'll be in after noon. So you and Mr. Darney can get some rest sir, maybe catch up some more?" Maybe fuck each other silly again without me, he added on mentally.

"Thank you, Sam, that's kindly and thoughtful."

"You're welcome sir, I'll be off than." He didn't wait for any further words to drift over from the other side of the door. He knew when he wasn't needed and privacy was and well, he was far to honest with himself. If he'd lingered for even a moment, he'd be spying at the keyhole once more.

Neither man ever spoke of that day. Tom arrived at the surgery a little afternoon and simply went to work. He never mentioned James again and Sam wasn't sure he could without blushing or

breaking out into a jealous rant. Life simply continued, unbroken by the sudden and brief appearance of someone who obviously meant a great deal to Tom. Someone that Sam gradually accepted he could never become. For even as the days faded to weeks and the weeks dissolved away, all of his attempts to hint and insinuate that he was of a similar mind fell on a deaf and blind observer.

As the winter became early spring the gossip was filled with talk of Sherman's march across the Carolinas and the destruction that followed in his wake. Word reached them of Richmond's fall and the final days of the Confederacy seemed only a heartbeat away. News that added to Sam's confliction. He was sick of fighting and death but knew that the defeat would scar his homeland for generations. He mourned the mockery of the loss of his family and the blood he had shed.

It was maybe because his thoughts were too distracted by the rumor and gossip passed about as news and fact, or maybe because everyone grew excited as March wound down about their being moved again to destinations unknown, but Sam stopped nagging Tom so loudly about eating. He stopped watching the object of his fading obsession in the growing face of his freedom. He asked for less and less permission to do things and tended to stay awake at nights, lost in thoughts while pretending to read in the sitting room. So it was that Tom's health faded and no one saw. His own pride refused to slow his pace or change his life for a little illness and without Sam's notice, he pushed himself.

Sam's first sign that Tom was ill was a shouting for Dr. Parsons late one afternoon. He finished wrapping the infected wound he'd just tended and glanced around for Tom, because when anyone called for Parsons, they got both men. Only Tom wasn't in sight and certainly not moving to where doctors and assistants were gathering around a fallen man.

"Sam!" Parsons called out as his head popped up from the crowd. "Come here, lad!"

Confused he joined the circle, expecting to see a soldier too stubborn to stay in bed and at most stitches torn open and found instead Tom laying unconscious. His skin was pale except for the flush of a fever. His breathing was weak and rasping and the strong, stubborn man suddenly looked young and far too fragile.

"Sir?" Sam asked, confused by a sight he was slow to process.

"How long has he been ill?" Parsons demanded.

Then it occurred to Sam how isolated he'd been lately. It had seemed the wisest course of action to distance himself from Tom given how soon the man would be leaving his life. Now he was cursing his own weakness. "I don't know sir, he hasn't complained of anything."

Parsons shook his head and pried at an eyelid. Tom's mumbled protests were weak and unintelligible. "Let's get him in bed." His eyes fell on the worried, wide eyed Sam. "Can you tend him if I show you how?"

Sam only nodded. "Doctor? Is it bad?"

Parsons shook his head. "Stubborn fool," he patted Tom's shoulder. "Don't worry Sam, he's young and strong, he's got even odds."

Cold fear of loss settling into the pit of Sam's stomach and there remained no room to think about the fall of all he'd once fought so painfully for.

There was no sense in Tom's world. He had moments of tight fire under his skin and visions of blood and loss. The only soothing came from the cool touch of water and a melodic Southern voice. When the world formed again into a sensible pattern, he opened his eyes to the bright

beams of an early morning.

Nothing wanted to work right. His throat was as fiery and dry as a scorched desert. His lungs ached to breath. All of his limbs felt weighted down, too heavy to move let alone function and everything felt hollowed, raw and exhausted.

It didn't surprise him to be laying in his bed in the rented room but the air felt closed and heavy. On the bedside table sat an array of glass bottles, half drunk glasses of water, discarded mugs of tea and Sam's bed wasn't slept in but held a tray of uneaten food. He glanced around and found the man in question asleep beside his bed.

The chair had been dragged in from out in the sitting room and pulled close to the bed. Sam was draped in it, collapsed in it and his head was pillowed on the edge of the bed. His too long light brown hair had fallen in messy strands over his face. One of his arms was out stretched so the tips of his fingers rested gently against Tom's legs.

The sight drew a weak smile to Tom's lips and he reached out, stroking that soft hair. Too exhausted to worry about how the touch would be taken or even if it would be accepted. It comforted him to see the man sleeping there and it felt so right to offer up such a gentle touch.

It woke Sam and Tom watched as the younger man shook off sleep. He turned his head into the contact and murmured but gradually he shook off the cobwebs of sleep. The disheveled head rose from the side of the bed. His eyes and nose were red and his face puffy from weeping. There was several days growth of beard on his chin but his eyes grew wide.

"Tom?"

"You," his voice cracked and he had to swallow to speak. "You shouldn't sleep like that, you'll hurt your neck."

"Oh my God." Sam whispered. A smile broke across his face but tears leaked out of his eyes. "Oh my God." He gathered up the hand that had been stroking his hair and pressed it to the side of his face as the tears broke free again. They streaked down, uncontrolled. "You're alive."

"Of course I'm alive." Tom forced out.

Sam clung to the hand he'd grasped and wept. The tears were short and quickly reined in from exhaustion as much as anything. Sam snuffled to a halt and wiped his face and nose with his handkerchief. It was only then that Tom noticed that Sam was half undressed. His jacket was gone, his vest hung open. The braces hung loose and part of his shirt was un-tucked. It looked like he'd been sleeping in the same clothes for too long.

"Dr. Parsons, he said if your fever hadn't broken by dawn, it wouldn't. I stayed awake until after the sun came up, you were hardly breathing at all. I," he'd wept then and must have cried himself to sleep. "You're alive." He leaned forward and slid a hand across Tom's forehead. "You're fever's down. Oh thank God." He'd clung to Tom's hand that morning and begged the other man not to die but knew it would mean nothing.

Sam struggled to compose himself and moved to gather up one of the glasses from the bedside table. "Here, can you drink?"

Tom nodded but Sam had to support his head to trickle the blessedly sweet water into his mouth. "Don't cry." He managed to force out, feeling sleep pull him back down. "I'm okay, don't cry."

But Sam did, he sat and wept tears of relief and exhaustion.

Sam was biting his nails as Parsons examined the still sleeping Tom later that day. The

contented nodding of the old doctors head did little to settled his nerves.

"Well?" Sam demanded. "I mean he spoke and was lucid but he's slept since."

"Well, I wouldn't have guessed this was the same man from midnight last if I didn't know it. He's turned the corner, Sam."

"He's going to be okay?"

"Nothing is ever certain but the crisis is past. The fever is down, he's sleeping soundly, things look promising. He's your care to thank for that."

Sam dropped down onto the edge of his unused bed.

"Now, you need to eat something and get some rest."

"I, I can't leave him alone."

"I'll stay with him. Go, bathe, get some dinner, get some sleep. You won't do him any good if you worry yourself into exhaustion." Parsons hadn't expected the almost frantic devotion that had emerged from Sam. The assistant had acted more like a grieving lover than the casual friend he was.

It was that thought that set Parsons mind whirling. Sam nodded, accepting defeat and wandering from the room to tend to his own self, leaving Parsons to contemplate his ill friend. He'd never heard Tom speak with interest about any woman, but with how dedicated he was to his work that wasn't surprising. As he rolled the idea about in his head, he grew more certain of Sam's state of mind, it was only Tom's that had him confused.

Sam rejoined him, shaved and bathed and with more color to his face than he'd had in days. Parsons nodded. "Get some sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

"You'll sit with him?"

"I will, now, sleep."

Sam was too tired to fight. He fell onto his bed, pulled the quilt up over his still dressed body and was almost instantly asleep. It left Parsons alone in the room with his thoughts for company.

Tom woke again but this time it was John Parsons sitting next to him. The older doctor was readying quietly.

"John? God I must have been sick for you to be here." He mumbled.

"Shhhh. I just got Sam to lay down." He whispered out and glanced to where the other man lay sleeping sounder than the dead.

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I doubt shouting would wake him now that he's out. Feeling better?" John had moved to sit on the edge of the bed and was helping the weakened man to drink.

Tom nodded. "A little."

"Liar, but you will soon if you take it easy. Did Sam tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"The war, it's over."

"What?" He would have sat up he was so startled but he simply didn't have the strength.

"On the ninth, two days before you collapsed, Lee surrendered, at Appomattox Courthouse."

"Oh, thank God." He sighed and closed his eyes.

"Grant paroled all of Lee's men, sent them home. Sam's free to go but he's stayed here all this time. He's never left your side. If I were a gambling man, I'd lay odds that the only reason you survived was because of that boy."

"He's a good man." Tom swallowed hard and eagerly took another offered drink. "How long have I been out? What day is it?"

"It's the fourteenth."

"So long?"

John nodded and eased the other man back into the covers. "I wasn't lying when I said you nearly died. There's talk of us being moved but Tom, you're not going anywhere for a long while. I don't even want you out of bed for at least another few weeks."

That made him smile. "Yes, doctor."

"I'm serious! We'll make arrangements for someone to stay and keep an eye on you."

He shook his head, hating the idea of anyone strange hovering around him. "It's okay, I've got Sam."

"Tom, the war's over. Sam'll be going home now that you're past the crisis. He hasn't been home in years, it's not right for him to stay."

The thought had never occurred to him that the war would end and Sam would leave. It made him frown and his chest ache. "Oh."

Parsons smiled a little at the heartbroken look that crossed the vulnerably open face. "Get some rest, you're going to have to eat when you wake up again. You'll need your strength for that."

The next few days blurred together with Tom sleeping far too much and his waking periods far too little. Every time his eyes opened, Sam was there and during those first days, the only way he was able to do anything was because of Sam. Not once did the younger man mention the Southern defeat or leaving and each night when Parsons came by to examine him Sam hovered near by.

On the fourth day of his recovery, Sam woke him mid-morning. "Tom, can you wake up?" He shook at a shoulder. "Just a little, there's something you need to know."

He fought sleep off and rubbed at his eyes. "What is it?"

"Tom, I don't know how to tell you this. I, we got word in this morning, President Lincoln, he's dead."

"That's not funny, Sam." He tried to close his eyes and go back to sleep.

"I'm not joshing you. He's dead."
That drove off sleep. "You're serious."

Sam just nodded.

"How? When?" Helplessness washed over him.

"A man named Booth, shot him. Lincoln was at a theater and Booth shot him in the head, he died the next morning."

"When? When?" His hands fisted up into the blankets.

"The day you woke up, the fourteenth." It broke Sam's heart to see tears well up in Tom's eyes.
"I'm so sorry."

"Leave me alone, just go away, please." He covered his eyes with his hand and turned his face away.

"Of course. I'm sorry, Tom." He stood up and moved unhappily away. "I'll be back in a little bit."

Tom ignored him as he left but Sam didn't go far. He stopped just outside of the bedroom and sat on the floor with his back to the door. From the closed room sounds of empty grief soaked weeping drifted out. There had been far too many grieving since the news had arrived. Sam ached for the grief in Tom but felt no personal loss of a man that had tried to tear his home apart.

Tom grew distant at the news. He barely said two words to Sam for the rest of the day and the next morning he was showing signs of slipping into despair. When dinner was eaten and Tom lay too rested to sleep and too worn thin from illness to do much more than lay abed, Sam ignored his grumpy mood and pulled his chair near the bed.

"Do you mind if I read?" He asked, softly, to the face turned away from him.

"Do what you will."

Sam settled in and opened his book to the page he'd marked earlier in the day. "I saw in Louisiana a live oak growing, all alone it stood and the moss hung down from the branches; Without any companion it grew there, uttering joyous leaves of green, and it's look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself; But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there, without its friend, its lover near - for I knew I could not; And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little moss, and brought it away - and I have placed it in sight in my room: It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends, (for I believe lately I think of little else but them;) yet it remains to me a curious token - it makes me think of manly love; for all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana, solitary, in a wide flat space, uttering joyous leaves all it's life, without a friend, a lover, near, I know very well I could not."

Sam glanced up and was surprised to see Tom's grey eyes wide and watching him. He felt a blush rise up on his face, forcing him to glance back down to the book.

"That," Tom wasn't sure he'd heard the lines properly or maybe his brain had been addled by the fever because it couldn't have meant what he heard. "That was lovely."

The softly, uncertain, words drew a smile from Sam. "It's Whitman." He turned the book over so Tom could see it. "It's a 1860's edition of Leaves of Grass. I don't know if he has a new one out, he's always putting out new editions. Have you read it?"

Tom just shook his head. "No."

"I just got my hands on this copy a week or so ago. It was always some of my favorite poems." He glanced up to meet those intimidating grey eyes. "My father considered it lewd and banned it from his house." He couldn't hold those eyes while remembering the beating he'd taken when his father had found his copy.

Tom saw the glance away and mistook the emotion in the expressive hazel eyes as homesickness. "Sam, in the dresser drawer, there's a purse. I've been setting aside a wage for your services. I want you to take it and go home. I don't want you to stay on account of my recovery. Dr. Parsons is finding someone to stay with me until I'm back on my feet."

That froze Sam's heart. "You're sending me away?"

"There's no reason for you to stay. You've been away from home so long already."

"Don't send me away." He forced out, choked on emotions. "Please, please don't send me away. I love you." His breath froze in a gasp and he covered his mouth. The words had just stumbled out and now they hung in the air between them.

"What?"

Sam shook his head, the bridge had been crossed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to tell you. I ask for nothing, just don't send me away. I'm happy just being near you. I thought I could leave but when I thought you were sure to die, it nearly killed me. I just want to stay near you. I'm not a live-oak."

It didn't mean what he thought it meant. "Sam, you aren't really my cousin. I'll be okay."

Emotion overwhelmed sensibility and all of Sam's carefully laid control crumbled. He surged forward, sliding fingers into Tom's darker hair, holding his face still, and pressed his lips to the shocked pair below him. It was a startled, chaste embrace but it sent shivering desire across Sam's body.

Strong hands, the feel already well known to his body, grasped his shoulders and pulled him away. "What are you doing?"

Sam let the weaker man push him back only far enough to stare into his eyes. "What I've wanted to do for months. I know what you and Mr. Darney did that night, I know you aren't objectionable to kissing a man."

"You don't mean this. You're too young."

That made Sam laugh but he let himself settle back in his chair. Tom wasn't going anywhere and he knew the doctor too well. Cornered, pushed too hard too fast, and Tom would retreat just out of stubbornness. Like a feral animal, he had to be enticed to come to him, not chased after.

"Tom, my father has always known what I am, I think from even before I knew. When war broke out and he sent my brothers to fight, my mother convinced him I was too young to go. That is until he caught sight of me, bent over a stall door with my lover's cock deep in my ass." He didn't blush at the vulgar words but Tom did. "He was off to the Calvary, he was killed six months later."

"I'm sorry."

Sam waved it off, he was done with his mourning. "My father felt going to war was the last effort to be made to make me a proper man. So I went, which is rather ironic when you think about it."

Sending a boy that enjoys laying with men to live and fight around nothing but men?" He smiled now. "Apparently, my father didn't see it that way. Would I like to see them again, yes, one day but I'm not a child or ignorant of myself Doctor Thomas Lambry."

"Sam,"

"Shut up, it's my turn to speak. I've been holding my tongue for months, so you just shut up."

The smallest of smiles touched Tom's lips. "Yes, sir."

"Good. I'm not asking anything of you. I'm sure Mr. Darney will be returning as soon as he's able and I won't get in between you two. I just want to stay near you. Please."

"You knew about us that night. That's why you left us alone in the morning? Did James wake you?"

Sam shook his head and felt himself blushing now. "No, I couldn't sleep. I know you care for him, love him. I know you don't love me, I'm okay with that. I won't be a burden."

"Sam, James is married."

"But, he loves you, I'd be blind not to see that."

"Yes, and I him but as a dear, sweet friend, nothing more."

"But," his mind spun and didn't know how to say it.

"James is a touch, free, with his favors. He likes pleasure, men, women, he likes seduction and taking anyone that catches his eye to bed. He'll never be happy with one person, man or woman." He wasn't even sure why he was trying to justify it to Sam but somewhere along the way Sam's thoughts had started to matter to him.

"So, he won't be coming to you?"

Tom shrugged. "If our paths cross again but not in the way you mean."

"Than, is there someone else?"

Tom shook his head. "No, I, I'm not entirely comfortable with where my desires lay."

That made Sam smile a little. "You've never been in love."

It was a statement not a question but Tom shook his head.

He was experienced enough to see the desire hidden behind the slate cold eyes and to also see the uncertainty. "Are you still going to send me away?"

"I," Tom closed his eyes and drew a breath. "I don't want you to go. I just didn't want you staying because you felt obliged."

"Tell me to and I won't ever speak of this again."

"I, Sam, I don't want to give that word."

Hope surged so suddenly, so painfully, in Sam's chest he almost couldn't breath. "Good. Now, you need to rest." He swooped forward and planted a quick kiss to Tom's forehead. "Do you want me to keep reading until you get back to sleep?"

Shocked by the casualness, by the ease that Sam suddenly was displaying, Tom nodded.
“Please.”

Sam smiled widely and cracked open the book again. If Whitman couldn't put Tom in the right frame of mind, nothing could. Everything had changed and for once it changed for the better. At long last, Sam was free to really be himself and not worry about Tom seeing more than he should. The freedom made him giddy with delight and once Tom was soundly asleep Sam leaned forward and kissed that beloved head once more.

“Just you wait until you're stronger, Thomas Lambry. You aren't going to know what hit you.”

Tom woke on his bed but his body didn't ache in illness and weakness from recovery. There was no warm Sam curled against his side, something Sam had taken to doing while he'd been on his sick bed. The room felt empty and when he opened his eyes it wasn't in the small rented room where he'd nearly died of fever but the plush elegance of the riverboat suite.

The pain of loss was suddenly too much, too fresh. As he had to do every morning, he awoke and had to remind himself that Sam was gone, and it was his fault. The warmed metal clutched in his hand gave him a point to ground himself on and he flipped open the latch and let the frozen smiles from his past stare at him.

“Aw, Sam, James wants me to think more. You used to say I thought too much. I can't do this without you, love, I can't.” The picture tumbled from numb hands and Tom gave in to the bout of tears that welled up.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twelve

“Good afternoon, Miss Horne.” James called out to the pretty blonde as he slipped by.

Alex's steps paused but he wasn't really surprised that James had sought him out, he was surprised it was so soon. “Mr. Darney.” He nodded his head in greeting and turned to keep walking away.

“I was wondering if I might have a private word with you, Miss?” James hurried to walk beside the very proper looking young lady but Alex made no effort to include him.

“I don't believe it would be proper for us to be alone together, Mr. Darney, no matter how dear of a friend you are to my godfather.”

James smiled, enjoying the game. “How about tea? Surely it wouldn't be improper to have a cup of tea with me?”

“Really, Mr. Darney, one more cup of tea today and I will certainly float away.” He kept his voice light but his eyes flashed.

“Than, may I have the pleasure of your company for a walk around the deck?” James offered his arm. “Really, Miss Horne, spare an old man a few moments of your time.”

Alex sighed and glanced James over, saw only amusement and not anger or lust and nodded. "Very well, but only a moment. Old men should take their rest in the afternoon and conserve their strength."

James chuckled and let the delicate hand slid against his arm. "You really are quite good." He spoke in a softer voice.

"Thank you."

He walked them in silence around the deck until he found a bench he liked. Set away from other benches, within eyesight of anyone that wanted to see but also placed so no one could approach without being noticed long before they could over hear any conversation.

"Oh, I believe you're right. I should have napped the afternoon away. My tired old bones." He motioned for Alex to sit, waited for him to settle and than joined the younger boy on the bench a respectable distance away.

"Really, Mr. Darney, is this necessary?"

He smiled slightly. "Actually, it is, my leg isn't being fair to me this day."
"Excuse me?"

James rubbed the ache in his thigh. "I nearly had it shot off in the war. I had the good fortune to end up on Tom's table. Otherwise, I would have lost it. I walked with a cane for nearly three years and while I can manage now without anything but the slightest of limps, it hurts a great deal to do so. Somedays, it hurts more than others and today is such a day. So, please, indulge me and don't force me to walk you in circles to have a word with you."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

He waved it off. "You and I are very much alike."
"I seriously doubt that, Mr. Darney."

"Oh, I don't know, switch our positions and I'm betting we would have made similar choices in each other's lives. We're the same creature, you and I, under the skin. I seduce my way in and out of people's beds for the pleasure and thrill of it but if I weren't so well provided for, I'd be like you; seducing the men around me to gain what I lacked." He watched and saw no change in the boy's expression but those soft brown eyes glazed over just slightly.

"It isn't like that." Alex whispered out. "You know nothing about my life."

James just shrugged that off. "You're correct, I don't but I can guess. Oh, don't worry, I'm not judging you. We all should use what we've been given. I think we both agree that everything around us should be used to the best advantage, even unpleasant things."

"Do you have a point to this conversation, Mr. Darney?" Alex raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. I do." He studied the carefully schooled, very pretty face that watched the far bank and didn't look toward James. "I can imagine how lucky you must feel at finding such an easy mark like Tom." There, that gained him the smallest of frowns. "So willing to do so much to help you and not even fucking you for repayment? Don't find men like that too often in these days."

"You speak of things you do not know." Alex hissed out, surprised at the anger that welled up in him.

"Tell me, just between us, is there really an uncle in Memphis waiting for you? How many men

have you scammed with that sob story?"

Alex reacted without thinking. He rose to his feet and swung out, his gloved hand delivered a resounding slap to the side of the handsome face. "How dare you!" He snarled out and moved to leave.

Only, James caught the slender wrist and pulled the smaller body back down onto the bench. "Sit down, we aren't finished here!" Alex fought a little but when James didn't release his grip, the emotion drained from the blonde's eyes and the body surrendered. It was an interesting reaction, not one he'd have expected. "If you want my help you need to start being honest with me, right now."

"Why would I need your help?"

"Because you want Tom and not because you want to repay a debt. You'll never have him without my help. Make your choice, right now, because I can find someone else to remind him of who he is, it doesn't have to be you."

They sat in silence, Alex's head hung a little loosely on his shoulders. James watched the pretty face but it was shut down, no expression was on it. Moments passed, slipping away as the riverboat steamed onward.

"Miss Horne, good afternoon, are you well dear?" The Captain asked as he strolled by.

Instantly, Alex's face lit up and he smiled softly. "Quite well, thank you for your concern Captain. Mr. Darney is just being kind enough to share accounts of my father's time in the war with me. Please, thank your lovely wife again for including me with this afternoon's tea."

"Of course, dear, of course." The older man nodded and smiled slightly but he gave James, the source, he was sure, of the pretty girl's momentary look of unhappiness, a hard glance before strolling onward.

"You are better than I am." James spoke softly with a little bitter admiration.

"What is it you wish to know, Mr. Darney?" Alex slumped forward a little, unable to continue pretending.

"Tom, are you just using him?"

Alex sighed. "Apparently."

"Yes or no."

"It's not that simple." It wasn't even that simple in his mind, how was he supposed to make it so simple to a stranger? "I have nothing left, I'm not in a position to refuse his help or to repay it. So, yes, I am using him but I'm not trying to hurt him."

A thought occurred to James, how different the boy across from him would be if he'd fallen into kinder, smarter hands at a younger age. Given someone, like James for example, Alex would have been a serious force to reckon with. Now with only rough experience and raw instinct to go on, he already was managing to do far better with how little he had than anyone had a right to.

"Alex, dear, accepting help when you need it and it's freely offered isn't using someone."

"It is if there is no means of repayment."

"How long have you been on your own?" He asked gently, carefully.

"My mother died two years ago this fall."

He had to push one last issue. "I can see you're better provided for than Tom is able." He lowered his voice down. "My fortune is as great as his, my life is stable enough to provide you access to anything you might wish. I travel to new places, see new people. He's so cold now, so gruff and distant. All you'll find with him is scorn and a very cold bed."

Alex turned and studied the handsome face. James was a very attractive man and far more charming than Tom, without a doubt, but he lacked something and it wasn't something Alex was able to name. "Are you truly making me an offer?"

James nodded. "Yes, I am. I'll even help you bed Tom if you still desire it but I think I can offer you so much more than he can."

A quiet voice in the back of Alex's mind screamed acceptance. The fear of his uncle's rejection mixed with the knowledge that Tom's patronage would end at Memphis had him worried. Being alone, adrift and vulnerable in a strange city wasn't his idea of a good time and right in front of him was a chance to avoid that.

"I'm going to stay with my uncle." That was where he belonged, with family.

"An uncle you've never met? I'm certain he will be completely accepting of the reality of your situation. What uncle wouldn't be charmed to learn their niece is a nephew that has like untold number of men bed him. Just how many has there been?"

That made Alex blush a little and he had to glance away.

"I'll wait for him to throw you out, the offer is open ended. Do we have an agreement?"

Uncertainty and fear settled in the pit of Alex's stomach but he shook his head. "You're correct, Mr. Darney, my uncle may very well throw me out into the street. I'm not ignorant of the general view of my preferences. You're correct again that Dr. Lambry owes me nothing and his kindness will expire at Memphis. You are wrong, however, in saying that he is cold for I've seen passion in that man's eyes the depth of which I can not plumb." Alex raised his eyes and locked them on the darker pair so closely studying him. "I have been forced to whore myself but I am not for sale. It's a generous offer for such as me but I must decline. I will risk being abandoned in Memphis, I have no desire to attach myself to you or anyone else merely for survival, not any longer." That was an easy statement to make while sitting in a nice new dress, in the warm afternoon sunlight on a fancy riverboat. Things became a little more desperate when days passed with no food and cold rain made a body shiver. Alex had only barely regained any sense of self or freedom and he found himself unwilling to surrender it so easily.

James nodded. "You're steadfast in your choice? You would rather risk being tossed about by fate than align yourself with me?"

"Yes, sir, I am steadfast."

"And what of Tom?"

"Sir?"

"Will you so easily let him walk from your life as he walked into it, or will you be as steadfast with him as well?"

"Dr. Lambry makes his own choices and he does not chose me. He's made it clear he's being kind to me for his own reasons."

"Forgive me, Alex, but I needed to know."

The quick change in the conversation confused the younger man. "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"Tom is my dearest friend, I couldn't risk that he would grow attached to you and have you be merely someone looking to use another."

"Obviously you haven't been paying attention, Dr. Lambry is far from attached to me." But the clothes on Alex's back spoke differently, the idea of anyone actually caring about him and not just about getting him into bed was foreign.

James nodded and grunted a little in a non-committal way. "Alex, I'm going to decide to trust your intentions toward my friend."

Completely unsure and fully confused now, Alex nodded. "Okay."

"That said, you won't seduce Tom before Memphis. I know him, it won't be done short of getting him drunk off his ass which isn't something he ever does. So, I'm going to be extending an invitation to him to spend his time in Baton Rouge with me, at my house. I'll keep him there for at least two weeks, maybe longer. Before we reach Memphis I plan on loaning you a small sum of money. Should things not work out with your uncle, or if you find him to be disagreeable, use the money to buy a ticket to Baton Rouge and come stay with your dear Uncle James. Okay?"

Alex sat up straighter and raised his chin. "I already gave you my answer."

"None of that!" James waved his hand around, shooing off the idea. "I'm sorry, dear but I don't go for men prettier than me. I'm vain."

"You weren't serious at all?" He wasn't sure if his pride should have been hurt.

"No, well, sure I wouldn't refuse you if you approached me, at least for the night anyway. Honestly, the two of us would kill one another. It's Tom I'm thinking of. Catch up to him at my home. If you show up and I still think Tom has an interest in you, I will tell you the secrets to seducing him. Better than that, I will tell you all you'll need to win his heart."

"You're insane."

James laughed. "Maybe, but I prefer the term eccentric. The choice would than be yours. Would you want his love? You've seen how loyal he is, do you think that's something you'd desire? Or are you more like me, a lover to all and a love to none? None of this will matter if you knock on dear uncle's door and he welcomes you with open arms, even with what's under the skirts."

"And if I decide I'm more like you?" He'd never been given the choice to consider it before.

"Well now, dear, I can't stand the idea of anyone like us tossed out into the cold street. Come to my home, with no expectations, no sense of debt, stay until we can get you on your feet."

"I don't understand why you'd do this for me. You don't know me."

That made James smile a touch bitterly. "As I said, we're the same creature. Only, I'm not sure I could have remained so strong if I'd lived your life." He laughed suddenly and shook his head.

"Why don't we just say that, just once, only once mind you, I want to play the part of the hero and rush to someone's rescue. My vanity likes that idea very much so indulge me. Do we have a deal?"

Alex contemplated the offered hand and the words it carried. "Yes, Mr. Darney, we have a deal. If my uncle turns out to be disagreeable, I will take up your hospitality until I can be secured elsewhere. I shall allow you to play the part of a hero." He accepted the offered hand.

That made James laugh, truly laugh and his eyes lit up. "There's my good darling. I'm delighted we were able to reach an understanding. May I escort you back to your room?"

"I'd be grateful, Mr. Darney."

The next few days passed in awkward uncertainty. Alex remained withdrawn while alone with Tom, lost in thoughts and prone to staring at the older man. The older man who wasn't speaking more than a few words a day and tended to fake reading as an excuse to stare off into space. James moved about both of them, wearing the tiniest of smiles and feeling smug.

Tom's eyes burned when they fell on both of his companions but James saw two different fires. When his friend studied him it was comfortable lust there, hidden and banked but waiting, almost begging to be fanned into full flame. When Tom watched Alex the fire was a hunger, something that threatened to consume all things in its path. Sooner or later one of the two fires would need to be indulged in it just wasn't the time. Tom needed to brood a bit longer, struggle with emotions that should have been easily understood.

So, James made sure he spent a good bit of time with Tom. Only it was playing endless hands of cards, in the sitting room or otherwise chaperoned. He made sure Alex was kept busy and distracted by the twittering ladies on the riverboat and made equal sure that he was never alone with either his friend or the too pretty boy. He kept both men at a low simmer until the boat finally docked in Memphis.

"Oh, I'm packed up." Alex broke into Tom's distant thoughts. He'd dressed in his lovely blue outfit and smoothed out the yellow striping on it, brushed his hair out twice and then pinned it up and still felt like he was forgetting something. After so much time, so much struggle and pain, he was finally in Memphis, merely moments from his uncle's home.

Tom snapped his wandering mind back to the present and forced himself not to frown. He was still debating the words of the matron in Owensboro about staying in Memphis for a few weeks to let Alex adjust to her, his, new surroundings. He'd mentioned to James the night before that he might and his dark eyed friend had merely nodded his head and tossed down two pairs, queens over nines, and beaten his lousy pair of kings.

"The boat is staying docked until tomorrow noon so leave your luggage. Let's find your uncle first, see how things sit with him and then move your things over."

Alex clutched the battered case closer to his body. "I don't mind taking it with me, but, what about the horses?"

"They'll be time to offload yours before they pull out. Don't worry. Do you have the letter?"

Alex nodded and produced the envelope he'd been trying very hard to keep from crushing in his gloved hands from nerves. "Thank you, Tom, for all that you've done, for going with me to meet him. I'm not sure I'd have the nerve if not for you."

There was such open emotion in the pretty face that Tom glanced away. It had been easier to keep the boy at an emotional arms length when Alex had been trying to seduce him constantly or trying to please him by pretending to be someone he wasn't.

"Have you made your mind up what you're going to tell him?"

Alex shook his head. "No, I haven't. He seems like a kind man in his letter but my mother never spoke of him. I thought it best to see what his temperament is before choosing a course of

action.”

“That’s likely wise.” Tom nodded and pulled his jacket on. “Ready?”

“Yes, no, yes.” Alex smiled weakly and drew a careful breath. “Yes.”

Tom offered his arm. “Let’s find your uncle.”

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Thirteen

Alex took an instant liking to the city. Several other riverboats, all brightly painted and shining in the sunshine, were docked near their own. Smaller crafts flitted about the river and on land people moved everywhere. Tom moved them around the traffic with confident ease, in command of everything as he always seemed to be. It made Alex smile a little and he let himself be guided and sheltered by the larger man.

It took a moment but Tom whistled down a coach and paid the man to take them to the address on the letter. He handed Alex into the carriage and climbed up beside him, settling in across from the boy rather than next to him. Alex sat silent, wide eyed and filled with a nervous excited energy. He knew he was fidgeting but simply couldn’t stop and not even the sight of the energetic, lively city around him could distract him. He was too busy to notice that Tom’s attention was fully on him and not the city outside the coach.

Down they went over dusty streets and past warehouses and slowly the town became pleasant residents. Small, wood homes, some single story some two, that sat on green patches of lawn with neighbors near by but not too near by. As the neighborhoods changed slightly, growing more affluent, houses sitting behind pretty white painted fences, Alex started to sit on the edge of his seat with nerves.

When the coach finally stopped, he thought he might be ill. Tom hopped out and Alex heard his deep voice speaking with the driver. He saw the two men pointing slightly at a cute, two story house. It was painted white, the shutters that framed the windows were green. The fence was in solid repair and flowers grew around the posts and in boxes by the lower story windows. It felt clean and nice and so very much like a home.

The past year returned and clouded Alex’s mind. All of the horrible, dirty things he’d done, had done to him suddenly made him feel small and unworthy of such a perfect home. He had been so fixed on reaching this address and his uncle within, so fixed on the idea that everything would be better when he made it here, that he had forgotten that nothing was ever so simple. Reaching a goal didn’t make how you reached it go away and using the justification of no choices, no options, was empty.

“Ready?” Tom asked from outside and offered a hand to help Alex from the carriage.

Alex sat, frightened and nodded dumbly. One of his gloved hands slid into Tom’s and some of the doctor’s stability flowed into him, under his skin. It would be enough to sustain him, he was certain it would be enough.

Tom took in the pale face, wide eyes and thinly pressed lips and read the fear there. “The driver

will wait.”

Alex only nodded again, unable to find words. He let Tom lead him up to the gate and when the doctor held it open for him he moved on steady steps into the house's yard. One foot landed in front of the other but Alex felt he was floating, the paper of the letter clutched in his nervous hand. The satchel that he'd dragged with him during a year's worth of trouble felt alternately too light and then too heavy.

When they reached the door, Tom had to stop because Alex simply froze. The boy's eyes were wide, almost unblinking and he just stood there. The wood door's metal knocker hung waiting to be used but neither person on the door stoop was ready to move it.

“Alex?”

The blond shook his head. “I'm so nervous.” He swallowed hard. “What if he, what if?”

Tom rested a hand on a slender shoulder. “You won't know if you don't knock.”

That forced Alex to draw a long slow breath and raise on gloved hand to knock. The metal rapped onto metal and echoed into the house behind. They stood, waiting in silence, Alex's expression growing more and more distressed. Finally, as Alex was debating knocking again, the door opened.

A woman answered, tall, well dressed but not in a wealthy fashion. She was plain but welcoming looking, her brown hair pinned back in a simple style. Her eyes slid from the tall, handsome man to the slender, pretty girl and she smiled in greeting.

“Hello?”

Tom swiped the hat off his head. “Afternoon, ma'am, we're sorry to bother you. If we could please have a word with Mr. Asher?” He'd promised himself not to speak, to not get in the way but from how Alex was looking he wasn't sure the other could speak.

The woman blinked in confusion for a moment and than smiled gently. “I'm sorry, Mr. Asher doesn't live here any longer. My husband and I, we bought this house from him, oh, three years ago now.”

A small muffled moan, like the whimper of a sick animal, escaped Alex's throat.

Tom ignored the sound. “Ma'am, this is Miss Horne, Mr. Asher's niece.” The lie was getting easier and easier to tell. “I'm her god father, I've been attempting to escort her to her uncle's care but all we have to go on is a letter five years out of date. It lead us to this address.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry. Please, would you like to come in?” She eyed Alex uneasily, worried the pretty girl would faint at any moment.

It made more sense to discuss this indoors but Tom wasn't sure Alex was up to the task of continuing to pretend to be female while so emotionally overwhelmed. “That's a kind offer ma'am but really, I don't wish to impose. Could you tell us where we might locate Mr. Asher?”

“You haven't heard?”

“No, ma'am, the only news we have is several years out of date.” He smiled and tried to be charming.

“His wife, young thing, she got the consumption. Last I heard, they were moving to Abilene, out in Texas, for her health. He was going to open a store, hardware or general, something along

those lines. They sold off everything and went west. Are you sure you won't come in?" Again she eyed Alex nervously.

Tom glanced to the bowed blond head. "No, thank you, we really have taken up far too much of your time."

"Very well, good luck finding your uncle, dear."

"Thank you." Alex managed to mutter out.

Tom thanked the lady again and used a hand on Alex's shoulder to turn the boy and walk him back down the path to the main street. Once on the other side of the perfectly white fence, Alex raised his head and straightened his spine.

"Well." He began, shoving the letter away into a pocket and offering a hand to Tom. "Thank you for your assistance. You've been more than kind to me, Dr. Lambry." When Tom was too stunned to accept the offered hand, Alex withdrew it. "I'll be on my way, then." He turned and started to walk down the street, blinded by the tears that were welling up and desperate for Tom not to see them.

"Alex! Wait!" Tom called but the blonde kept moving, satchel clutched tightly in one slender gloved hand and feet moving with an urgent step. "Wait!" His voice grew more angry and he ran to catch up.

Alex was forced to stop when a hand caught his wrist. "You've fulfilled your obligation, Dr. Lambry and delivered me to Memphis."

"Where will you go?" He asked the back of the blond head.

"This isn't the backwoods." He knew how to whore himself for money, it was a talent he'd learned easily.

"I didn't ask if this was the backwoods!" He snapped, knowing he was being harsh and shouting. "I asked where you think you're going to go?"

One slender shoulder shrugged. The money James had lent him wouldn't be enough to get him to Abilene but he could make up the difference. "I'll find a way."

"Damn it, Alex!" Tom shook the wrist he was holding, confused and angry and not even sure why.

"Please, I should go."

"But,"

He wanted to find a dark corner, curl up and cry his eyes out. There was only so much he could keep a steady face on for so long and he'd reached his breaking point. He needed to cry and scream and feel sorry for himself if only for a few hours before figuring out what to do next. Until he'd indulged that desire, that need, he wasn't going to be able to think clearly.

Of its own accord, Tom's hand slid from wrist to elbow and then up to shoulder. The body below his hands still felt far too thin, delicate, and he felt a shocking protective urge hit him. The last time he felt so protective of anyone else was when Sam was still alive and he knew how he'd handle the situation if it was Sam standing, proud and stubborn, before him instead of Alex.

Tom wanted to speak, to promise shelter and care. He wanted to say that it was okay to accept help and not to worry. Inside his head he comforted and had all the right words to show Alex that they'd find his uncle it would just take longer. Those words would show him the way to convince

a boy who'd known too little of trust and trustworthiness that Tom wasn't like the others, that he didn't have to walk alone and he wasn't a burden. He opened his mouth but nothing would come out and he wanted to curse himself and his own failings.

Instead, he slid the hand holding onto the slender shoulder across the top of the boy's chest. He tugged slightly and the stunned body stumbled back against him, tucking under his chin perfectly. Tom's other hand willfully slid around the slender, corseted waist and pulled the startled body back tight against his chest. He turned his head to rest the side of his cheek against the top of the blond curls.

It felt right, perfect, and the confusion and anger in Tom fell away. The boy's body eased, shivered, trembled but didn't struggle for escape. Tom's arms tightened and he forced his clenched jaws apart long enough to whisper.

"It's okay." He swallowed hard, hating how holding the younger man felt so familiar, hating how he knew his arms would long to feel the body again wrapped in them. "We'll find him, together. Okay?"

Alex shivered with a flutter very much like a trapped bird. The words, so tender, so obviously painfully poured out, flowed over his skin like warmed honey. His strength melted. He felt again like that morning after Tom had killed his captors and planned to leave him behind; so lost, so exhausted and uncertain, so completely frightened of the world around him. Only, instead of feeling like he should just lay down and die, right there on the mountainside because he was too tired to take another step, this time he knew he could give in to the exhaustion and it would be okay.

In his arms, Alex shivered again. Tom just held on, nuzzling a little at the soft, lavender scented hair. A sob drifted out, chased by a shudder. With no further warning, Alex went limp. He fell against Tom and Tom held him. As another sob escaped, Tom bent and scooped the boy up. Alex curled against his chest, the satchel hanging loosely from a dangling arm, and let the tears fall.

Without speaking again, without whispering the words he wanted to about taking Alex home where he belonged, Tom carried the boy back to the coach and eased him inside. This time, when Tom climbed in, he sat next to Alex. He reached over and pulled the quietly weeping man against him. Liking the feel of the warm body curled against his own, soothing the soft hair and just watching the world pass by outside the coach window, that felt like enough.

When the coach returned to the docks, Alex was still weeping silently. Tom slid his arms from around the limp body and quickly exited the coach to settle with the driver. When he glanced inside, Alex was still curled up over himself, looking small and broken.

"Steady now, let's get you down from there."

For all his efforts, Alex caught a boot heel on the coach and stumbled. He fell with a gasp, bracing himself for landing painfully. Only, he didn't hit hard dirt but Tom's sheltering chest. The stronger man caught him, wrapped him back into a protective embrace, sheltered him. There was no pain, no embarrassment, just safety and strength.

Tom hitched the slender body into a more comfortable carrying position in his arms. "Here now, it's okay, can you get your case?"

"You don't have to," Alex began, staring up at the strong jaw line and stubbornly set face.

"Can you reach your case?"

Alex nodded and snaked an arm out to grasp the handle of his satchel. Without waiting for

permission, he threw his arms around Tom's neck, the satchel bumping sharply into spine, and buried his face against Tom. The arms holding him never wavered and he closed his eyes and let Tom carry them back onto the river boat.

Eyes turned to them but Tom stared them down. There weren't too many people that could stand up to him when he was in a mood and the way he was feeling now actually had people taking a step back from him. Only two people had the nerve to step forward.

"Oh, Miss Horne, are you alright?" The Captain asked, moving forward in concern.

Alex curled tighter against Tom's chest, hiding his face further.

"She's fine." Tom nearly barked back and his eyes locked with dark brown, peering from the crowd.

James made no efforts to hide his smile and pushed forward. He leaned in close to Tom and whispered softly to the other man. "Well, aren't you two a pretty sight."

"James," Tom warned.

"Now, now, I'll behave. Want me to deal with this fool?"

"Please."

James rested a hand on the center of Alex's back. "Dear, you okay?"

Alex never raised his head, ashamed of the tears on his face and how weak he was. Too desperate for the strength, safety and warmth he was being wrapped in from Tom to pull even fractionally away.

"Alex is fine." Tom finally answered and pushed past James. Knowing that whatever James did would distract the nosy gossips from following and trying to help.

And he did, as Tom pushed his way forward James smiled a soft comforting smile. "Miss Horne is fine. You know, the poor child wasn't well when Tom finally arrived to escort her to her uncle's. She's just exhausted, don't worry, Tom will see to it she's well, I'm sure he'll want her to rest, quietly." On and on he went, not even really hearing what he was saying. He nodded and smiled and comforted but his thoughts were on how good it was to see Tom carrying the slender blonde away.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Fourteen

Tom didn't release his hold on Alex until he was setting the boy down on his bed. Even then, Alex kept a clutching grip onto Tom's neck, sliding his hands down to grasp the front of the worn coat. In the end, they fell limp and weak onto the bed beside him. He was just too exhausted to even maintain the hold he had on the tall doctor.

Tom shed off his coat and sat on the edge of the bed. Alex had curled up on his side and looked twice as skinny, twice as small, as he normally did. Without thinking about it, Tom stroked the

blonde hair gently.

"Hey, now, it'll be okay."

Alex sniffled but kept his eyes unfocused. "I'm not a horse, don't talk to me like I am one."

Tom's jaw clenched up. "That isn't," Tom snapped and stopped the angry words when the boy cowered at the sound. He drew a slow, deep breath and let it out in a long hiss. Alex got under his skin, made him angry, made him simply feel, far too often. "Look," he managed to get out in a much calmer voice. "All I'm saying is there's no point to crying."

That drew a reaction but it wasn't a sensible one to Tom's eyes. The tears didn't dry up, the boy didn't smile and sit up. There was no logical understanding like he'd expected. Instead Alex surged up from where he'd curled into a ball.

"No point to crying?" He shot back, warm brown eyes wide with a fire. The tears still rolled down his face but now there was anger in him as well.

"It won't fix anything." Tom tried again to explain.

"How would you know?" Alex's voice was sharp and biting. "It'll make me feel better, that's good enough. How dare you tell me there's no point to crying! You have no idea of what I've had to do to get here only to find out I've got to go further!" He crawled off the bed to stand next to it, feet planted in a wide, angry stance. "I'll damned well cry if I want to for as long as I want to and you, you mister cold ice king, emotionally dead, poor excuse for a human who's never felt anything that wasn't selfish his entire life," he was shouting now. "Can kiss my ass!"

That was it. That was all Tom could take. His emotions had been rolling around like a small boat tossed on the ocean for weeks and this was too much. He found his feet less gracefully than Alex had. "Don't you dare to ever presume you know anything about what I do or do not feel!"

"Oh, excuse me, that's working on the theory you have emotions! Someone as cold as you has no right to tell me what to feel!"

"At least I'm not a slave to my emotions! At least I don't let other people's will overwhelm my own! How many men have you just given into because you were too weak to fight them?" He hated the words as soon as he'd said them but out they poured and there was no recalling them. It was better this way, better that the boy hated him.

"You can't be serious! First you are as much a slave to your pathetic desire to feel nothing as I may or may not be to my emotions. Which is more sad? Which is least healthy?" Tears weren't just falling now, they were flowing. "And yes, I've surrendered to too many men! Did you want to hear me say that? Fine! I've said it but damn you before you judge me! How many men beating you for looking at the wrong person, saying the wrong word, would it take before you stopped trying to be free? How many men holding you down and using you while you begged them to stop would it take before you stopped fighting? Huh? Tell me, how many!" Alex's voice was shrill now, screaming, his fists balled up but the only thing he wanted to hit was himself. "If you can't come up with a number, doctor," he used the title the same as he would a swear word, "I can tell you how many times it took for me!"

Tom's anger dissolved. Before his eyes he remembered Alex as he'd found him that first night; tied to a ring, being raped, with switch marks across his back and yet he'd managed to smile and continue the next morning. All of the pain in Tom's life suddenly felt horribly selfish.

"Alex,"

"No!" He had seen the look change in those cold grey eyes, seen the ice and anger disappear.

"Don't you dare feel sorry for me! You're the one that should be pitied here. Sam, oh my Sam, my poor dead, Sam! If he wasn't already dead he'd drop over from shame at seeing what a sorry excuse for a man you are!"

The anger returned and while logically Tom knew that the younger boy was skilled at knowing what nerves to hit, not just erotic ones, he still grew angry. "I told you before, do not speak of him." He didn't shout now, he almost growled.

Alex knew what he was doing was wrong but he couldn't stop. He needed to be beaten or fucked by the exasperating man across from him or he'd snap. His nerves were frayed too thin and since he was sure that Tom wasn't going to fuck him, he knew how to get option two.

"Would you be happier if I dressed like a boy?" Tom had stalked around the edge of the bed and was now little over an arms length away and still Alex was pushing. "Would you be happy if I denied who I was? This," he shook a handful of fabric at Tom. "This is what I am! Who I am! For better or worse this is what I am! I like to wear pretty clothes and dresses and I like sewing and I like cooking and I like being prettier than most women! I like men! I like hard, aching cocks! I like sucking them down my throat, I like them shoved deep into my ass! This is what and who I am but you'd be so much happier if I pretended otherwise. If I put on pants and ugly fabrics in ugly colors and cut my hair to an ugly length you'd be happier! If I shouted to the world that I wanted to bed women instead of having men like you throw me down and fuck me, you'd be happier because you can't stand anyone," he had to pause to draw breath and a distracted part of his mind noted that Tom was breathing just as hard. "Anyone, being happy with who they are, even if it's different than what society says they should be!"

"Stop it." Tom warned, lower and darker as he moved closer to where Alex was ranting.

"No!" He was shaking now and still the words and tears wouldn't stop. "I may be a whore, I may be happier in a dress but at least I'm not a hypocrite like you! Bemoaning your lost love when if he walked in that door right now you'd tell him to go to hell!"

"Stop it!"

"I feel sorry for him, having such a traitor for a lover! Was he even cold yet before you started to hate what you are, what the two of you shared? Hypocrite! Oh my dear Sam, I loved him so but OH it's disgusting and evil and bad! I protect his memory like it's a holy shrine but belittle what we shared every day by hiding behind shame because I'm too much of a coward to risk being hurt again!"

"Stop it!" Tom screamed and was across those last feet that separated them. His hands clamped down on the slender shoulders roughly. Below him the wide brown eyes, angry and flashing, hurt and crying, were scanning his face looking for something that Tom couldn't name.

There it was, he'd gone to far, or just far enough. Tom grabbed him and he relaxed, waiting for the fist to land. Only, it didn't, both of Tom's hands were still gripping his shoulders, painfully but that was it. He wasn't even being shaken, just that strong grasp. He studied Tom's angry, hurt face, shocked at the raw, bold emotion he wore so openly. There was no cold distance now, nothing in the older man was being hidden and the depth of the pain he saw there was enough to make Alex hurt. He would have preferred to have been beaten rather than see such pain in Tom's eyes.

Alex opened his mouth to say something, he wasn't sure what but something. Anything was better than hanging in the stark silence that framed the two of them. Only before he could say a word to break the moment he hung in, confused at not being at least smacked around, Tom crossed the last inches between them and kissed him.

Lips slid along lips and Alex let his mouth part under the chaste kiss. One of Tom's hands slid up

from it's bruising grip on his shoulder to slid back and cradle his head. The other hand slid down to his waist and pulled their bodies closer. Against his mouth, Tom's lips were firm, uncertain, unyielding and they didn't accept the invitation Alex offered with his parted lips.

So, he slid his tongue out and just barely stroked along Tom's mouth. A shiver raced from head to foot across the taller man and he moaned. Alex was crushed forward, pressed tight to the stronger body and finally, Tom deepened the kiss. The doctor's tongue snaked inside his mouth, exploring with tentative touch. Alex stroked it with his own, delighting in the shudder it caused in the other body.

Onward the kiss went, slowly, gradually, growing more heated. Tom lost himself in the sweet mouth being offered to him. The smell of lavender tickled his nose. There was a taste of salt from the tears Alex had shed, and was still shedding, to the kiss. As the boy in his arms let his angry tension dissolve, Tom moved the kiss deeper. Let his tongue challenge and toy with it's pair until both men were breathless.

Tom didn't let go, he cradled the startled head to his chest and hugged the younger man tight. His breath was gasping in and out of his body but he couldn't slow it or control it. Without being able to stop himself the words tumbled out.

"I don't want to hurt you." He whispered, unsure if it was a plea or request.

Startled by the open confession, Alex felt his own anger fade. He had to swallow hard to move the lump from his throat to let him speak. "I don't think you could." He believed it, really believed it. If Tom hadn't beaten him for all the things he'd thrown at the man, right there, he wasn't likely to ever beat him.

"No, I," Tom pulled away and gathered the pretty face between his hands, wiping at forgotten tears with his thumbs. "I break everything I touch, I hurt everyone that gets close to me. You've had too much pain already, I don't want to hurt you too."

"I'm tougher than I look." He whispered back, a small smile teasing the corners of his lips.

It didn't lighten the mood, Tom just shook his head. He leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to Alex's forehead before turning and hurrying out of the room. He moved quickly across the sitting room to shut himself into the privacy of his own bedroom. So quickly, in fact, that he missed the form of a dark haired, dark eyed man crouching down to hide behind one of the chairs.

Alex watched Tom's door almost slam shut before he sat down on the edge of the bed. He was too stunned to move, to think or speak, it wasn't what he'd expected. Nor was he expecting to hear a floorboard creak behind him, it made him jump, startled. James wasn't smiling, for once his face was serious and steady. He leaned in the open door frame, arms folded across his chest. "You okay?"

Alex nodded. "He didn't hit me."

That made James smile and he shook his head. "I know he didn't, Tom has a temper but he rarely beats on anyone. Are you okay?" He moved, uninvited into the bedroom and offered his handkerchief to the blonde.

"Thanks." Alex took the snowy white fabric and daintily dabbed at the drying tears still clinging to his face. "I'm okay. My uncle's moved out to Texas."

"I'm sorry." He sat on the bed next to the younger man and accepted back the now damp cloth. When his hand returned from his coat and tucking the fabric away it brought with it a flask. He unscrewed the cap and offered it as well.

It was just what Alex needed. He took it and downed a swallow of the strong liquor not even trying to look graceful or feminine. "Thank you again." But he didn't pass the flask back over to James, just stared at his gloved hands and the metal he held. "You were listening to our fight?" He took another swallow, felt the warmth spread out and steady his nerves and handed it back to James.

James downed his own swallow before nodding. "Awful of me isn't it? Eavesdropping like that, it's just not proper." Another swallow chased the first and he handed the flask back to the blonde. "Good thing Tom didn't see me out there. He may not have hit you but he would have beaten me into the floorboards."

"You really believe that?"

"He's done it before." James smiled more and glanced to where the other man was refusing to look up at him. "I told you, we're the same creature. Only when I pushed him like that, he did hit me, repeatedly." Which was why he'd hovered so long out in the sitting room. From the moment he heard their raised voices he knew what Alex was doing and if Tom snapped and actually did raise a hand to the smaller man he wanted to be there to stop him.

"I don't know why I did that." Alex spoke softly as he pulled each finger from its place inside the glove and slid the fabric off his hands. "I just, I was so angry and I wanted him to do something, anything."

"You wanted him to beat you."

Alex only nodded.

"Would it have been easier if he had?"

"Yes." He rubbed at his eyes. "He's so kind to me, it scares me."

James passed the flask back but the younger man refused it so he capped it and put it away. "Tom's father delivered me, I was born three weeks after Tom. Our families are close friends but while my grandfather was a printer, and his father was a blacksmith, Tom's family has been doctors as far back as the 1600's. Old family, old money, old respectable ways and yet they were kind to us, to our newer ideals. If you could meet his family you'd understand him better." James shook his head.

"Are you sure you trust me enough to tell me these things?" Alex wasn't sure he trusted himself with any knowledge about Tom. He was apt to use it against the man the next time they fought, he knew himself.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't tell you. Let me guess, you had toy dolls as a child?"

Alex only nodded.

"Tom? He had medical books and instruments, small chemistry sets and dead birds to dissect. His parents, his family, are frightfully serious. No one raises their voice, no one tells jokes, no one runs around. I've known his mother my entire life and I've never once seen her laugh and can count the number of times she's smiled on one hand. Disagreeable woman, completely disagreeable and his father is no better expect he's away long hours for his work."

"Your family wasn't like that." Alex stated, just knowing things had been different for the outgoing James.

The boy's understanding made him smile. "That is stating it mildly. I think Tom's parents felt they

could have a civilizing affect on my family. He's always been a serious sort, even as a child, even when he was staying with my family. When they sent us off to school, my parents sent me with Tom hoping I'd be a good influence on him and his parents sent him with me hoping he'd be able to sway me. Just like his brothers before him, he was expected to score high marks and he did. Are you beginning to see a pattern here?"

"Yes."

"Good. I've known since we were fourteen that Tom had no interest in women, it was another year until I figured where his desire truly were." He smiled at that, fifteen, naked with a boy four years older, in a very personal moment and Tom had walked into their shared room. Only instead of being repulsed, his friend had grown horribly embarrassed and twice as aroused. "I had to twist his arm to get him to admit it. See, as I'm certain you can guess, men of his social status simply are not sodomites."

"Mr. Darney,"

"Hush dear, haven't you learned to let your elders babble when they wish to?" He patted a now ungloved hand. "When my leg was nearly blown off in the war, it was Tom that saved it. He did it because he pushes himself too far, expects himself to be this impossible image of what he's been told to be. I'm not complaining because I like my leg but it's a shitty way to live. When I saw him again, after quite a bit of time had passed, he was very much like he is now. Driven, cold, distant, empty, his eyes were so empty. Except when he looked at Sam, they weren't even involved yet, but there was something in how they looked at each other. I've never looked at or been looked at by anyone like that my entire life."

"Please,"

"Shhhh, let me say what I need to say. I ran into them a few times over the years that followed and each time, Tom was more human, more relaxed than the time before. It wasn't anything Sam did or didn't do, it was just he was getting comfortable with himself. Now, seeing him like he was in school and during the war again, it's not easy to look at but never once in all these years has he tried so hard to deny what he desires."

"He's afraid of being hurt again."

"Smart boy, see we are alike." James smiled. "I'm not shy at saying this nor is it idle flattery dear, you are simply beautiful but Tom's never once been moved by what a person looks like. He's too logical, too doctorish for that. There's something in you that he's responding to."

"I make him angry."

"You make him feel. You remind him he's not as dead as Sam. He's always been short tempered and angry. You're pushing him, the same that I've always tried to do. It's actually a very amusing game. It's better to have him angry to the point of screaming than with those cold, dead eyes. Don't you think?"

"I don't know, Mr. Darney, he doesn't seem happy."

"Tom's never happy!" James laughed. "It goes against his nature, he's a gloomy sort. Aim for him to be content, he worries too much about things that might happen to ever really be happy, not happy like folks like us can be. It's a scarier place, this horrid world, when you feel things too much like we do but in return it holds many more wonders."

"Even if it's only for a short time, you feel it's still proper for him?" Alex asked, unable, unwilling to think of anything in long terms.

"Even if it's for a day." James reached over and brushed a stray curl back off the boy's pretty

face. "Now, you should rest and stop fussing. Whatever happens with Tom happens and as to your uncle, don't worry, you'll find him." He stood and moved to the bedroom door. "Rest!"

Alex hadn't moved from where he was sitting on the edge of the bed but he turned to see James moving from the room. "Mr. Darney?"

"Yes, dear?" James stopped, the door mostly closed before him.

"Thank you."

He smiled and pulled the door shut and let himself out of the suite.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Fifteen

Alone in his room, Alex sat. There was a bone weariness weighing him down. Time passed unmeasured and still he sat, unmoving, unthinking. His ears strained for the sound of Tom's door opening, seeking the clues to the other man's mood. Eventually, the alertness faded, dissolved and left him exhausted. It was okay then to lay down and once his head was flat, he slipped into sound sleep.

Slowly, sleep retreated and Alex awoke, groggy and alone. His limbs moved with a heavy weight as he sat up in the darkening room. The sun was setting, tossing a fiery glow across the room. The yawn that escaped felt sticky and fuzzy from the swallows of scotch he'd downed before drifting to sleep.

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched the shadows start to deepen. Without thinking, he stripped off the pretty new boots and slid the stockings from his legs. Bare footed and legged, he stood now and carefully removed the new bodice, the new skirt. Each garment he stripped from his body he set gently aside. The corset followed and then the chemise and bloomers. Layer after layer peeled away until finally he stood nude, alone in his room.

It was only then that he turned to the mirror over the dresser, small and plain, and met his own eyes watching back. Watched as his hands lifted and removed the pins from his hair and let it fall, thick and curly about his shoulders. It had been a long time since he'd had the luxury to just see himself this way and he judged what he saw critically.

It wasn't the body of the young woman he pretended to but the slender man he was. A light dusting of blonde fine hair covered his legs, less on his arms and almost none on his chest. The chest itself was narrow, slender, boyish, the shoulders too delicate in the bones under the flesh to ever hold much strength or width.

He could wish and work and pray and never have the masculinity of a man like Tom, or even one like James. He slid a hand over his neck, too long, too graceful to be manly, lower over his chest and down to cross his hips. Without thought of sexuality, he cupped himself, stroked an exploring hand across his softened sex.

It was a difficult conclusion to reach but he knew that men only desired him because he was so slender, so sleek and graceful. So like a woman. The sort of man he was attracted to, strong, confident, undeniably masculine, could only be attracted to him because he was so feminine. They were drawn to the pretty young woman not the slender man. He was beautiful, not

handsome, even James said as much. The setting sun caught the mirror and reflected fire in his place.

With conviction, he turned and gathered up the camisole and a petticoat. The soft fabric slid easily across his skin and covered his nakedness. He found a simple cord and tied his hair back at the base of his neck. Oddly, he felt more exposed half dressed this way than he had while nude.

He moved on graceful, bare feet to the door and cracked it open. The room beyond was dark, lit only by the setting sun, and quietly he slipped into its odd light. On stealthy feet he moved across the floor to Tom's door but once he reached it he froze. His hand raised but not to knock, he pressed it to the wood, caught like a bug in amber between what he wanted and what he feared.

"You missed dinner."

Tom's voice, soft, rich and deep, echoing from behind him caused Alex to jump in startled fright. He turned and scanned the darkened room and found the doctor sitting in a chair. On the table beside him was a half empty bottle and a glass with the last swallows waiting to be consumed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Alex shook his head. "I'm sorry." He swallowed hard but didn't look away. He couldn't see Tom's eyes in the shadow he was sitting in but he could feel them. "For things I said before. I'm sorry."

One of Tom's hands snaked out to lift the glass and its remaining liquor to his lips. The glass was placed back on the table with a small click. "You were angry."

"That's no excuse." Alex whispered back, pressing his spine against the closed bedroom door.

"You were right." Tom poured more from the bottle but left the glass untouched.

"Are you drunk?"

"I said, you were right."

"And I asked if you were drunk." Alex heard the sharper tone to his words and bite it off. He couldn't say just what it was about the other man that made him so contrary, so snippy, but like gravity it just was.

"I am a little, yes and you're half naked."

That made Alex smile slightly, surprised Tom had noticed. "I am a little, yes."

The glass raised again to lips and returned half emptied. "You were right, Sam would be ashamed of me."

"That isn't what I said."

"It's what you meant. I have been a traitor to what we had." A sigh drifted across the shadows. "I'm sorry I was so cruel to judge the choices you've made. It's not my place, I was wrong. You did what you had to do to stay alive, that's all that matters."

Alex upped Tom from a little drunk to quite drunk. "What you said was true. I do let my emotions rule me, I do let other people override my own will. I have let men, a lot of men, do whatever they've wanted to me or with me."

"You couldn't have stopped them."

"You could have."

"I'm not you. What I could have or would have done isn't what you should have done. It doesn't matter." The second half of the contents of the glass disappeared and again the glass clicked against the table a sharp counterpoint.

"I'm not proud of myself." Alex admitted.

"Neither am I."

Alex stepped away from the door, moving a few feet closer to Tom. "I worry a great deal about what will become of me. Can I lie enough, long enough, to convince someone to wed me? What happens when he wants children? Or if he finds out? Even if my uncle is a kind man, how long will his kindness last when faced with the prospect of supporting me? What kind of work can I do? I don't know how to support myself, I was raised to be a good wife. The only outcome I can see for myself is returning to being a whore."

"Is that what you want?" The deep, soft voice asked.

"No." He answered without having to think about it. "But at least I'd be able to take care of myself, make my own way of things. My options are limited."

"I'm uncomfortable around you." The confession slipped out.

A few more paces were crossed between them. "In what way?"

"In most ways. I," the glass was refilled in the pause. "I don't like it when you try to be what you think I want you to be."

"Okay, I won't do that anyone."

"When you're not trying to please, it makes me uncomfortable because," he sighed again. "Because I like it too much."

The confession made Alex smile, the setting sun hitting his hair and causing the strands to glow gold.

"You're too much for me, Alex."

The smile disappeared. "Too much?"

"Too clever, too good at hitting my nerves, too desirable, too beautiful, too alive, too brave, too bright, too strong."

That made him laugh softly. "I'll take credit for the too good at hitting your nerves, I'm annoying that way, but I'm not brave or strong."

"You get up everyday and do what you have to do make it to the next day and you do it unafraid of who you are. I'm far older than you and I've not yet learned how to do that."

"For a smart man you're an absolute moron." Alex shook his head. "I'm frightened everyday."

"The worst of it is when I see you looking so stunning I can't help desiring you. I'm not comfortable with that on so many levels but I've never been drawn by women, even very beautiful ones. It's not the girl you pretend to be that I want."

Alex shivered at the dark hunger, the hidden pain in the soft voice. The confession was so close to his own musings, his own fears and regrets. The angle of the sun shifted and Tom's legs were

glowing in a sunbeam. Unbidden, Alex stepped closer, standing mere feet from the seated man, still unable to make out his face in the shadows he sat in. Very deliberately, he stripped off his camisole, the air in the room felt cool against the bare skin of his chest. Nimble fingers worked the ties of his petticoat and the fabric fell, pooled around his feet.

"Alex." Tom's breath hissed out but the man in the chair didn't move.

Carefully, Alex stepped from the fabric, toeing it aside. He reached behind him and pulled the tie from his hair and shook the curls out. Then he was nude, his skin lit up and glowing from the setting sun but it was the hidden eyes that made him burn.

"This is who I am." His voice was a whisper and he tried to read a reaction desperately from the other man. "I play a lot of games but this is what I am. I can be cruel and mean and say horrible things because I'd rather hurt you or be hurt by you than have you look at me with such cold emptiness. I won't stop doing that. It's who I am."

"Is it just me because I happened across you?"

"I, well," He drew a slow breath. "Those first days, yes. But you aren't like anyone I've ever met before. I should be looking to keep my options open but, I'm not. I like who I am around you." One of his hands snaked across his bare chest, the first move he'd made since baring himself to Tom's eyes. "I like the feel of your eyes on me."

Eyes that Tom had to shut but the image of the bare young man danced behind his eyelids. He wasn't as hard as he could be but his arousal was a distracting ache between his legs. "Alex, please, redress."

"Why?" He smiled softly and tilted his head to the side. "It's just you here to see."

"Please."

"Why?"

"Because, you're too young." There was no point denying his attraction or his desires and while he wasn't willing to voice them he could no longer hide them from the boy.

"Tom," Alex crossed the last few steps and stood, nude, at the edge of Tom's knees. "I've had more lovers, more men, in two years than you've probably had in your life. I never knew my father, I buried my mother, I survived my minister raping me. I'm not a child. I am not too young. I know who I am, what I am, what I like and don't like. I know the consequences of my actions." He reached out and gathered up the hand that had been lifting and lowering the glass. It felt weakened, uncertain, in his grasp, the flesh felt too warm as he settled the hand along the cool skin of his hip.

The sun's angle deepened, grew sharp and jagged and for the first time Alex could see Tom's eyes. "Tom? Please, touch me."

"You're too young, I'm too old." Tom forced out but his other hand found its way to the other side of Alex's hip. Neither hand was willing to move from where the tips of his fingers sat, brushing against the cool, naked skin.

"Please, I promise, I won't do anything without your permission, just please, please touch me."

"It's not right." But his hands flattened out on the still too thin hip and the touch of his palm stirred the languid sex.

Alex sighed as the hands slid up to his waist with a will of their own. The touch burned a trail

across his body and tingled his nerves with teasing fire. As Tom slid forward in his chair, his hands tracing up to tease higher, Alex felt lithe instead of weak, worshiped instead of disdained. The touch made him feel like some silvery god that had risen from the wide, powerful river they were sailing on instead of something small and mortal.

Fingertips teased the divot of his navel and Alex let his head loll back. The tips of the curls brushed against the small of his back, tickling him. Callused hands slid across the flat of his stomach, mapping his contours with a touch far gentler than he'd known. Swooping strokes followed the edges of his ribs, back to his spine and in slow, muted torment down to the top curve of his ass.

When the hands slid forward once more over hipbones, Alex whimpered. Denied the touches he wanted, hungry for more of the torture he was enduring from the soft exploration, he let his eyes drift shut. The sun sank lower, filling the room with a soft glow and hazy shadows. The ragged gasps of Tom's breath was a chisel breaking into the foggy realm of desire Alex was wrapped in.

Up once more the hands traveled, stretching higher. Over the joint where rib joined to rib and higher still. Rough, strong hands slid with a feather soft touch across already hard and aching nipples. The contact was so expected, so sudden, that Alex cried out and stumbled. His knees grew weak, his cock throbbed in hungry need. His flesh absorbed the heat that bled from the teasing hands. Thumbs rolled over the pebbled nerves, scraping with a more desperate touch but still just as gentle. Both men moaned and Alex grew light headed. As the hands continued to tease him, sliding over the sides of his ribs, scrapping across hypersensitive nipples, he lost his balance on weakened legs and stumbled.

Only he didn't fall. The hands easily slid under his arms and the strength in them carefully lowered the younger man down. Eased him like he was made of some rare and fragile china down to straddle Tom's knees, perched on the edge of the man's legs. The hands steadying him, holding him around his waist, balancing him.

Tom's lips were against his own, they appeared with a demanding touch but a gentle kiss. The hands slid upward again, tracing over shoulders and neck, burying themselves deeply into the cascading curls. Alex parted his lips at the gentle kiss' silent request. Tom proved far more skilled at kissing than Alex had been prepared for, tasting of sharp liquor and hungry want. His body melted into limp need and hard desire. He sighed out a moan into Tom's mouth and the older man consumed it.

There was such strength, such control in the doctor. It raced shivers across Alex's skin knowing that the hands so lightly teasing his flesh could wreck such violence. It aroused him to know just how much power was held in tender check for his pleasure. A mere look from his guarded, cold eyes was enough to arouse him, a brush of a touch set his body ablaze.

Lips pulled from his own to trace his jaw line, his face, his cheekbones. Soft kisses rained down on his eyes and the bridge of his nose and Alex let hands that could crush him support his head in a tender grasp. Down the kisses fell, seeking out sensitive spots on neck and ears. Lips and touch sought out gasps and moans, reflecting deeper echoes from the doctor's throat.

Those wicked hands moved quickly to scoop Alex up, the bare skin of his ass slid along Tom's cloth covered knees. Before he had time to react or even to worry or wonder about what was happening, Tom cradled him safely and slid him onto the seat of the chair. Tom knelt on the rug in front of him and those strong hands slid across the length of his legs. Higher past knees across sensitive thighs and Alex's legs fell apart, begging for further contact. He bit his lip to hush the words that wanted to pour out, frightened that a single intelligent sound would break the spell or wake him from what had to be another dream.

Wide hands palmed his aching length and he knew it wasn't a dream. "Oh! Oh God, please!" Alex begged, nearly arching off the chair in his need for contact. Had he shut his eyes? Had he

gone blind? All was darkness now and it took his lust clouded mind too long to understand that the last of the sun had been swallowed by the night.

In the dark a thumb slid over the head of his cock, fingertips danced along his shaft. A hand slipped lower and weighed the hot velvet of his balls, reaching out to caress the hypersensitive skin of the most upper of his thighs, sliding across the joint where leg joined pelvis. Out the hands explored, sliding under his hips to cup his ass. Fingers dug in roughly and it pulled a shuddering moan out loudly in the darkness of the new night. Up the hands lifted, raising his hips as easily as if he were a doll and down they lowered.

Alex sat on the very edge of the chair. His head lolled, weak and useless, on the back, leaving his spine to arch in unsupported desire, a bridge between hip and head. Hands slid across his thighs, spreading his legs wider. In the dark he heard the rustle of fabric after one hand disappeared from his flesh. He knew Tom was loosening his pants, allowing his own aching length to tumble free. He knew what was going to happen next, it would be so easy to slid into him like this. In his mind he anticipated it, the sharp pain from too little preparation and lubrication, the burning pleasure of all those delightful spots being touched so deeply. He could imagine the sound of Tom's body joining into his and he shivered with contained need.

Tom moved in the darkness and Alex relaxed, waiting. The hands returned but they didn't spread his ass apart to allow Tom to pierce him, instead they slid across his hips to rest on his waist. He had a moment of confusion before the tip of Tom's tongue explained. He arched up to the touch so violently that Tom actually chuckled. The sound in the dark of the night was almost as delicious as the sensation. Alex was breathless and gasped for air.

"Sensitive aren't you?" Tom whispered out.

The voice was better than the hands touching him. Alex struggled for words as the tongue returned and traced up his length to circle the head again. The words he found fled and he had to grope after them.

"No one's ever, oh by all that's holy!" He teetered on the brink of climax as suddenly the hot mouth was swallowing him whole. His hand snapped out and slid against Tom's head, grasping the dark brown hair.

The mouth retreated and left Alex feeling very alone and abandoned. The hand still on his stomach fluttered in a gentle stroke, Alex had a pretty good idea where Tom's other hand was at.

"No one's ever done this for you?"

Alex shook his head. "No, I, it's always been my job. Most men haven't worried about anything beyond their own pleasure." The breath was burning in his lungs now, his body was damp with sweat, cooling in the chilly night.

"And you, do you find pleasure in doing this?" A tongue returned to tease briefly. "When you are the one on your knees like I am?"

The dirty image of Tom on his knees, sucking at his throbbing cock, made him whimper. He almost begged for a lamp to be lit so he could see such a sight. "Me?" He forced out, trying to think. "Yes, I enjoy it."

"What is it you enjoy about it?" Tom whispered out, laying soft, brushing kisses against the delicious flesh by his face, letting his breath tickle out.

"I," it was so difficult to think. "The feel, the taste, I get, oh god, I get hard knowing it was me that, me that,"

Tom chuckled again. "That you did this to someone?"

"Yes, oh yes!" Alex's hips snapped forward as Tom swallowed him again. "They said it was because I was a whore, that, oh my, that only a whore would enjoy it. Oh, please, please don't stop."

"Those men were fools, there's little better than kissing a lover this way." Tom muttered before deepening his teasing torments.

Alex writhed. The hand grasping Tom's hair pulled roughly. Every moan from Tom forced an answering one from Alex. The stroking motion of Tom's hand on his own length brushed against one bare leg, teasing him with what he was missing. There was nothing he could do, he was lost, drowning in desire.

He wanted to warn Tom, he really did but there was no chance. Tom's body shifted, stiffened, thrusting in the dark. The hushed, muffled groans of his own release, the feel of a splash of hot, thick fluid that spilled onto Alex's leg, it was too much. In the darkness spots of white and red exploded before his eyes, he pushed his hips upward, arched his back and cried out in a long, whimpering voice.

He'd been in Tom's place countless times but never here. Never sitting, drained and empty, his limbs limp and weak. He could feel Tom swallowing, feel the muscles of his throat milking his climax for more. The touch of the skilled tongue became a torture that drew out his orgasm to a painful length.

Slowly, his breath stopped burning in his lungs and he felt the weight of Tom's head pillowed on his thigh. It was such a gentle, loving gesture that Alex found he'd been stroking the shorter brown hair without thinking about it. "Tom?"

"Don't speak." The deep voice whispered back. "Just for a moment."

Alex nodded, which went unseen in the night and slumped into his chair. Tom stayed pressed against his legs, curled up along his knee, pillowed on his thigh and it felt perfect. As the night air began to chill Alex down enough that he was starting to grow cold, Tom finally moved. It wasn't until the warm press of the doctor's body was gone that Alex fully understood how much he missed it.

A match struck in the darkness, filling the room with the scent of sharp sulfur and casting a tiny glow. Tom pressed the flame against the lamp and lit it, turning to burn low and soft. The sight of the boy, still sprawled limply in the chair, made him smile softly. The blonde curls were everywhere, curving along ribs and shoulders in an untidy mess. The long lean legs were still parted wide in unspoken invitation and Tom wasn't so drunk as to be able to forget such a sight in the morning.

He distracted himself by gathering up the discarded clothing. Draping camisole, petticoat and hair tie over one arm and moving to stand over the half slumbering boy. One hand reached out and brushed the smooth face gently.

"Alex?"

"Hmmm?" He sighed in reply.

It put a warm feeling in Tom's ribs, something soft and content that wormed itself inside. "You can't stay out here like this." He bent down and scooped up the willing body, surprised again by how little the other weighed and how right he felt in his arms.

He carried the boy into his bedroom, the scene of the brutal fight of only a few hours earlier, and laid the pale form on the top coverlet of his bed. Careful not to snag the delicate fabrics, Tom

laid the boy's discarded clothes beside him and glanced up to see sleepy, heavy lidded brown eyes watching him.

"Get some rest, we'll discuss this in the morning." Tom whispered out and bent down to place a quick and very chaste kiss on the other's forehead.

Alex said not a word as Tom spoke, or when he kissed him, but inside he was laughing. Lost in contentment and pleasure, drowning in warm safety, he found the very professional, even cold, promise to speak in the morning amusing. How very Tom like it was, how proper. As sleep pulled Alex down, he had a final moment to wonder if Tom was considering offering him a contract of mutual blow jobs. A contract that he'd happily accept.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Sixteen

In the sitting room Tom stood with his back pressed to Alex's door and his eyes focused on the single burning lamp. Slowly, sense returned and he pried his hand from where it was covering his face and the shocked, slightly horrified expression he knew had to be on it. The sight of Alex, naked and glowing in the setting sun, had simply been too much. Not even all the saints could have refused, no mortal could have been strong enough to refuse but that was cold comfort.

There was right and there was wrong and that was all life was. What he'd done was wrong, on many levels. He tried to press that thought into his mind but all he could feel was the smooth skin under his hands. In his ears the sounds of Alex moaning and begging drowned out the simplicity of right and wrong. The taste of Alex still sharp on his tongue overcame any protesting words of morality.

The world for Tom was always so clear cut. Black and white, right and wrong, that was how he'd defined everything but Alex cut that to shreds. He tore up the ordered lines Tom had split his life into, made festive confetti and then gleefully tossed it to the winds. It didn't take much for him to know he was out of his depth and to know who could help him see the shades of grey that swirled around him.

He made it to James' room door without having to stop and talk to anyone, which was good. In the state he was in he was likely to reply to such simple questions about the weather or their traveling with a bold announcement that he'd just blown the boy that was pretending to be a girl that was pretending to be his god daughter. He'd learned he had a nasty habit of answering simple questions with the least appropriate response when he was severely confused or upset. The only way to avoid the risk was to shut up and not say anything and on the riverboat, that would have been just as odd.

"Go away, I've retired for the night!" James snapped out once Tom knocked but there was no sleep in the man's voice, just annoyance.

"God's sake, James, it's me!" Tom barked back.

There was a moment but the door cracked open. "Tom? I'm in the middle of something, can this wait until morning?"

"Not really." He pushed on the door and James let him slip inside.

"Are you drunk?" James asked lightly, oblivious to the state of his room.

Tom paused inside the door and quickly shut it tightly behind him. James had a single room but it was still a nice, well decorated and good sized space. The bed was large enough for one, snug for two and pressed against the wall. A pair of chairs were clustered near a small table and off to the side a desk sat alone.

Only, the desk had been cleared and draped across it was a naked woman. Her ankles were tied to the legs of the desks and James had managed to fasten her hands together and to the opposite side. Her dark hair spilled down and pooled on either side of her back. She turned her head at the sound of the door and her large dark eyes grew wider and she muttered protests behind the cloth gagging her mouth.

It was a pretty sight. The dark of her hair against the creamy paleness of her skin. The cloth ropes were in brutal contrast to the fluidity of her graceful form. Even the lines of her body made a perfect contrast, all rounded curves, soft wide hips, pressed over the squared angles of the wood of the desk.

It was equally obvious that Tom had arrived well into their play. The woman's bare bottom was reddened from a though spanking. Other twisted cloth lengths were attached to the bed frame and tossed in discarded sections about the room. From the spread of her legs nothing was hidden and the slight, glistening trail on her thighs confessed that James had already taken her at least once.

"Always the artist." Tom muttered out.

The gagged woman muttered more intently and tugged at her bonds.

"Shhh, dear, it's okay, Dr. Lambry is trustworthy." James made no move to sooth the woman beyond words and he stayed standing, annoyed and still aroused, between his two guests.

The words seemed to comfort her a little.

Tom tilted his head to the side to take in the woman better. "Isn't she the maid for my suite?" That set her off again.

James laughed. "Really, dear, hush, he won't gossip." He smiled as he locked eyes with her and winked. "Who do you think it was that taught me how to spank your pretty bottom so well? You've Dr. Lambry to thank for that."

Her eyes widened again but it wasn't in fear for her job or of discovery. Her gagged muffles echoed out again.

"No, dear, I doubt Tom would care to join us. He's far more reserved these days." He finished staring at Tom and almost making his friend blush.

"Once, I took you over my knee, once." Tom offered in defense.

"And set me down an entirely new pathway of discovery. Now, Tom, please, I do have my hands occupied at the moment. What is it?"

"Send her away."

James slid close to Tom, slipped into his personal space. "Why? Will you play with me tonight if I do?"

"Send her away, James. You've had her how many times already tonight?"

James only shrugged. "I want more."

"Please."

It was the please and the lack of icy coldness in Tom's eyes that convinced him it wasn't a toying game. "Alright." As he agreed the maid tied to his desk protested again. James skillfully untied her and pulled the gag from her mouth.

"You promised all night!" She snapped out.

"Well, I lied. Now dress and leave."

"Master, sir, please!" She whined.

"Dress, now, or I will toss you naked into the hallway and keep your clothes."

She shivered in lust at the threat but moved to dress.

"Such a slutty dear." James confessed to Tom but spoke for the woman's benefit. "I've taken her twice already and still she wants more. She's climaxed five, six times, I don't know I stop counting at five. A real treasure to find on my tedious travels."

The woman was nearly fully dressed and she paused in front of James, eyes lowered.

"Tomorrow?"

"If I find it pleases me, now get out."

Her eyes were glowing. "Yes, sir." She shot Tom a hard, jealous look as she slipped out.

"You never cease to amaze me, James."

The darker man shrugged, shook a cigarette out of his case and lit it. "I keep myself amused." He sucked a long drag from it and studied his friend, still hovering near the door. "I'd offer you a drink but I think you may have had enough. What's happened?"

Tom moved and poured a drink more to spite James' thought that he shouldn't than because he wanted one. He lowered himself into one of the chairs, the one further from the desk, and shook his head. "James, I,"

"Hey, hey now, dearest, what's wrong?" The confusion in the normally steady grey eyes worried him.

"It's Alex."

There was such remorse, such dread and confusion, in those two spoken words that James felt fear settle upon him. He'd never known Tom to act with violence without cause but he'd changed so much, there was a chilled moment of fear that maybe Alex had pushed too hard and Tom had done the unforgivable.

"What about him?" James managed to ask with none of his worries in his voice, with none of the fear of blonde curls and blood.

"James, I," Tom stopped and knocked back a long swallow of the liquor he'd poured.

"Tom?"

"He was naked, glowing in the sunset and he was so," Tom sighed and shook his head. "I touched him, kissed him, James, I sucked his cock into my mouth without asking if it was okay and I didn't, I couldn't, stop."

The relief was crushing and James sighed out a smoky breath. He sat heavily on the bed. "You blew him?"

Tom nodded.

"Did he protest? Scream, no, Tom, no, don't!"

"Well, not really."

He laughed now and drew another drag from his cigarette. "Lucky boy, I know how skilled you are with such matters."

"James, this isn't funny!"

He forced his amusement down to a small smirk. "I'm sorry Tom. My I assume you've let go of this nonsense about never touching a man again?"

"I don't know, I," Tom finished in a sigh.

"Well, look at it this way, did the boat sink because you enjoyed it? Did the world end because for a moment you weren't filled with anger and angst? Really, Tom, do you believe God to be so petty that he cares who we fuck? It's a morality law made by little, sad, petty men. All their attempts at shaming men like us to conform to their narrow little mold of sexual mores for how many thousands of years hasn't worked because what we are is just as good as what they are." He'd shut off the teasing tone and kept his serious eyes locked on his friend.

"You've thought about this a lot?"

James drew another angry draw and blew the smoke out. "Of course I have, did you really think it was as simple and easy for me as I pretend? For all my father's casualness with etiquette he'd be horrified to know what I prefer. Even the pretty little thing tied to my desk would have shook the foundations of his beliefs, in some ways I'm far worse than you because I walk both sides of the road." He shook his head. "I would be just as disowned and cast out as you the only difference is I refuse to let their ideas of how the world is effect how the world actually is."

"Is it really that easy?"

That made James smile again and he rose to his feet and crossed to where Tom sat. He offered the last few drags of the cigarette to Tom. "Nothing is ever easy, love." He watched as his friend took the smoke and pulled a long breath of it into his mouth, enjoying watching something so simple that Tom made so sexy. "Life is too short and holds too much pain without us adding more to it." He slid into Tom's lap, facing him. "All we can do is try to be the best people we can be, find as much pleasure as we can and not add to the misery around us. Sam's death wasn't because of what you two shared, it was just a shitty happenstance."

Tom sucked the last drag from the cigarette and watched the open emotion on his friend's face. "He used to always say he would die young and violently. I hated it when he'd talk like that. Sam used to go on when he was depressed or drunk about how he should have died during the war. I can't do that again, James, I can't."

He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss the tight, almost frowning, lips. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but you're going to. I'll die one day and they way I live it'll be well before your careful ass. You're going to loose your parents too and God willing your nasty older brothers go before you. You

can't hold on to the people you love, all you can do is love them while you have them. No amount of denial is going to change that." He brushed hair back from the unhappy face. "So will you push me away, push them away, to avoid being hurt that badly again?"

"I can't."

"What about Alex? Will you push away what pleasure, what happiness, you may find with him?"

"I can't." He shut his eyes. "God, help me, I can't."

He smiled wider now, pleased at having won. In truth, he could talk Tom into anything and could have held this conversation days ago but it was Tom that needed the time to ease into things.

"So, now that we've established that you prefer to fuck me instead of that maid, pretty as she is, and that it's only closed minded men that object and not some grand biblical wrong and we've established that you gain nothing by holding people from your heart because you're going to lose them anyway, why are you so upset about Alex?"

James made it sound so simple. "He's too young, he's been through too much. The last thing he needs is another old man chasing him."

There were words hanging there that Tom didn't speak but James could see them being held back. "And?"

"And, as soon as we find his uncle, he's leaving. I, it isn't easy for me to get used to people, especially ones that I'll never see again."

That was a more real fear than the first two, at least to James' thinking and he nodded seriously. "There are never any promises. You could say something rude to me the next time you open your mouth and we could never speak again."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not, it could happen."

"It's unlikely."

"True but it could happen. All we can do is enjoy the time we have and with Alex if that's until you reach Texas so be it. Don't borrow trouble, life brings enough of it's own. Besides, his uncle's more than likely to lose his mind when he finds out his niece isn't a girl. What will you do with Alex then?"

"Boarding school."

That made James laughed. "Yes, like the moral strong holds we attended, brilliant idea."

"He should be in school."

"Tom, he's living as a girl. What? Do you expect him to attend university? Find a career path and support himself? Do you send him to a girl's university? Marry him off?"

"I don't know!" Tom snapped back. "I'm trying to do what's right!"

"Shhh," He soothed a hand over the angry face. "All I'm saying is this is complicated and there aren't easy answers. What's right is not worrying about it for now and figuring things out as you go. Until that time, Alex isn't going anywhere. It's not just because of money, he likes you. Quite a lot too if I'm reading him properly."

"You think so?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're still an idiot. Yes, I even offered him my support and he turned me down to stay near you."

"James,"

"Hush, it wasn't serious, he's too pretty for me. I like my men stronger, rougher, more like you." That drew a slight blush to the stubborn face across from his own and made him laugh. "Now, have we resolved that you shouldn't worry about his uncle until you find him?"

Tom just shrugged.

"I'll take that as a yes. Now, we're left with your more vocal protests. He's too young and been through too much. Do you think you can say no to him again?"

"I think so."

"Even if he's naked again, sliding into your bed late at night? Will you push him out?" He'd actually been considering suggesting such a thing to Alex because he knew how responsive Tom was when he was hovering between sleep and wakefulness.

The thought made Tom shiver.

"I didn't think so. You've tasted him, touched him, there's no going back from that."

"He should have the option to not be sexually active. Everyone should have that option and he had it taken from him." Tom forced out and couldn't seem to understand the sick feeling it put in his stomach.

James saw the hurt behind his friend's eyes and he understood. "Because you didn't have that option when you were his age." He should have punched the most respectable Dean Gordan.

"This isn't about me."

"Of course not." James shifted his weight, sliding further into Tom's lap. "So what would make you feel better about his age and history?"

"I don't know, he should have time where he doesn't have to whore himself to be safe."

"Okay, so say a year? Two?"

"He'll be eighteen in two years."

"A very mature age. What if you have his uncle's permission?"

"What?"

"Please, how many babies have you delivered to thirteen year old girls? How many second or third children have you delivered to sixteen year olds?"

"Too many."

"The man that fathered those children had the blessings of her closest relations. If you had his uncle's permission, would it make you feel better?"

The thought hit like a board to the head. He'd been thinking of Alex so much as a boy that he

forgot he was living by the rules placed on women. "Assuming he'd still want me? That he'd not want to stay with his uncle?" Tom wasn't sure if James was suggesting marriage or just a passing of guardianship but both ideas were ones he'd never think of without James' influence.

"Yes."

He nodded. "It would make things better, yes."

"Okay, so now we've established that you want him to have time away from sexual intercourse for at least a year or two or until you've formal permission to fuck him from his uncle. What's left?"

"God, you're such a lawyer, you could talk the devil back into heaven."

That made James smile. "Only on an appeal, that is why you came to see me tonight, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Good, so what's allowable? Kissing?"

"I don't think I could stop him."

"On the cheek? The lips? What about on the neck?" He accented each body part by kissing Tom.

"Okay."

"What about lower?" He ran his hands down Tom's chest. "Are you allowing all forms of kissing? His chest? Nipples? Cock?"

The memory of Alex's cock in his mouth, the feel of the boy's desire on his tongue, made Tom moan again. "I don't know."

"Will you be strong enough to refuse him?"

"No." He whispered out.

"So, it should be allowed, because if you don't allow some release the two of you will be fucking before the requirements are met."

"That's," he had to swallow hard as James nipped his ear. "That sounds logical."

"Is he allowed to kiss you?"

The idea made him push his hips forward into James'.

"I'll take that as a yes." James chuckled. "And touch? Will you touch him, will he touch you?" He pressed his hand against the hard ache in Tom's pants.

"Yes." Came the hissed reply.

"So, what you're saying, is anything up to but not including you putting your cock in his ass or his cock in your ass, you're okay with?"

It was so difficult to think with James teasing him. "I want him to have time without intercourse." He tried to retreat into the clinical doctor side of his mind and found it gone.

"That's a yes as well, I'll assume. That leaves a great deal of pleasurable things the two of you could share. Should I remind you?"

"Tease."

James arched his hips forward, sliding his erection tight into Tom's. "No, that's what you're turning Alex into. I'm not a tease because I know one of us is going to get well and thoroughly fucked before dawn. Or do you have objections to that?"

Tom closed his eyes and shook his head, silently agreeing to anything James wanted.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Seventeen

Relaxed, happy and content, Alex slept like the dead. The emotional swings of his uncle not waiting in Memphis topped with his spat with Tom and their rather delightful making up had left him exhausted. He felt he could have slept for days and was surprised to wake up several hours after dawn. Still naked, under the covers, he stretched and yawned. It was starting to get easy waking up this way, slowly, safe, in a warm bed. Luxuries he had forgotten about and ones he was happily discovering.

He sighed and dropped his head back on the pillow. "I am so much more a creature of comfort." The words hung in the empty room and he smiled in hazy happiness.

As he rose from the warm layers of blankets into the cool morning air some truths had to be faced. The water he washed up in was far too cold for his comfort but his uncle had moved to Texas. Tom hadn't abandoned him in Memphis like he should have. Alex hadn't been forced to choose between the uncertain safety of his uncle's care and the uncertain safety of Tom's. If both became certain safe havens, which would he choose? The fact was that Tom had no obligations to him and might not want him around once his uncle was located. That was a fact as cold as the wash water.

He combed out the rat tangles from his hair and quickly braided it into a simple plait. There was no promise with Tom, the man was tolerant of him but that wasn't security. As Alex sat in front of the small mirror, he knew he could make Tom keep him. There were words, actions, he could do to endear himself to the older doctor so that when the time came he could stay with Tom if he wished. The stern, stalwart man had cracked last night and it gave Alex a foothold, one he would have exploited horribly if Tom had been any other man.

Tom wasn't other men. Alex couldn't simply manipulate him for his own needs and ends without feeling lower than slime. If he twisted Tom around, yes, he'd be safe and secure for as long as he wanted but eventually Alex knew he'd move on, to his uncle's house or someone else's side and the idea of hurting Tom actually caused him pain. Tom wasn't other men, he was noble, honorable, gentle, sweet, short tempered, exasperating, frustrating, and Alex sighed.

The coldest fact of all that he had to accept that morning was that while he may not be in love with the dear Dr. Lambry, he certainly was smitten. That made everything more complicated.

Tom was too hung over to eat but he happily sipped at the coffee the maid brought with the breakfast tray. She'd blushed a soft red but neither made any mention of the night before. Not that Tom could blame her, James had a way of finding the one person in a crowd who was both deviant and horny. He didn't want to think about what that said about him.

He'd stayed with James until close to dawn when he'd slipped from the lawyer's grasp to dress

and return to his rooms. He had no idea how James did it, there was no difference in the man's libido no matter how much time had passed. He made Tom forget that he wasn't eighteen anymore and now, in addition to the hang over, his whole body was aching from their play. Well, maybe not his whole body but definitely important areas, people just didn't bend into some of those positions on a day to day basis.

The second cup of black coffee was settling nicely into his stomach and he was three pages into the Memphis morning paper when Alex's bedroom door opened. The blond slid into the room, dressed, hair braided back but barefooted, wearing a small, easy smile.

"Good morning."

Tom was stunned again by the boy's beauty, how easily he floated into a room, how simply he captured attention. "Morning. Sleep well?" The sudden memory of kneeling between those slender, shapely legs, licking the hard length between them, hit Tom. Apparently he hadn't drunk enough to blunt, let alone forget, that memory.

Alex nodded quickly and slid into the chair opposite Tom. "Quite, I didn't know I was that tired. You?" He poured out his own coffee and plated several slices of toast and some eggs. Another luxury he could get used to, food, plenty of it and not having to ask permission to eat it.

He thought about how he'd slumbered lightly wrapped in James' arms, a feeling he hadn't know he'd missed so badly since Sam died. "Well enough."

"You're not eating?" He said between mouthfuls of food.

Tom's stomach rolled over. "No."

"Hung over?"

"A little."

"I know a good remedy!"

"So do I, it's called getting drunk again."

That made Alex chuckle and shake his head. "Never mind."

Tom folded the paper up and watched another slice of jelly soaked bread disappear into the boy's mouth. For as dainty and ladylike as he acted at dinner around other people, Alex still ate like a hungry, growing, boy when alone. It drew the smallest of smiles to his lips.

"Look, Alex, we need to talk about last night."

"Must we? I mean, it was so wonderful, I don't want to ruin it with a fight."

"What makes you think we're going to fight?"

He set the toast down and cocked his head to the side to see if Tom was seriously asking or just being annoying. It felt better to land on the side of serious so he answered. "Well, you're going to go on about how wrong it is, I'll get angry and say it was perfect, you'll tell me something stupid like I'm too young or worse that men shouldn't do that sort of thing and I'll get really angry. Most likely, I'll tell you what an idiot you are for saying that, you'll shout something back about me being too young to know better. I'm sure it'll end in doors being slammed. Why ruin such a delightful night with such a stupid morning?"

"Without fighting about it, may we discuss it?"

"Are you going to attempt to dismiss me for my age or preferences?" He raised an eyebrow.

"No."

"Alright, we may discuss it."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You're insufferable."

"That would mean more if you weren't smiling."

Tom ran a hand over his face to hide the wider grin that comment pulled from him. "Seriously, Alex, about last night."

"What about it?"

"We need to establish some things." This was so much more difficult with Alex sitting across from him. In his mind, the rehearsed conversations had gone smoothly, easily.

"Okay."

His head ached too much to deal with this. "Last night, I," his words died as Alex licked jelly from his lips. That wasn't helping and he knew the boy was doing it strictly to unnerve him. "Look, I've admitted you were right about things."

"Things? Which things?"

"I am afraid of being hurt again. I'm not, I've never been, comfortable with what I desire. This isn't easy for me so would you stop that!" He snapped.

Alex pulled the jelly sticky finger from his mouth. "Sorry." He said but the words held little remorse.

Tom sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I've always tried to do the right things."

"From what I've seen, you're a very honorable man."

"I can't change the fact that I desire you."

The confession made a warm, hazy feeling settle with the coffee and toast in Alex's stomach.

"However, it still isn't proper."

"Hang what's proper!"

"Alex,"

"Sorry."

"Are you very mature for your age, yes, you are. I will grant you that."

"Thanks."

"However, everyone should have the chance to step back from their circumstances and choose what they do and do not want." He scanned the clever face to see if any of his meaning was

sinking in. "Alex, you deserve that right. I know you've had little choice over matters of the bedroom."

He set his coffee cup down. "Now you leave that alone, Thomas Lambry! Just because I've been in a bad spot a time or two doesn't mean I'm ignorant of what I desire or want. Don't you dare suggest otherwise!"

"Shut up! I'm not going to fight with you!" Tom roared over the boy's protests. "For once attempt to hear me out!"

That settled him down, with only the smallest of pouts. "Okay."

"God, you're so annoying! You get me so angry, frustrate me beyond the point of tolerance! You've become an itch between my shoulder blades that I can't reach to scratch!" Tom sighed as the boy's expression fell. "For as aggravating as being around you can be, I find it difficult to think of life without it. I'm getting used to your irritation. And with that, I'd be a liar and a fool to be unmoved by how stunning you are. You're a beautiful young man, inside and out and I'm an old fool."

"Tom,"

He gave the younger a harsh look and the blonde settled down with a grin. "Let me say my piece before you start. We're going to Baton Rouge, we'll stay there a week or so and then head to Texas to try to find your uncle. Once there, you need to tell him the truth. Lying isn't going to do any good, not at all." He held up his hand to stall the protests. "You don't have to do it after hello but you'll need to tell him. When he knows the truth you'll know whether or not you can stay with him."

"And if I can't?"

Tom shook his head. "We'll figure something out. I'm not going to abandon you, do you believe that?"

Alex nodded and blinked back tears.

"That said, you've put me in an uncomfortable situation. I wish my concern for you was strictly platonic but it's not." He held his hand up at the smirk that danced on the other's face. "Don't." Tom waited until the blonde had gained some control. "We both know that it isn't. I can't change the fact that I feel like a lecher around you or that I do believe you should have a chance to start over. So, from this point on, whatever's happened since your mother died, doesn't count. You're getting a chance at a clean slate. I'm going to try to do what's honorable with you."

Alex wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. "How do you mean?"

"No sexual intercourse. I can't stop you from finding other men but I will not have any associations with you." He prayed he wouldn't blush, he hadn't blushed over sexual matters since he was Alex's age.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean." He thought he understood and hoped he was wrong.

"You and I, we aren't going to, I mean, we're not," he drew a breath. "We won't lay together."

Alex thought for a moment. "Was last night an example of laying together?"

"No." Tom muttered out.

The blonde's face lit up. "Oh! You just don't want to fuck. We can play but you won't fuck me and I won't fuck you, that's what you're saying."

Tom prayed he'd just drop over dead. "Crudely stated, but yes." He jumped, startled, as a slender bare foot nestled up his leg into his crotch. The flexible toes teased the half hard arousal Tom had hoped would go unnoticed.

"I think you enjoy my being crude."

He lifted the foot from his lap and set it on his knee, his fingers straying to the bare ankle. "Frustrating cuss."

Alex only laughed. "So for right now, you'll let me play with you but with that only limit?" The idea was making him hard, there was so many things he could do to the stuffy, distant man, things to break down the walls of his control.

"Yes. We'll reevaluate the situation when you turn eighteen or when I have your uncle's blessing."

"That's going to be a fun conversation." He dipped a finger into the jam on his forgotten toast and popped the digit into his mouth. His cheeks hollowed inward as he sucked on the jam and he locked his eyes on Tom's.

"Alex,"

The foot slipped back between Tom's legs and found things had grown considerably harder. Alex slipped his finger from his mouth and smiled. "I know a sure cure for a hang over."

"I'm sure you do but I'm really not interested this morning." He tried to sound like he meant it but he wasn't sure it came out as certain as he wanted.

The toes curled, the sole of the foot slid in teasing strokes. "Some part of you seems interested."

Tom pulled the foot from his groin and set it on the floor. "I want to finish my paper."

Alex nodded. "Fine." He pouted a little and went back to eating the jam straight from the glass container. It really wasn't fair to tell him they could play and then ignore him, it wasn't. Alex studied the back of the boring newspaper that blocked Tom from his view and continued to munch on his toast. James had said that Tom needed convincing about things, he wondered how far he could push the good doctor. An evil thought slipped into his brain and made itself at home.

The glass container of jam fit easily into his hand and Alex fit easily under the table. Silently, he had a perfect view of Tom's legs, parted now to make room for the obvious bulge between them. It made Alex smile, the man was interested he was just shy, he just needed encouraging. The jam was placed carefully aside and one slender hand reached out to press at the perfect point of contact.

Tom jumped, his paper rattled and he glanced down at the hand in his lap. It was skillfully stroking his cock through the fabric of his pants. The sight was startling, shocking, bold and made him instantly, painfully hard. Over the edge of the paper he saw the empty chair on the other side of the table and he bit back a moan.

"Alex, stop, I want to read the paper." He watched as the hand was joined by another and the pair began to pluck at the buttons, slowly opening his pants. His hands clenched into fists onto the paper, crushing it slightly.

"So? Read your paper, don't mind me." Alex purred from below the table.

That froze Tom's breath. He pulled his eyes up to the paper and struggled with what to do. He didn't really want to tell Alex to go away, or to bat the exploring hands aside, but saying he was

okay with a more physical relationship with the younger man was different than having Alex under the table.

He tried to focus on the stories before his eyes but they wavered when a slender hand slid along the bare length of his cock. Unbidden, his legs slid further apart but he didn't look down again, frightened he find and lock onto those wicked nut brown eyes set in the pretty face. The hand stroked him, slid along his shaft, down to the base and up to drag a palm over the head. It was a touch so different than James', so much warmer that he swallowed hard to crush the moan that wanted to escape.

"Any interesting news in your morning paper?" Alex asked softly, continuing to stroke Tom. He was pleased at the sight he had such a clear view of. Tom wasn't the largest man he'd seen but he was generous, a contented width in his hand and good length for him to fondle. The sight of the length made Alex happy, as well as very hard.

"No." Tom forced out but he couldn't even make out the text now.

The teasing hand slowed and just rested against the fevered flesh. "You're just as I imagined." Alex spoke softly, leaning to rest his shoulder against Tom's knee. "I knew you weren't tiny, you're too confident for that, too wonderful." He sighed softly and felt the leg shiver against him. "I knew you'd fit so well to my hand, perfect width, good length, lovely to look at." Tom moaned and leaned back in the chair.

"Oh? I'm sorry? Am I disturbing your morning paper?" Brown eyes peered up from under the edge of the table and were laughing in delight at the sight of the solid Dr. Lambry with his eyes clenched shut, struggling to speak. "Just ignore me, I promise not to bother you too terribly much."

He let a hand stray from it's teasing to dip his fingers into the glass of jam. Tom's breath caught raggedly as he dragged the jam sticky digits across the exposed flesh, leaving trails of dark fruit behind.

"What?" Tom managed to force out before the smell of sweet fruit rose to tickle his nose. "You didn't?" But he could see the sticky fingers sliding the jam on his body. As he watched, Alex sucked the fingers into his mouth and locked those tormenting eyes onto Tom's

The boy made happy slurping sounds as he sucked his fingers clean. "Hmmm, good jam, too bad I've made a mess of things. I know, don't move now and I'll clean it up."

"No." Tom whispered but it was too late. In the space between his lap and the edge of the table a blonde head appeared and a tongue swiped a stripe of jam from his cock. He found himself angling his hips so that Alex could reach him better and dropping the morning paper onto the table, not caring if it fell into food or drink.

Alex moaned softly as he licked at his sticky treat. It wasn't the berry flavor but the scent. Sweet and cloying, but under it was the strong scent of clean, healthy male, a scent that was strictly Tom. There was something in the combination of Tom and berry that made his head feel light. He sucked the head between his lips and teased it with his tongue.

A hand snaked into his hair, but it wasn't demanding or hurtful. The hand stroked through his curls, pulling the springy lengths free to be toyed with. He slid his head down, slowly taking as much of the length as he could into his mouth. Tom was shuddering now, shifting where he sat as he struggled to hold still, Alex bobbed his head slowly, teasing, trying to break that control.

He'd teased too much. The hand stroking his hair tightened, the hips jerked in shortened thrusts. Tom groaned out, sounding like a cornered and pained animal rather than a man lost in ecstasy. The hot bitter release splashed into Alex's mouth, mixing with the sweet berry and sliding in easy

swallows down his throat. He sucked and licked and swallowed as Tom whimpered and trembled, unmade by his actions.

Alex kept working the delicious flesh until he was certain Tom was done and clean. The length was slowly starting to soften and he knew to release it before the sensation went from pleasure to plain annoying. The hand in his hair twitched and then groped and tried to get a grip onto his shoulder. It was strong in its grasp, far more demanding than anything the doctor had done while he was aroused and it made Alex a little nervous.

He let the hand pull him up, slinking between spread legs, chair seat and edge of table, expecting to see upset anger in the cold eyes. Only, Tom still had his eyes shut, his forehead crinkled up. He tugged Alex into his lap and pulled the boy's lips to his own. It wasn't what he'd expected, the warm length of Tom's body pressed to his fevered, aroused one, his mouth plundered. Alex let his lips part and let the tongue savage his own. It was a hint at the passion, the fire, that Tom kept so securely locked away. It fed Alex's desire to break the man free of the chains he was wearing.

Tom released the mouth he'd been enjoying and opened his eyes. Alex sat across his legs, the fabric of his dress a scratchy touch to his still exposed, sensitive groin. The blonde's eyes were confused and Tom frowned a little.

"What're you thinking?" It wasn't the wicked, smug expression he'd expected.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Kiss me, right after."

Tom smiled, he'd been asked the same from other lovers. "I like the taste of me on your lips." He licked his own. "The berry's a nice touch."

The boy's eyes went wide and then squinted shut. A whispery moan slipped free and his hips slid hard into Tom's. It was a sudden and violent need driven from the lust that Tom's kink roused in him. It left little room to doubt his current condition. Tom leaned forward and kissed the tip of the boy's nose.

"Turn around, put your back to my chest." He whispered into an ear, drawing out another shiver and a nod.

Alex slithered off the lap he'd been straddling and back onto it as soon as Tom had tucked himself back into his pants. The curve of his ass was pressed into Tom's hips, his spine along the strong chest. Experience said to be uneasy, uncertain but he couldn't manage it, he melted into Tom and dropped his head on the wide shoulder.

"Put your legs on either side of mine and lift your skirts up." Tom wasn't sure how he was going to manage all that fabric, so he'd make Alex do it.

He didn't have to ask twice, the blonde sighed as he spread his legs wide, leaning tighter against Tom. It took both hands to gather the skirts up and hold them out of the way. Only they bunched up too thickly to allow Tom to see into the other's lap. He used feel, touching the slender right knee, feeling the knit of the black stockings. Next came the edge of the garters and the bottom edge of the bloomers, the flesh under the fabric shivered under his touch, the boy in his arms sighed and nuzzled his face against Tom's neck.

The cloth of the bloomers were smoother, softer, than he'd expected and his fingers trailed up across a spread thigh. Upwards they trailed to where the fabric split to expose skin softer than

any cloth. Alex gasped at the first touch of skin on skin and arched his back. His hips lifted, trying to pull Tom's hand further, it only made Tom slow down, tease a little more. It was only for show, he didn't want to wait, knowing the truth under Alex's skirts was a delicious honesty.

There was no cleft, no silken soft wetness of woman there at the joint of legs as Tom's hand found what he craved. He didn't tease in soft touches the way Alex had, he found the hard length and wrapped a hand tight around it. The weeping tip slid hot fluid over fingers and palm and Tom sighed at the sensation.

Just like everything else on the young man, his cock was long and graceful, lean and sleek. Tom's hand wrapped easily around it and one of his fears evaporated. It was one thing to be drunk and go too far, it was another to set the boy on his lap cold sober. Some part of Tom's mind had expected to feel like a dirty old man, a sick pedophile, using the younger man for his own pleasure. He'd been frightened that this moment would show to his too clinical mind that Alex was younger than he'd been told.

The velvet hardness in his hand wasn't that of a youth. The body that writhed against his, pressing in all the right ways, abandoned to pleasure, wasn't one of a child. Lithe, yes, slender, yes, but like a cat not a child and instead of making Tom feel sick it made him feel strong. The bones under the still too thin skin were delicate, fine, and it made Tom feel protective, painfully male and sheltering.

As he stroked the cock in his hand he felt able to take on anything, anyone. Alex made him feel that strong, that powerful. He was like some potion of courage poured directly into Tom's blood, something better than opium and just as addictive. This cat like creature was purring for his touch, writhing for his contact, moaning in unspoken begging words for release.

The scent of lavender and sex swirled around the pair. Alex's harsh, hyperventilating breaths coursed over Tom's skin. He wrapped around the slender waist to hold the blonde steady on his lap and felt the false nipping in of the corseted waist. It was no wonder the breaths sliding over his neck were growing short and desperate. The corset would limit a full breath under the best of situations. Tom started to worry the boy really would pass out and hurried things up, sliding his hand harder, faster, over the tormented length.

Alex groaned, shivering and clung to the edge by the narrowest of margins. He was almost desperate not to come, wanting the moment to last forever, wrapped safely in arms that made him feel so whole. Tom's lips fell to the side of his face, his hair, in soft kisses and when Alex still held on the deep voice carried him over the edge.

"I want to feel you, let go."

The words rumbled into his ear, teasing with hot breath and the scent of coffee. Alex arched tightly against the restraining hand, crying out sharply, and fell into the quicksand of release. It pulled him down and turned his vision black as his entire body thrashed and convulsed with the strength of the fall.

"Oh," Alex murmured, muttered, and sighed against Tom as he slowly came back down from such heights. "Oh my, remind me to have toast for breakfast more often."

That made Tom chuckle against the smooth, peachy skin. He reached out and snagged the napkin from the table and started cleaning them both up. When he was fairly sure he'd done a decent job he tugged the fabric of Alex's skirts back into place.

Alex sighed and snuggled closer to Tom's body. "Thank you." He accented the words with a quick kiss to the side of Tom's face.

"Don't thank me, I never do anything that's not selfish."

"Well," Alex sighed happily. "I like your version of selfish over everyone else's. How's the hang over?"

Tom shook his head but was glad the younger man couldn't see the smile on his face. "How do you stand all that fabric?" He picked at the layers of skirts.

"A body gets used to it." He wiggled a little in place. "If we stay like this I'll get ideas again."

The arm still around Alex's waist tightened for a moment and then released its hold. "You've plans today?"

"Mrs. Burtell is giving me some of her embroidery supplies. I'm to meet her this morning and take lunch with a few other ladies." He slid lightly from his spot on Tom's lap, smoothing out skirts as he went. "You?"

"I've been invited to sit in on a few games."

"Poker? I love poker!"

"You're supposed to be a respectable young lady."

Alex crinkled up his nose. "I know. I hadn't understood how much fun pretending to be a respectable young lady that's fallen and become a loose woman could be until I got to do it. I like drinking halls and gaming parlors. People are so easy to read." He turned and brushed some of the already in place dark hair out of place. "I bet you command at the poker table, you aren't so easy to read."

"Thanks, will you be okay today?" He smoothed the hair back into place.

"Better than okay." Alex smiled and with a saucy sway to his walk, disappeared back into his bedroom.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Eighteen

"That must have been some sewing circle to put such a peachy glow to your skin, Miss Horne." James tossed out as Alex hustled by, the blonde was clutching a fabric sided bag in his hands.

"Mr. Darney, I don't believe I should reward you with the pleasure of my company on this lovely afternoon." The words were brisk but the tone amused.

"Oh, you hurt me, my dear, what have I done to offend you this time?" James fell in beside the quickly moving beauty and forced him to take the offered arm or be truly rude.

Alex glanced up and side ways at James and shook his head. "Speaking to my uncle was a nice touch."

"Really? I thought so as well. So you've seen my hand in things?"

"It was unmistakable." Nut brown eyes slid to seek out ears that might over hear and found none. "I attempted to slip into my dear god father's bed last night and found it empty. It's a very small leap of logic to figure where he was and the talk this morning confirmed it."

"And for that you'd deny me your conversation? In sincerest honesty, I am deeply wounded."

"Eighteen or until he can speak to my uncle! Absurd!"

"What? I thought you'd like the challenge." James was grinning like a fool.

Alex just sniffed in discontent. "Do not insult my intelligence, Mr. Darney. You've set it up so that I challenge him not the other way around."

"You are such a darling! Are you sure I'm not your father? I don't believe I have any Southern bastards and I would have been quite young but it must be so."

"I'm very certain."

"Pity, but you have caught me. It would be too easy if I simply talked him into doing what you wish. He'd twist it all around, angst all about it. This way, when you do manage to trip him into a bed, or floor, or field, you'll have won him in totality." He patted the gloved hand tucked against his arm.

"That doesn't mean I've forgiven you."

"Nor would I expect it but I've surely made this little boat ride more amusing than any sewing circle."

That drew matching lewd smiles from both men. "Indeed, you have at that, Mr. Darney."

The rest of the trip to Baton Rouge was indeed amusing. Alex kept toying with Tom the way a cat would a mouse, teasing and rewarding and then slipping out of reach into tormenting refusal. Tom turned out to be a quiet, contented lover, but steadfast in his promise to only take things so far. Not that Alex was protesting, he'd found more pleasure with Tom in a few days than he'd found in his life.

The time wasn't about pleasure, not entirely. Alex was using it to grow closer to Tom and not just sexually. The man was painfully guarded, careful, controlled and bit by bit like a barbed hook, Alex was threading his way inside.

It was on the night before they reached Baton Rouge that Alex felt he'd gained the greatest success. James had arrived after dinner to play cards and Alex was invited by both men to join. They sat around the small table, the older men smoking and all three drinking enough to be relaxed and at ease. The stacks were high, the piles of peanuts mounting in front of Tom and disappearing from the other two.

Alex groaned again and put his head on the table. "No fair!" The last of his peanuts had disappeared into James' stack and the black eyed man was smiling.

"You shouldn't have called his bluff." Tom rubbed salt into the wound.

"I didn't know he was bluffing!"

"Not so good of a player as you thought, hmm?" James teased and popped some of his currency into his mouth. "Tom will win anyway, he always wins."

"Doesn't hurt you'll eat your stakes."

James shrugged. "I like goobers. You didn't expect me to clean the kid out of real money did you?"

"James serves as an excellent example of what not to be, Alex, you should take notes."

Alex just tilted his defeated head and like watching the old friends interact. Tom was different with James around, softer, easier and he wanted to learn how James did it. "Don't say that, I happen to like Mr. Darney."

"That's it." James slid the glass from in front of Alex. "You're drunk, no more for you."

"I am not. Is it so difficult to believe I've grown accustomed to your company, offensive as it is."

Tom was laughing and won the current hand against his friend. Taking half of James remaining peanuts with him.

"You're right to dislike me, I'm an absolute carpet bagger. Good Southern boy like you should try to shoot me or challenge me to a duel or something." He sighed and accepted the lose, stealing nuts from Tom's pile to munch on.

"Are you really?" Alex propped himself up on an elbow and eyed the handsome dark man.

"He is the worst kind of carpet bagger." Tom answered. "I can respect the Northern man going South seeking a fortune but one that already has one and is merely exploiting the Reconstruction for an advancement of such wealth is unforgivable."

James finished the drink he'd pulled from in front of Alex. "And just how much money have you and your family made from our little ventures south of the Mason-Dixon line?"

"Enough."

"Are you both so rich?" Alex asked carefully. He was aware that Tom was moneyed and James as well but wealthy implied so much more.

"Disgustingly so." James sighed out, loosing another hand. "Tom's family has a solid place in society and mine were just rich enough to belong there. We bought our way in, made friends by helping families like Tom's make their fortunes back. Who's worth more now, Tom? You or me?"

"Personal holdings?" He shrugged. "You I'd guess. I haven't looked lately, I let father deal with most of my accounts."

"Most but not all." James confessed to the wide eyed Alex. "When we were mere pups in boarding school, Tom's father sent him an allowance of five dollars a week. Money that he was not asked to be accountable for, and was above and beyond the living expenses. My father sent me not a penny, at the time we couldn't afford it. Tom not only saw to it that I had no immediate needs he managed to save the majority of his allowance in an account that his father was unaware of." He shuffled the cards and prepared to loose the last of his nuts.

"I like not having to worry."

"How much have you tucked away now?"

"Enough."

James winked at Alex. "Enough so that if his father learns what's under your pretty skirts you'll be okay."

"Can't say as I fault it. There's nothing worse than being poor." Alex felt suddenly melancholy at the thought. "Mother was never well off but she made ends meet but after her death everything was taken."

"Don't worry dear, if Tom won't, your dear Uncle James will keep you in a comfortable lifestyle."

"And how do you plan to do that with no peanuts left?"

"Foiled again." James reached a hand out and took one of Alex's. He placed a kiss to the back of the boy's knuckles and rose from the table smoothly. "I'm sorry, dear, I'll have to be your savior another night. Tom, you've cleaned me out again but forgive my departure. I need to thank a maid for finding these wonderful peanuts for us." He smiled as Tom shook his head.

"Good night James."

"Tom, Alex, sleep well." He wasn't sure how much sleep the pair was getting, how much was playtime and didn't want to know. Alex appeared to have Tom reined in and every day he was seeing his friend relax a little more. It put him in the right frame of mind to face the lovely woman waiting for him in his room.

Alex snatched one of Tom's peanuts and refrained from teasing about liking to eat Tom's nuts.

"Will you be going to bed?"

Tom finished putting the cards back into order. "I am but I'll be reading for a little while first."

"May I read with you?"

"What are your reading?"

"Mark Twain's Innocents Abroad. It's very amusing, I found it on the bookshelf. May I?"

"I'm a little tired tonight, Alex, I just want a quiet evening."

"I'll be a church mouse."

The brown eyes were so wide, so open and hopeful that Tom couldn't refuse such a small request. "Very well, but if you annoy me I'm tossing you out."

That made Alex sit up straight. "We're reading in your bedroom?" So far, Tom hadn't allowed or invited him past the thresh hold.

"I had planned to read in bed, yes."

That brought a bright smile to Alex's face. "Let me fetch my book!"

Tom watched the younger man take off at a run for his bedroom and rose to his feet wearily. Baton Rouge would face him in the morning and with it the memory of Sam's ghost. It was making him feel old, tired. He wanted nothing more than to retire to his bedroom and get lost in his book and memories.

In his room, the door partially cracked open, Tom stripped off his boots. Down he stripped to his undershirt and let the braces fall about his legs. He even pulled his socks from his feet and enjoyed the feel of bare toes wiggling in the cooler night air. He gathered pillows without a mind to save any for Alex, and adjusted himself on them after adjusting the wick of the lamp. Settled in, comfortable, he gathered up his comforting book and wandered into his thoughts and memories.

The door pushed slightly open and Alex peered inside. "You haven't changed your mind have

you?" He asked of the still form stretched out on the bed.

"Should I have?"

That made the blonde smile and push himself into the room, shutting the door behind him. Tom's eyes followed him. The boy had stripped down too for night, leaving on his chemise and from the look of it little else. The ties at the neck of the dress were loosened so the neckline fell wide. It exposed collarbones and occasionally slipped low enough to allow a slender shoulder to pop out. The blonde curls had been tamed into a tail at the base of the boy's skull, tendrils slipping free to tickle face and flesh. He moved on bare feet, book clutched in his hands.

With a happy smile, feeling Tom's eyes on him, he slid onto the wide bed. He squirmed and wiggled more than he had to but he liked knowing Tom was missing nothing. Eventually, he settled himself along the foot of the bed, head and body turned to catch the light from the lamp.

"My God, your feet are huge!" Alex teased and poked at the bare feet he'd never seen exposed before.

Tom jumped and pulled away. "They're the right size to keep me from falling down." Warily, he let his feet return to their former position.

"I guess it's true what they say about men with big feet."

"Quiet evening, church mouse." Tom grumbled and turned back to his book.

Silence fell, only the sounds of pages being turned broke it. Tom found himself watching Alex instead of reading. The fall of the curls against the peachy skin, the angle of the chin. He watched the way what was read flitted across the boy's face pulling out frowns or smiles easily.

"If you want me to be quiet and read, you shouldn't watch me like that."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't mind." Alex propped himself up on an elbow and turned to watch Tom watching him. "What is it that you're always reading?"

Tom closed the book in his hands. "Leaves of Grass from Whitman."

"I've never read that. May I borrow it?" It was obvious the book held meaning for Tom.

The strong hands gripped the book's cover. "It was Sam's."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

Tom just shook his head. "It was his favorite book. He used to say that everything he needed to learn about being himself he found in here."

"Powerful book."

Tom opened the cover and flipped a few pages. It didn't take much to find the verse he was looking for. "As I lay with my head in your lap, Camerado, the confession I made I resume - what I said to you in the open air I resume: I know I am restless, and make others so; I know my words are weapons, full of danger, full of death; (Indeed I am the real soldier; it is not he, there, with the bayonet and not the red stripped artilleryman;) For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them; I am more resolute because all have denied me, than I could ever have been had all accepted me; I heed not, nor have never heeded, either experience, cautions, majorities, nor ridicule; And the threat of what is call'd hell is little or nothing to me; and the lure

of what is call'd heaven is little or nothing to me."

Alex had sat up while he listened. "Whitman was a homosexual?"

"Is, he's still alive."

"Is he?"

Tom shrugged. "He's married I believe."

"So is James."

"True. Several of his poems suggest it. They're all beautifully written. When I was ill, Sam must have read me this book three or four times."

"It's difficult to picture you as ill."

He studied the open, lovely face before him. Seeking something, looking for something in the brown eyes that wasn't to be found. "You are different from Sam."

"That's because I'm one of a kind." He teased but let the silliness flee. "I'm not him, Tom, I can't ever be him." It was a cold fear in his stomach.

"I don't think I could stand it if you were him."

Alex crawled up the bed from the foot to sit facing Tom. "Good, I can't fight a ghost. I won't even try."

He reached a hand out and brushed a curl back from Alex's face. "Why? Why would you even think of it? Why me? You could have any man you wanted."

Alex leaned into the fleeting touch. "I don't want any man, I want you." He meant it to sound light and airy but the words came out soaked in truth. To cover the sudden seriousness of his words, Alex slipped a hand delicately into Tom's.

"A glimpse, through an interstice caught, of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room, around the stove, late of a winter's night - and I unremark'd seated in a corner; of a youth who loves me, and whom I love, silently approaching, and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand; a long while, amid the noises of the coming and going - of drinking and oath and smutty jest, there we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word." Sam whispered into Tom's memory, quoting his beloved verses.

The memory was sharp but instead of pain it brought sweetness. Tom glanced away and slid his hand free of the light hold. He used it to pat the spot beside him on the bed. "Come here."

Alex required no further invitation, he moved quickly to accept and sat pressed tightly to Tom's side. He snuggled in, one of Tom's arms draped over his mostly bare shoulders, leaning against the stable chest. Tom pulled away but it wasn't to escape Alex but to reach something on the bedside table. When he sat upright again, he held a tin picture case tightly in his grip. With reverence, he flipped the latch open and with a steadying indrawn breath, opened the case for Alex to see.

Nut brown eyes studied the younger, less care worn face of his lover and the love that stood with him. "He's not as handsome as I thought." Alex clapped a hand over his mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry!"

It broke the mood and made Tom laugh. The amusement rocked the tense and nervous young man pressed against him. "No, it's okay, he wasn't an extraordinarily handsome man. You've no

need to be jealous of him in that manner.” It felt good showing his pictures to Alex. “It was his personality that drew him attention. He was so reserved when we met, so careful, but once the war was over he relaxed. He had a laugh you could hear a half a block away. He was always laughing, rarely melancholy or moody. He was viciously jealous, even after Sam accepted James he was still jealous.” Tom laughed a little again, the first time since Sam’s death that he’d felt comfortable, warm enough, with the memories to laugh. “He refused to leave the two of us alone together.”

Alex smiled more at the soft laughter and the light of memory thawing Tom’s eyes than the story. “If I know Mr. Darney, that produced some interesting evenings.”

It was Alex that laughed at the slight blush that crept up Tom’s face. “On occasion.” He shook his head at those memories, they weren’t ones he had visited too often over the years.

“I was playing poker that night.”

“The night he was killed?”

Tom nodded. “In Baton Rouge, we’d been so busy making plans to go west but he really wanted to go out that night. He’d been a little down since his father had rejected him again. We’d been drinking, playing, but he’d grown bored with playing and had moved on to dice. It was late, we were both more than a little drunk, I was winning, he’d lost what he’d been betting. He was awful at dice, awful. He started making innuendos, suggestions and comments that weren’t very well veiled. One of the other gamblers called him on it, slandered him. Well, it would have been slander if it hadn’t been true. Sam’s response was to land himself on my lap and kiss me. I was drunk enough that I found it exciting, thrilling.

“The rest of the table wasn’t so amused. Words, threats were exchanged, I gathered my winnings and we left. Tossed out really, out stayed our welcome. Instead of going to our hotel, he pulled me into the alley.” Tom kept his eyes on the smiling face in the picture. “He was everywhere, laughing, so alive. I tried to push him back but I was as successful denying him as I’ve been with you.”

That made Alex pull the arm around his shoulders tighter to his body. He wrapped both his hands around Tom’s larger one and hung on, awed at being allowed to share a memory that was so painful.

“It wasn’t often that Sam wanted to top but he did that night. He had a taste sometimes for unusual places, times.”

“He liked to tease you.”

Tom nodded.

“You are amusing to tease.”

“Sam felt the same way, said I was too stuffy.”

“You are.”

“I let him take me, right there in the alley. He was laughing in my ear as we tried to make ourselves presentable again to make it back to the hotel when some men at the alley cursed us. Before we could even turn, a gun was fired. The bullet hit Sam’s left lumber area, lodged itself deep in his abdomen. The night was so silent without his laughter, I,” his breathing was harsh. Pulling from his lungs in short gasps, trapped in a memory that still owned him. “I don’t remember much, cradling Sam as he fell, charging the men, hitting them over and over again. I don’t know why they didn’t shoot me, luck I guess. If our places had been reversed, if I’d taken

him that night, it would have been my back that the bullet would have found. I would have died and he would have lived."

"You can't know that." Alex wished the right words would simply make everything better, make it all disappear but he wasn't so young to believe that. "It wasn't your fault. I doubt Sam blamed you."

Tom shook his head. "He made me promise that I wouldn't blame myself. I killed him Alex."

"No, you didn't, you didn't pull that trigger, you didn't kill him."

"No, I, there was nothing I could do to save him. He was in so much pain that last day. He begged me to end it for him, made me promise that when he was no longer able to speak that I would kill him. I did. I killed him. I placed chloroform over his face and held him while he died. It's my fault."

Alex pushed the arm off his shoulder and pulled away from the tense and near panicked body. Swiftly, he swung a hand out and brought it in a hard, stinging slap across Tom's face. "Stop that! Sam was dead the moment that bullet hit his body, you know that, I'm not a doctor and even I know that!" His brown eyes flashed. "All you did was honor his request to end the pain, to end your pain at having to watch him fade over the days to come. If your places were reversed would you have done less for him?"

"You struck me!" The crack of the slender hand across his face had shattered Tom's memories and poured anger over his head. He wanted to take a hold of the slender young man and shake sense into him, push him aside and away. He did neither, he sat in stunned, stinging, silence as Alex's words struck with equal bite.

"Someone had to! Beat me if you'd like I won't apologize. Do you really think you're the only one to have suffered? The only person forced to make painful, awful choices? How dare you waste your life drowning in pity! If slapping you upside your fool head is what it's going to take to make you wake up and start dealing with the fact that he was murdered and it had nothing to do with you, then I'll spend all night slapping you silly!"

"It's like fending off a kitten, how can I fight back without being a bully." Tom shook his head while he grumbled. "Am I really so pathetic?"

The earnest question softened Alex's wrath. "No, you've been grievously hurt but the wounds should not be mortal ones. You've a right to mourn, something I don't see you've allowed yourself to really do. You've a right to question and shake your fists at God but Tom, you can't let it end your life or freeze you like an insect in amber."

Tom gathered the blond against his body, stroking a hand over hair and exposed shoulder. All the things he wanted to say, all the elegant words that so easily poured from Alex, froze in his throat. He sighed in a drained surrender and when he did speak, it was on a whim.

"Stay the night with me?" He whispered into the blonde curls.

"What?" Alex was certain he hadn't heard that correctly.

"Just sleep, would you sleep beside me?"

He pulled out of the embrace he'd been tucked into to stare into the stormy depths of Tom's eyes. They were unreadable again and Alex found himself nodding. "I'd love to."

Tom gathered their books from the bed and tucked Alex like a small doll under the heavy covers. He slid in beside the other man, uncertain, awkward from being alone for so long. It wasn't until

Alex slid across the space between them and curled up against his body with a contented sigh that he was able to let go. Tom put out the lamp and truly settled in. He lifted the lithe body into a more comfortable position, wrapped himself around those slender legs, inhaled the soft scent of lavender from the roaming curls and fell into a sound, dreamless sleep.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Nineteen

The bedroom door slipped open, the smallest of clicks but it stirred the sleeping pair. "Well, what a lovely sight." James called out, the smirk thick in his voice.

Tom went from asleep to alert in a heartbeat. The arm he'd had wrapped around Alex slipped from where the blond had cuddled it to his chest and drew on the pistols kept near the bed. Before James could finish speaking, Tom had the weapon aimed and the hammer cocked.

James raised an eyebrow at the gun pointed at him but didn't move. Tom's eyes were wide but still unfocused in sleep, it was Alex who raised a mussed and sleepy head from where he'd been startled awake and slapped a hand over the pistol.

"Mr. Darney is being an ass but shooting him won't teach him anything." Alex mumbled and pushed the gun down.

"Jesus, I could have shot you!" Tom wasn't sure if he should be angry or frightened but he put the gun away.

Alex tugged at the arm that had been wrapped happily around him. He pulled until Tom was again laying down before pressing himself back against the other body. "Tell him to go away and lay back down."

Tom sighed and gave into the pull of the boy. "Go away James." The slender body pressed to his own easily rolled back onto it's side and Tom found himself wrapping around it, spooning it, as if he'd been doing such for years.

A warm body pressed along Tom's back, spooning him. Warm breath brushed his neck and it tickled something about the feeling being wrong in Tom's mind. An arm slid around Tom's chest to rest on Alex's side, a leg tossed over Tom's the way his was tossed over Alex's.

"James, if you don't get out of this bed, right now, I will shoot you."

"Hmmm, I don't think you'd kill me."

"Maybe not but you don't need all of your toes."

That made the men on either side of him laugh and only darkened Tom's mood.

"I should have warned you, Alex dear, Tom wakes up mean."

"He really can't be blamed when it's your face he has to see first thing." Alex yawned and stretched, sliding his body along Tom's far more than he needed to. "Just what is it you're doing here again?"

"It's almost eleven. You two slept too late, someone had to come in here and wake you. We have to disembark before noon." James raised himself up to watch the sleepy faces. "Does that spare me death?"

"Barely." Tom admitted and slid away from the slender body.

"From your states of total dress you two slept a very sound night." James fished for information.

"We were reading after you left." Tom answered and scratched his neck. "Is it really so late?" He hadn't slept that late in years, not since Sam had died.

"It is, I brought coffee."

"Here that, Alex?" Alex had only burrowed deeper into the warm covers. Tom swung a hand out and swatted the near by hip. The light slap raised James' eyebrows and set a lusty, dirty look to his expression. "Get moving."

Alex yipped at the spank but giggled. He stretched full out like a cat, knowing both men were watching and liking it. A wide yawn split his face as he nearly fell out of the bed. "Fine, whatever, doesn't matter that I was sleeping well. Oh no, can't have that, got to rudely throw me out of the bed and into the cold morning air," Alex was still muttering as he wandered out of his bedroom and across to his own room.

"Whiny in the morning." James followed the boy, just as lovely half awake as fully awake, with his eyes and enjoyed the happy situation.

"Coffee, if you want to live, get me coffee."

James had hired a carriage and had it waiting. He sighed and shook his head and demanded his friends hitch their horses to the coach and ride with him. Tom was unwilling to fight over something so minor and Alex seemed tickled by the idea. So with little fuss, shortly after noon, the three were on the way to the house James had rented.

"The city really has come a long way, it was still mostly destroyed the last I was here!" James peered from the windows. "Union troops are still here and are supposed to be for a while yet. It's amazing how much Reconstruction's been done. This house, it's supposed to be freshly re-built. It has a real bath tub, four bedrooms, gas lights and four negro house servants. It's decorated already and is supposed to be ready to move in. Father felt I might want a larger place than what I maintained in Kansas in case I wanted to move the wife and children here. They refused to even hear the idea." The excitement in James' voice was a little dull at the end of his running narrative.

It was the touch of loneliness that drew Alex. "I'm certain, Mr. Darney, that you'll have the house filled with friends visiting and the sound of laughter from your parties."

James smiled. "I'm sure of it. It's a good thing the soldiers are still here, there's a great heavy resentment toward Northerners lingering. Tom and I might have had to hide behind your accent if it weren't for them, Alex."

Alex chuckled smoothly. The grand Southern city was lovely to see, filled with people and returning life. The only sadness he saw was floating in Tom's eyes.

The house they stopped in front of was large enough to make Alex feel very poor. It was painted white, bright and crisp and set on a green patch of lawn that held several large trees. There were

no neighbors near and the coach had to drive up the lane to reach the front door. It wasn't a mansion, but it wasn't one by much.

Standing out front were the five black skinned servants, two men and three women. Dressed in clean, new clothes and standing in a line, eyes downcast. Alex had seen plenty of slaves in his life, even if they'd been too poor to own one but he'd never understood the look of surrender in their eyes until he'd dragged irons from his own body. The younger man and the youngest of the women were somewhere in their twenties, the two other women were older, one grey haired and one graying, and the final man was old enough to be a grandfather but he stood with a strong, straight spine.

The younger man hurried forward to set a step down at the coach and open the door for them. James hopped out and offered his hand to help Alex down. Tom followed with a wary eye.

"You must be Ruth." James called out as he approached the graying woman, neither the oldest nor the youngest.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Darney, sir."

James offered his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, my agent has sung your praises."

The line of servants exchanged looks and were uncertain how to accept James' hand. "Sir, it wouldn't be proper sir, I'm sorry, sir." Ruth nodded and lowered her eyes.

James just shook his head and withdrew his hand. "I don't wish to make any of you uncomfortable but I do not hold the same stupid hatreds as most men. I'm informed that you're each very skilled in your work, discreet with your tongues and trustworthy. I'm grateful to your service. This must be Lottie," he nodded to the oldest woman. "I've been told you're the best cook around, I look forward to tasting your creations. Has the household budget been adequate?"

The oldest woman nodded but never raised her eyes. "Yes, sir."

"Good, let me know if it becomes otherwise. The youngest here but be Ima. That would make you Jacob and you John." James nodded to the two men, the elder being first addressed and the one to bob his head in reply.

"I know I didn't send notice, but my friends, Dr. Thomas Lambry and Miss Alex Horne will be staying for a time. Ima, please see that they're settled in?"

The youngest girl curtsied slightly. "Yes, sir."

"Jacob, I'll leave you to see to their horses and the delivery of the luggage and Ruth, please, I'd like to inspect the house."

"Of course, sir." She glanced to Lottie and back again. "Would you or your company sir care to take lunch?"

"That won't be necessary, we had a late breakfast." James was still smiling but it was lost. The family he'd hired had been in dire straights before his agent had located them. It was his way to try to help out a family that was struggling when he could, it was self because a good turn made for loyal servants. That didn't change the fact that the people had been shown too little respect in their lives, something that could only be soothed in time.

"Tom, Alex, I'm sorry dears but I must attend to the house first. Join me for dinner later?"

"Of course." Tom nodded. "Thank you for letting us stay here."

He waved it off and felt he should have been thanking them. He hated settling into a new city, even if he'd love it in a week. "Tish tosh, you're family!"

"If you're going to knock on that door, you'd better be on fire, at the least." James called out, seeing the blond shadow hovering near the slightly opened office door.

"Mr. Darney, I need a moment."

"I don't see flames."

Alex sighed and folded his arms over his chest. "Would you prefer it if I set myself ablaze? I shall."

James sighed and set his pen down. "No, come in. I'm cranky. Father's office here has everything backwards. It's going to take me months to straighten everything out."

"I'm sorry."

James waved it off. "Don't pity me too much, I do enjoy the effort of it. What can I do for you dear? Is Ruth treating you well? I instructed her to treat you as the lady of the household."

Alex slipped inside the small office. It smelled lightly of dust, stale books and faint cigar smoke and oddly made him feel safe and comfortable. "That was kind of you, she's been a pleasure to work with. I've been attempting to set the household in a functional way so that once you are a single man alone here everything should run smoothly." They'd been in Baton Rouge for five days now and Alex had taken to the running of the household like a fish to water.

James smiled. "I know, she told me. I'm indebted to you."

Carefully, Alex sat across the desk from James. "Hardly, it is I that am in your debt."

"So what is it that brings you to me now? Obviously it isn't fire."

"You need to speak to Tom."

"Alex,"

"Don't you Alex me!" The blonde's nerves were shot. "It's been almost a week, every night he goes out and stays out until morning."

James had noticed but he pretended otherwise. "So? If you've issue with him speak to him, not me."

"I have, he shouted at me to mind my own affairs."

"He's a grown man, if he wants to go out drinking, he can go out drinking."

"He's not getting drunk. He's drinking but only enough to make him angry."

"Your point is what?"

"I'm not a fool, neither are you so stop pretending otherwise. We both know what this city is for him and we both know what it is to drink trying to gain courage for something. He won't speak to me, I can't even get him to touch me, but he might listen to you." He pleaded now, truly worried. "If something isn't done he's going to end up in trouble."

James shook his head. "It's not my place, I'm sorry."

"You claim to be his best friend!"

"Which is why I need to stay out of his way in this matter. I'm sorry." He sat back in his chair. "I'll help you however I can but I this isn't my place. It's something he has to deal with on his own."

Alex pushed himself to his feet angrily. "You're too helpful!" He crossed half way to the door before his feet slowed and he turned. "Say, were you serious about the offer of help?"

The smile was wicked and triumphant. "Name it."

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty

Tom left the house to collect his horse as he'd done every night. He patted the dapple's side and let the creature whicker slightly at his face. "Missed me huh? How about I call you Drole, fitting for our lives isn't it?" The horse whickered and drew a smile from the glum human's face.

"Drole? Isn't that French for something funny?"

"Go back inside, Alex." Tom's voice lost the soft affection that he'd used on the horse. He couldn't see the boy but the voice was from behind him.

"You think your life is funny?"

"It's not French, or not how I mean it. It's Cajun."

"You speak Creole?"

"Go away, Alex."

"Sam's last name was Deveroux, wasn't it? A French name, was he Creole?"

He shook his head. "Everyone in Southern Louisiana is Cajun."

"So what does Drole in Cajun French mean?"

"It means take your scrawny ass back into that house before I drag you there!"

"Huh, such meaning in such a tiny word."

"Alex!"

"I'm going with you."

"Like hell you are!" Tom turned but the figure standing the doorway to the stable wasn't Alex.

Or rather, the body standing in the door, holding the reins of a saddled horse, wasn't Alexandria. The clothes were baggy, loose fitting but not objectionable. The pants fell to a proper length over

sturdy, simple boots. A plain, ordinary and fairly well worn shirt in dark brick red tucked neatly into a waist band. The wild blond curls had been combed smooth and pulled sharply back into a tight braid. It gave the boy a sharp look to his face and turned his features from pretty to fox like and almost sly in appearance. The sharp angle of cheekbones and chin were striking on a woman but sharp on a young man. There was nothing that could be done about his shorter height or the delicacy of his frame but over all he made a passable boy.

It shot straight to Tom's groin. As attractive as Alex was in a dress, he was twice as desirable in pants. He looked older, less doll like, less child like. He stood with a confident stance, legs spread wide and dug in for the fight his demand was sure to rouse. Tom's eyes swept the frame twice, then a third time, drinking in a sight that stunned him. He wanted to grab the boy, run his hands over the masculine waist and feel no corset hiding what he was. He wanted his hands to wander over the round ass, so much more exposed in pants instead of hidden under several layers of skirts. It would be easy for the hand to slip down the front of those pants, to rub the length there to full arousal. The desire to kiss over the sharp features, to lick the high cheekbones and see if his tongue would be cut by them, was strong. As his mind wandered down that path, he knew where it was heading, the sight of Alex as Alexander, made him want to strip them both naked and fuck right there in the stables.

He reminded himself he was angry at the boys intrusion and focused on that. "What do you think you're doing?" He snapped, hoping any breathlessness was mistaken for anger not desire.

"As I said, I'm going with you." Alex's voice never wavered. "Absurd looking isn't it? I feel awful and ugly but I can't go with you as a girl."

"You don't even know where I'm going."

"Does it matter?"

"And if I'm going to a whore house to find someone to fuck? What will you do than?" He spat the words out, wishing he could take back the memories of the touches, the kisses, they'd shared.

Alex shrugged. "I'll wait and have a drink. Do you really think I've never been in a whore house?" Dark images, hateful memories flashed across his mind, Alex clenched his jaw and refused to allow the past to sway the present.

"You're right, you look," sexy, hot, thrilling, desirable. "Absurd." He forced himself to finish and really hated himself. There just was little left in him after this week to care if he was a bastard.

The small smile Alex had been wearing fell to a look of hard acceptance. He'd wanted Tom to find him attractive dressed as the young man he really was. For as much as he'd hate to have to wear the uncomfortable, ugly clothes every day, he wanted Tom to be turned on. The acknowledgement that he was as ugly as the clothes on his back cut far deeper than he'd expected.

"Absurd or not, I'm going with you."

"I won't be buying your drinks."

A ghost of a smile returned, the difficult part passed now that Tom had accepted that he was tagging along. "Don't worry, I've money."

"Damn you, James." Tom muttered and gathered up Drole's reins. He rode out into the setting sun with the boy following.

Tom led them to nothing more exciting than places to gamble. The fact that most of the casinos also had women and private rooms was obviously a secondary trade and obviously not what Tom was seeking out. The first place they stopped was one that Tom had been frequenting because several of the other players knew his face and welcomed him to join.

"Who's the boy?" One of the older men with a sharp New England accent asked.

Tom locked eyes with Alex but the blond appeared to be holding his tongue for once. "My nephew."

The man nodded to Alex in welcome before elbowing his neighbor in the ribs. "Bringing the boy out to make a man of him, eh?"

Tom took his place at the table but his eyes were on Alex. "What do you say? Want to be made a man tonight? I'll pay."

Alex wasn't sure if he wanted to spit, hiss or growl but he gave into none of the desired fits of temper. He smiled with a distinct lewd feel. "I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm not as innocent as you've been lead to believe. It's a touch too late to buy me a whore."

The friendly New Englander laughed merrily but at Alex's quick retort or the look of angry shock on Tom's face neither man knew. Tom brushed it off and let his face go blank. "Well, should you grow bored, the offer stands."

Alex shrugged casually and took a seat to the side to watch the game. "If I see something that attracts my eye, I'll be sure to inform you."

The other players laughed again but Tom still scowled. It wasn't the typical night out for Tom, and it took Alex several hours to understand what seemed odd. The drink in front of Tom went untouched, or rarely touched. He wasn't sure if the curbing of the desire to get drunk was a good or bad sign.

As the hours passed and Tom seemed to steadily win more than he lost, he'd grow bored with the saloon he was in and drag them to another. They were in their fourth location and Alex was getting tired. It was hours from the sun rise and Tom was showing no desire to go home. In fact, as the hours melted away he seemed to grow more tense, more tightly wound up instead of more tired or at ease.

Finally, as Tom was dismounting outside of a rough looking place, Alex's tolerance dissolved. "Tom, what is it?"

Tom just froze and kept his eyes on the ground.

"What? Just tell me what it is that's been eating at you? This isn't helping you any, what is it? Huh?" Alex flicked the reins in his hand and tried to see into the hidden face.

Tom moved forward to the side of the saloon, to a darkened alley that ran along the side. "That's where he was shot." His voice echoed out in the cool darkness.

Alex studied the squared shoulders, the hung head, the clenched hands and that spoke to him louder than the empty, dark space before them. "Tom,"

"I haven't been back in Baton Rouge since. I expected it to look, I don't know, different." He turned suddenly, stalking over to tower over Alex. "Do you really mean to follow?"

"Yes." What settled into his stomach wasn't quite fear but it was close.

"I want to go to his grave. I," his face screwed up and the words blew away. "I need to say goodbye."

Alex reached a hand up to caress the side of Tom's pained face but the taller man pulled away

from his touch. There were advantages to being dressed as a woman, Tom wouldn't have flinched away if he'd been in skirts.

"Let's go home, get some sleep. I'll go with you tomorrow, when you're rested." He didn't quite beg.

"Alex, I haven't been able to find the courage to go." He closed his eyes and swallowed the lump in his throat. "I keep trying, every night I've tried and I can't, I couldn't even come here until now, I just can't."

"You can, but you don't have to do it alone. What do you say?"

The tension drained from Tom's body, it visibly poured from his shoulders and down to dissolve into the earth. He nodded, defeated and let Alex guide them back home. He was ashamed of his weakness, ashamed that he was unable to do what he wanted so badly to do. He was ashamed that he needed to lean so heavily on Alex's slender shoulders. More importantly, he was frightened by how deeply he'd grown to accept the younger man's help and care.

They quickly tended to the horses when they reached James' house rather than wake John. It was like being on the trail again, the pair moved in comfortable actions and no words. It helped settle some of the churning uneasy in Tom's stomach.

Once inside, Alex took Tom's hand and led the man to his bedroom. He didn't leave, Alex undressed down to his under britches and without invitation, slipped into the bed beside Tom. It felt like a victory, maybe a hollow one but still a victory and Alex couldn't understand why the feel of the strong arms wrapped around him didn't warm him the way they had.

"Alex?"

"Hmm?" He whispered in the darkness, pretending to more sleepiness than he was.

"I lied before." Tom swallowed and pulled the slender body closer to his own, wrapped his own around it, enveloped it. "I've never seen a sight more desirable than you in those clothes. It wasn't absurd, it really appealed to me."

All thoughts of feeling cold, empty or uncomfortable fled. The words soothed a hard knot of tension that Alex hadn't known he was carrying, washed a wound he hadn't know was bleeding. It made him want to kick the older man, or punch him, something. It wasn't fair that he could be such a heartless bastard and then turn around and be so breathtakingly wonderful.

He didn't kick Tom, or punch him, he just forgave him. "I looked awful."

Tom chuckled very lightly. "No hunting compliments, you didn't, you looked uncomfortable but you were attractive enough that I almost betrayed my promise to you. I hadn't realized how much the young man you look like until you pulled your hair back."

The truth of Tom's words sunk in and Alex felt some of his exhaustion dissolving. "You mean you almost,"

"Shhhh, go to sleep." Tom kissed the blond head tucked under his chin and settled in deeper. "Sleep or go to your own bed."

Alex sighed. "Yes sir." But as he settled in he wiggled his ass tighter into Tom's groin and fell asleep with an evil grin on his face.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty One

Tom woke alone, the bed empty and the dent where Alex had obviously slept was cold to the touch. The only thing that remained of the boy was the lingering scent of lavender and a few stray blonde hairs on his pillow. He'd gone to bed sober but the sun peeking around the curtains was still annoying. There was no hang over to blame his unpleasant mood on this time.

He found Alex in the kitchen, up to his wrists in flour. The boy was laughing with the black servants, as at home with them and helping their work as if he'd been raised there. Tom hovered in the door way and listened to the old, white haired Lottie that was re-telling a story that had both Alex and the young Ima in such glee. All three moved about chopping or stirring and it was such a domestic sight that Tom found himself unequipped to enter their world.

Ima turned to set a bowl on a stand behind her and saw the shadow of Tom in the doorway. Her laughter instantly died and that drew the eyes of the other two. Alex chuckled to a slow stop but the smile stayed on his face, unlike his two companions.

"Morning, Mister Doctor sir." Lottie said in a hushed voice so unlike the booming one she'd been telling the story in and bobbed a slight curtsy.

"Morning." Tom muttered back, sounding gruff, feeling like he'd just smashed a basket of eggs for simply being too large and too rough.

"Oh hush now, Miss Lottie, he's not mean and he won't bite." Alex scolded. "He just barks a lot, that's all."

"Should I send coffee and breakfast up for you, sir?" Lottie asked, ignoring Alex's advice.

"I'd be grateful, something simple and cold. Alex, are we still going out this morning?" It was the closest he could bring himself to asking directly.

Alex nodded his head. "As soon as you wish."

Tom's eyes swept the room again and he nodded. "As soon as I've eaten." He turned then, in awkwardness and beat a fast retreat from the domain of such femininity.

Tom was barely gone from the kitchen before Alex was laughing again. "Oh his face! You'd think he'd never seen a kitchen before."

Lottie shook her head and moved to put together a simple breakfast tray. "That one, he's a frightful sort."

"He is not." Alex turned the dough out onto the floured table. He'd ventured into the kitchen for some tea and found a home there. The eldest lady and primary cook reminded him distantly of home and he'd been thrilled at being accepted into their circle. So long as they all stayed in the kitchen, the color of their skin didn't determine their comfort levels. Across the thresh hold, Alex had to return to being 'lady of the house'a and the dark skinned women to merely being 'servants'.

A breath hissed out between Lottie's teeth. "Eyes as cold as ice and temper as short as the devils!"

"Maybe, but he's still harmless."

The other women exchanged looks before setting in to tease Alex about being sweet on his Godfather. He let them, blushing a little and pretending disinterest but it didn't matter what they said, so long as they continued to include him in their conversation. He'd found himself almost desperately hungry for such casual, domestic contact.

Alex was already on the back of his horse by the time Tom pulled his hat down over his eyes and swung into his own saddle. He'd been short, snapping out orders for the boy to be ready or be left behind, complaining about the sunshine and then his own coat which refused to behave. He'd even snapped at James when the man had attempted to speak to him on his way out of the door but he didn't feel sorry for that. James only smirked more at the sharp tone, not less.

The truth was, if Alex hadn't been waiting, Tom wouldn't have been able to go. He couldn't say it was the blonde's presence specifically or if it was just a general desire to not back down in front of another person that drove him but he was honest enough to know that he wouldn't be able to continue without that extra push. It was easy to say it would be okay, easy to pretend it was just another trip across the city but it wasn't easy to believe.

The city hadn't changed, not really. The burned buildings were fading and from their ash were growing new structures. Soldiers still roamed the streets and the locals still eyed them with distaste. There was still a wide margin of interaction between folks of different skin colors and even in communities of all white or all black the people were split into social standings.

He'd liked Baton Rouge and could have happily settled there if Sam had wished it. Their short trip to the North had left Sam feeling isolated, lost and homesick not so much for a place but a way of life. Most of their time and travels had kept them South and Tom was okay with that, home for him wasn't a place or region or culture, it was embodied into one person.

Across busy streets and noisy markets they rode, time hadn't dulled Tom's memory of where his love was sleeping. He wove them around neighborhoods and districts and finally brought them to a nice, well maintained corner of the city. Most of the houses here had burned to one degree or another and now stood re-built, only the local parish had been untouched by the invading army and it was there that Tom guided them.

The graveyard lay to the side and behind a black iron fence. It was old, well tended and sprouted an acreage of markers. Tom slid from the saddle and tied the reins off, only distantly hearing Alex's booted feet hit the dirt behind him. A second set of reins joined the first and Alex stood silent, waiting.

"You sure you want to do this?" He finally asked, the late morning sun bright and cheerful for such a dark task.

Tom only nodded and forced his feet to move. Long strides carried him past the gate in the fence and onto the well tended pathway. His feet knew the way, his mind was frozen. The brightness of the day went unnoticed and the shadows drew his eyes. He knew where the family plot was, knew where Sam was.

The grave was tended to, respectable, in line with Sam's mother and two of his brothers, a sister who had died in infancy and the myriad other relations. Unlike the other stones marking names and dates, Sam's lacked the cross carved into it. It would have angered Tom had he not been certain that Sam wouldn't have cared.

"That bastard." He muttered.

"What's wrong?"

Tom waved to the other markers. "His father had the military service of his brothers carved into the stones but not on his. A name, a date and nothing more, he shunned him even in death. The bastard! Sam fought hard, he was a good soldier, he served with honor."

It was true that the marker was the plainest, the most austere of the line. It was a sad sight but being angry at Sam's father wasn't what Tom was looking for here. Alex touched the tense arm in front of him before speaking. "Would he really have cared?"

Tom shook his head. "I doubt it." His body unfroze and he knelt suddenly. Uneasy fingers picked at too long strands of grass, bits of weed near the headstone and his shoulders sagged. "All he wanted was to be buried near his mother. His father refused because of me, of what we had."

Alex folded himself down next to Tom, mindful of his skirts as only someone well used to wearing them could be. "You obviously succeeded."

"When threats of violence proved useless, money moved the man. I paid for the funeral. If he hadn't wanted so badly to be near his mother I would have taken him to New Orleans. He loved that city, Cajun, wild, as alive as he was." Tom's voice broke and the threads of grass slipped between his fingers.

For long moments the pair knelt there, neither speaking. Alex was wise enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. Nothing he could say could mean anything. He'd loved his mother but that was different and he'd never once cared for anyone even a tenth of what Tom had for Sam. He'd never lost that love, anything he'd speak would be clichés heard from others parroted back with no meaning. Tom didn't need that, he needed to sit quietly but not in solitude.

Tom drew a shaky breath and turned his head. "Alex? Could I have a moment alone?"

Alex nodded. "Okay, but I'll be right over there." He nodded to a near by tree, out of ear shot but within sight. He rose to his feet and briefly let his fingertips trace across a knotted up shoulder on his way to the shade.

Tom waited and watched from the corner of his eye as Alex settled down at the base of the tree. "That's Alex." He started, feeling stupid, feeling awkward but needing to speak to Sam. The grave felt closer to the lost man somehow. It was a physical thing he could see and touch and it made his words feel more real than simply speaking them into air. "You'd like him, he's different.

"God, I miss you. I," He rubbed a hand across his eyes but started plucking at grass again. "I've been angry at you, stupid I know but it's easier to be angry than to mourn. I've been stupid about a lot of things, I hope you can forgive me that. I'm trying here, I know it doesn't look it but I am. I just, I can't go on. I need to let go, I need to let you go." That made his chest ache, throb and feel broken.

"I can't forget you, I won't, ever, I can't. You're so much apart of me but I need to move on. I keep thinking that if I just check every face I see I'll spot you turning a corner one day and you'll laugh at me for thinking you dead. I keep thinking you'll say that you were merely lost and I'm a fool. I can't do that any more, I need to accept that you aren't ever coming back and that it's okay for me to still live." A tear, scalding hot and bitter with salt, slid from his eye and tracked down his face. He wiped it away brutally.

"I've been holding on to some of your things. I brought your bible." He fished the worn cover from his pocket, the bible Sam had carried during the war. Rather, it was the cover of a bible, the book long since removed. He'd confessed one night, when he was drunk and sad, that he'd torn the pages out and burned them but he couldn't burn the cover. His mother's handwriting, saying how proud she was of him, how much she loved him, was more dear than any religious text.

Tom propped the cover against the headstone. "I thought you might want it back. I couldn't bury it with you, I should have, maybe." He shook his head. "I'm sure you won't forgive me for putting you in my suit, you always said it was ugly. I still haven't gotten a replacement. I need to start doing these things, it's not about a suit, I need to start being again. If I could just have you back for five minutes!" His fingers dug into the grass until his knuckles ached.

"I never told you often enough how much I loved you. I don't think you knew. I would give anything to switch our places. I'm so sorry." His voice was a hoarse whisper now, broken in emotion and the words were choked away.

It took several long slow breaths before his heart steadied out and he was sure he wasn't going to fall apart. "I don't know what I'm doing with Alex. I really don't. He's infuriating but I like him. I could be fond of him. I don't know what'll come of it but I want to try and see where it'll take me. I need to say goodbye to you to do that. I don't want to, I don't want to let you go! I don't!" He stopped to blink back tears again. "But I have to. Not for Alex, or anyone else but for me, I need to even if I don't want to. I'm not sure I'll be able to come back here, I'm thinking about going West like we talked about and even if I don't, I doubt I'll be back. I know you'll understand that, I know you're always with me. I love you, nothing will change that and I hope there is an afterlife so I can see you again. But until then, I need to get on with this life. Oh God." He sniffed loudly and his fingers traced across the bible cover he'd left. "So, I guess, I'll see you later."

He wanted to curl over his knees and weep and he might have if not for footsteps behind him. Tom looked first to Alex but the boy was sitting in the shade, his brown eyes locked on a point behind Tom. When he turned he glanced up the dark pants leg of a disapproving man.

"What do you think you're doing?" The man's lined face frowned deeply.

Tom rose to his feet and was actually grateful. The distraction saved him from a break down. "I'm leaving, Mr. Deveroux." He turned to call Alex over but the boy was already at his elbow.

The elder sniffed and the frown stayed in place. "I see your sin was strictly with my son. I'll never understand why you had to place your impure, vile, hands upon my boy. Weren't there others you could have corrupted?"

Tom lowered his eyes and tried to step around the aging minister. "I don't wish to fight with you."

"No, your tastes run to innocent boys or young girls!" He waved widely at Alex. "You should not be allowed to entire holy ground, it's because of you my son is condemned to Hell!"

"Why you rotten, stupid," Alex started in but as he tried to push past Tom, a strong hand caught his arm and stilled him.

"Alex." He shook his head. Slowly, Tom raised his eyes back up and squared his shoulders. "Mr. Deveroux, out of respect to your son I wish not to quarrel with you but I don't believe you knew your son. I can't see your heart so I can't speak for what is in it but I do know that your son never felt you loved him. I loved him, I won't allow you to shame me for that love, not you. If that love has damned him, let it damn me as well. I'd rather spend eternity in torment beside him than a moment in heaven with the likes of you. Now, step aside, I will not ask you again." He spat the words out and locked hard, cold, gray eyes to the old man's watery blue.

Mr. Deveroux did not step aside but neither did he speak again. Tom shook his head and stepped around him, this time the man made no move to block him and with Alex following left the graveyard. Tom didn't glance back, he kept his spine straight. He hadn't found Sam here, not really, but he had found some small measure of peace. Sam's death felt real now, not shocked horror but real. The fact of the event felt suddenly woven into the threads of his life instead of merely being something staining them, marring them.

He paused before handing the other set of reins to Alex. One hand reached out and brushed one of the dozens of stray curls back from Alex's face. He couldn't make himself smile, he felt no sudden joy or peace, grief was still with him, but he no longer felt like he was drowning. The warm brown eyes locked with his and the pretty face softened in understanding of the things Tom couldn't place into words. Alex nodded and accepted the offered reins.

They crossed the city in silence but this one was comfortable. Some unseen but deeply felt shadow had brightened over the pair and if Tom still rode tense and unhappy, Alex felt the change. He kept his eyes on the brooding doctor while the city around them faded from his concern.

John met them at the stable as if he'd been waiting for them but the man held his tongue and didn't speak. Tom noticed some undercurrent of change in the man or the air around him that set his eyes scanning, looking for trouble. Alex missed it but he saw the instant alertness in Tom and took his cue there. He followed a step behind the larger man into the house.

As the front door swung open on well oiled hinges, they were met with the sight of Ruth sitting on a chair in the entranceway. She was wringing the fabric of her apron over and over in her hands but bounced to her feet when they joined her in the house. James rounded a corner, worry stretched on his face.

"Thank God you came back sooner instead of later." He started in right away, moving to Tom and ignoring Alex.

"What's happened?"

"One of Ruth's neighbors is in labor and has been all night and the child has yet to be born. There's only one doctor around that'll tend to the Negro community and he's out of town at the moment." James quickly explained.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't mean to bother, sir. Mr. Darney sir, he suggested you might be able to help, sir." Ruth bobbed her head but couldn't meet Tom's cold eyes.

Tom put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "You know which is my medical bag?" He waited for the boy to nod. "Good, go fetch it and hurry."

"Yes, sir." Alex hiked up the hem of his skirt and took off at a run for the stairs.

"Ruth, we'll need blankets and boiling water, not just hot, boiling, and plenty of it. The mother, how old is she and is this the first birth?" He snapped out as he stripped off his coat and hat, stripped to his shirt and started rolling up his sleeves.

"Water and blankets are waiting already, sir. Martha, she's just sixteen sir, it's her first child."

Alex came charging back down the steps, winded but clutching the case. Tom turned to James. "Stay here, I'll be back when I can." There was no point ordering Alex to stay, Tom could see that from how tightly the boy held to the medical bag. He wasn't even going to try. "Lead on, Ruth, I'll follow."

"Oh, bless you sir, bless you."

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Two

Tom had expected to be lead to a poor neighborhood filled with makeshift homes and poor sanitation. He hadn't been expecting to be led to a house in the same neighborhood, on the very same street, as James'. It was just as nice, equally well tended to and even larger. There had never been any reason to give it any thought. At home, the white servants his family had employed lived in poor communities and arrived daily for their work. It was a rare neighbor that had a live in staff or even a live in cook. He heard it was common among the very wealthy but Tom's family didn't quiet qualify for that status.

It was a reinforcement of the old slave system. Now they were paid a wage, a small one, and still housed in the homes they tended. It made sense that they'd have their own community behind the veneer of their white employers. Even living side by side, the line between the two world was almost unbreachable.

Tom was lead to the stables, and to a small living space built onto it. Gathered around outside was a collection of men, one, a young boy not yet twenty was pacing and biting his nails. It was always easy to spot the husband and father.

"Emma Mae, Emma Mae!" Ruth called out as she pushed her way around the men. "I brought a doctor, Emma Mae!"

Inside the single room space was a bed, a cook stove and little more. Thin, but well sewn curtains hung on the single window. They were pushed aside now to allow as much light as possible into the room. Three older women moved around, two helping to support the laboring woman and one obviously acting as midwife.

Emma Mae was the midwife. A large, forceful woman with skin the color of night, she eyed Tom carefully before nodding. "Grateful for the help, Doctor."

Tom delved into his questions as he washed up his hands and arms. Alex didn't hear it, there was so much blood. The sheets on the bed were soaked red, the women in the room were stained and splattered, the wash basin was pink with blood. The woman on the bed, her belly swollen and round, was half stripped, sweating, exhausted. The whites of her eyes when she managed to open them were yellowed and her voice was reduced to weakened moaning.

"Alex!" Tom's voice snapped into his shock.

"Yes?"

"My bag, I need to get some of those instruments to boiling. Now!"

Alex nodded and handed the bag over. Tom popped it open and easily fetched out shiny, sharp objects that looked like items from a devils toy box. Each instrument was handed to Alex until Tom seemed satisfied and shut the case again.

"Boil those, and boil them well." He ordered to Alex and watched as the wide eyed blonde moved to where Ruth was waiting by the cook stove. Tom stepped carefully to the bedside and with nods to the women, began his job.

Hours slipped away and the sun grew high in the sky outside. The room grew stuffy and claustrophobic. The mood grew solemn, the women and the doctor all knowing the outcome and none willing to speak of it easily. Finally, Tom stepped back. He wiped a forearm across his brow to try to clear the sweat away without smearing more of the blood across him.

Ruth and Emma Mae drew near him, Alex hovered near the cook stove. Tom shook his head. "I've got the child turned now, the shoulder and arm are no longer blocking the birth canal."

Emma Mae shook her head. "And how you managed that is a miracle of it's own Doc but we three all know that babe is dead." She hissed out soft and low, her voice not carrying to the woman, exhausted and panting for breath, on the bed.

Tom slowly nodded. "Most likely, yes. I've seen no signs the child lives." His eyes rested on the woman that had struggled so long. "I don't believe Annie has any strength left to deliver the babe now. I've been able to control most of the bleeding but she's lost a frightful amount."

"Say it plain, Doc." Emma Mae nodded.

It took a slow indrawn breath and a moment more to run all the options in his mind before Tom settled on two. "I can remove the child. I have the equipment that will work to render the dead child into sections small enough to deliver with greater ease. Annie's odds of survival will increase but the child will not survive. There's almost zero chance that baby is even still alive but doing this removes that chance. It's not a pretty process."

The dark, wise, faces of the women went ashen and Ruth nodded. "I've seen it done with a horse, yes sir."

"Or," Tom went on, knowing the pair understood the seriousness of the situation. "The baby is in alignment. It doesn't appear too large to be delivered under ideal settings. We revive Annie as best we can and force her to deliver this child. The risk to her is far greater, if any bleeding occurs she won't survive. She's exhausted, this will take anything she has left, but even dead, the baby will be born whole. I can help as much as I'm able but the effort is hers, the risk, is hers. If we try to deliver this child, the odds are high we'll lose both of them. I can't make this choice, neither are good options but we've run out of those. I'm going to wash up, discuss it with the others and let me know but a choice has to be made soon." He stepped away from them to where Alex had clean toweling, warmed water and soap waiting. The blonde poured the water over his hands as he tried to scrub the blood from them.

"Tom?" Alex whispered. He wanted reassured that things were going to be alright and his voice carried that need.

Tom just shook his head and dried his hands. Ruth moved closer to his arm and waited for him to look her way.

"Doctor, sir? Let her deliver it, sir. It's God's will now."

He shook his head. "Okay, she can't wait, let's do this."

Tom armed one woman with smelling salts and told her to use them liberally to keep the exhausted woman aware, the other he placed helping to support her, calm her. Alex stayed out of the way, trying to keep items clean and on hand, trying to keep water hot.

There was screaming again, painful, tormented cries forced between clenched teeth. The women and Tom all barked out short words of encouragement, Tom's deep voice weaving around their higher tones to deliver orders. There was very little blood until the head crowned, the laboring young girl's eyes flew open and she moaned in raspy shock. Blood poured, a dark red river to consecrate thighs, bed and Tom's hands.

"No, no!" Tom forced out. "Come on, Annie, come on! One more good push!" But he knew there was too much blood and there was nothing he could do to stop the bleeding until the baby was born.

"Push, Annie, push!" He ordered but the woman was weakening. "You! Emma Mae," he reached out and grabbed the older woman's hands and placed them low on the woman's belly. "Feel the contraction?"

Emma Mae nodded. "Yes sir."

"Help her push the babe out, feel it? Good!" There was sobbing and gasping for breath. "Push!" He ordered and finally the head slipped free, coated in blood the slick head slipped from Tom's grasp and slid back an inch too far. "Again!"

This time Tom got a careful grasp on the limp baby and pulled. He forced the shoulders free of the birth canal and the rest of the slick form fell freely into the world. Tom wasted no time, he handed the unresponsive child to Ruth and sopped at the dark red blood.

"No, God no, not this time, come on." He tried but knew already what he'd find. There wasn't enough blood left in the woman, her lips were pale, her eyes open and unseeing. The bed was the site of carnage and human tragedy and still Tom tried. "The uterine wall is torn, I, there's nothing to do for it, I can't, I,"

Emma Mae rested a hand on the worn and struggling doctor. "Shhh, Doc, shhh, Annie's already with Jesus, you done your best, Doc. Can you see to the babe? It ain't crying Doc."

He forced himself to nod and move away from the dead woman, her blood growing thick and slippery on his hands. The babe was cradled in a blanket and held close to Ruth, the cord already cut and tied off skillfully by Emma Mae. Tom cleared the child's mouth, felt for any sign of heartbeat but there was nothing. The child was already cooling, a tiny corpse as he'd feared.

"The cord was about the poor things neck." Ruth whispered out watching the doctor's motions, seeing the hopelessness in his grey eyes. She wondered now how she'd ever thought them cold and mean.

Tom struggled a little while more and would have continued expect that Ruth pulled the still form away from him. She swaddled the child tightly and laid the boy that had never drawn a breath on his dead mother's breast.

He swallowed hard. "Should I tell the husband?"

Emma Mae shook her head. "We'll tell Ira, thank you doctor, for trying."

"Come on, Doc, come away, let me take you home and fix you a proper bath." Ruth started to tug at Tom's arm, making it clear the group of family and friends wished to mourn alone.

Tom pulled away from the unwelcome touch and pushed his way outside. The men parted around him, taking in the hard look on his face. Shocked away by the sight of a white man coated in so much blood. The husband, Ira, knew, he pushed into the room and his grief torn wailing broke the afternoon air. Tom found his way to an outdoor pump and sluiced water over his arms, hands and face. Knowing it wasn't enough to wash him clean but needing the cool touch to shock his anger away.

When he shook the water from his face and head, Ruth and Alex were standing near. Alex clutched his medical bag and he knew there was no point to asking if all the instruments had been returned. He just knew Alex had seen to it.

"I'm sorry." He forced out.

Ruth shook her head. "None of that, you're just one man, this was God's will. Annie was a good girl."

Tom found no comfort in those words but he let the two of them lead him back to James' house. Let Ruth fuss about drawing him a proper hot bath and getting both of them some late lunch because it was easier than debating her. Her faith was strong, it allowed her to accept what should have been unacceptable. There was no similar comfort for Tom. Two souls had died today not because God willed it but because medical science and his own skill were lacking. He knew where the fault lay and it wasn't with God.

Tom paused just outside of James' house, letting Ruth bustle ahead to hide her sorrow in busy activity. Alex paused and stood waiting for something. An acknowledgement or word, or explanation, something from Tom to make sense of the day.

He found himself fresh out of wisdom and overstocked with bitter truths. "This is what is to be a doctor. It's not heroic. It's grief and blood, pain and death." He wanted to sigh heavily but he couldn't bring himself to give into that indulgence. There were no more words and with heavy steps he went inside, leaving Alex along, clutching his medical bag, in the bright afternoon sunlight.

It took over an hour for the bath to be ready but Tom had never been so grateful for the luxury of a real hot bath before. He stripped the bloody, dirty clothes off and washed off quickly in the waiting pale of water, wiping as much of the blood and sweat from his body as he could before getting into the steaming bath. Finally, he sunk into the water and closed his eyes, trying to shut off his thoughts.

The water had started to cool when he finally reached for the soap but it wasn't the plain white soap he'd expected. The scent of lavender drifted to his nose and tickled it. There was no doubt where it was from, he doubted if James' house stocked lavender scented soap and the bar wasn't new. It had been used lightly which meant it was the bar he'd given Alex. The small offering eased an ache that wasn't in his body, soothed him in ways not just from the relaxing scent. It was what he needed more than the bath, he'd have to remember to thank Alex later.

Alex didn't surrender the medical bag until he'd had a chance to clean, dry and replace each instrument back into its spot. It gave him something to do while water was being heated for the copper tub and when that chore was done, he helped Ima haul the water to the tub. It was all just things to keep busy and even though he saved a basin of hot water for himself, he wasn't in any rush to try to relax.

He paused as the last of the hot water arrived in the bathing room. He wanted to hide somewhere and sneak into Tom's bath, seduce the man when he was naked. Tom was so careful about being clothed or mostly clothed during their few encounters that the idea of seeing the man nude, wet, relaxed, was tempting. He shook that idea off, knowing it wasn't fair, knowing deep down that Tom needed the time alone. Alex needed to leave something of himself for the doctor, the pained look in his eyes demanded it, and with a smile, he knew what to do.

So it was without his beloved soap that he washed off quickly in the basin of hot water in his bedroom. The warm water made him sleepy and as soon as Alex had dabbed at the flecks of blood on his dress, washing as much of the stain out as he could, he donned only a chemise and laid across the bed to think. Which, apparently, wasn't something he did well because as soon as he'd stretched out, he fell asleep.

Alex became slowly aware that his head was pillowed on someone's lap. The warm heat of flesh, the soft give of tissue, the heady scent of male eased him from blackness as much as the hand that was idly toying with his loose curls. He sighed and reluctantly opened his eyes. All they could focus on was the cover of the book his pillow was reading, it was a book he'd seen dozens of times.

"Tom?" He asked sleepily, confused.

A warm voice, more tenor than Tom's chuckled out and the book closed. "Not quite little one but I am flattered." The deep Southern accent, the hazel eyes and the bright smile matched the face Alex knew from a carefully shared picture.

"Sam?" He tried to sit up but the hand stroking his head refused to let him. All he could do was turn from laying on his side to his back and looking straight up at the smiling man.

"Clever, clever." The hand strayed from hair to face and began tracing across Alex's nose and lips.

"But, you're dead, how?"

Sam laughed. "This is a dream silly. My goodness, he was right, you are far too pretty."

For some reason the frank compliment made Alex blush and that only made the man above him laugh harder.

"None of that, it's a truth you already know. You've survived because of that face, no shame in that but isn't it nice having someone more interested in what's inside your head?"

"You mean Tom?"

"Of course."

Alex shook his head. "He loves you, there's no room in him for anything else."

"Now you're not being so clever. You can win him if you want him, the only question remains, do you want to?"

"You're encouraging me?" His thoughts felt hazy, thick.

"You're good for him, consider this my blessing. I want him happy." Sam smiled softly. "Or as happy as he can allow himself to be."

"You can't approve or disapprove, you're not real, this is just a dream."

"It doesn't change the fact that you feel better after hearing me out does it?"

"Guess not."

"So, if you make up your mind and win Tom, whatever shall you do with him." The hazel eyes drew closer.

"I, I don't know." Alex closed his eyes and parted his lips, letting the dream man kiss him. He sighed as the lips began to press softly to his skin. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

Alex started awake, sprawled out across his bed and painfully hard. He had to blink for a moment to clear his head. The dream had felt so real, he was certain if he looked around he'd find the source of the lips that had been kissing him so gently.

"Just a dream." He whispered and let his head flop back onto the bed. "A creepy, very real dream about a dead love that's left me way to turned on."

Alex glanced around the room again and noticed the time. He groaned. "And a half hour to

dinner, so no time to do a thing about it. Damn it.” But the words were more pout than curse, his mind was too much on the odd dream. He hauled himself off the bed and tried to think unsexy thoughts while he dressed for dinner.

On his way out, he paused at the mirror. “You really think something like me could win someone like him?”

But the ghost which had spoken so clearly in his dream, remained silent now.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Three

Dinner was a quiet affair. Tom pushed his food around more than he ate it but James and Alex kept some conversation moving. It wasn't difficult if you pretended the day had never happened. Both men, fortunately, had a knack for ignoring difficult things.

“I've received an invitation to a dinner party next Wednesday, would you two care to attend as well?” James asked of Tom but his eyes stayed on Alex.

The question was the only thing Tom had responded to during the dinner. “It's generous of you to offer but we should be leaving. I was thinking two days from now. There's a boat crossing the river and we can take a train from there. We'll be in Abilene in a matter of days that way.”

James didn't react outwardly but the color drained from Alex's face before the boy could hide it. “Well, you'll stop by on your way East again? It would be a pity to drift apart again after we found each other by such chance.”

“Of course.” Tom agreed but he went back to ignoring his food.

Alex looked across the table at Tom but it was only James who would meet his eyes. The black was soft and warm, there was understanding in their depth and a gentle smile on the face. Alex nodded in acceptance and drew on James offered support, an unlikely ally but one he'd cling to.

Once they retreated to their rooms for the night, Alex knew without asking that Tom wasn't going to be inviting him in again. The solitude around the man was something almost physical, a wall that went unseen but stopped approach just the same. Alex allowed it to drive him away and he sat in his bedroom, brushing out his hair and listening to the house grow quiet and dark.

The afternoon's strange dream weighed heavily on his mind. Tom couldn't be won over by the likes of him, it was impossible and it was a cruel trick of his own mind to tell him otherwise. Men like Tom had obligations beyond the little world Alex knew. They drifted into lives like Alex's and drifted out again as they willed. He had nothing to offer to bind the man to him, not in any real sense. They'd reach Abilene and Tom would ride away.

That thought spiked a pain in his chest so sharp that Alex thought he might have some physical injury. It made him desperate to steal every moment he could until the day he had to see Tom leave. Memories were all a body collected after all, he'd learned that early in life. Memories and scars that traced life's passage and comforted or scolded as the days grew short.

It was easy to cross the darkened hallway to Tom's bedroom door. He stood outside, uncertain

once he saw the lamp still burned. He'd intended to slip into the darkened room and slid into the bed beside Tom and sleep there, curled against the warm length of his body, wrapped in the strength of his arms, but the light changed his plans. The light spilling under the doorframe sapped his courage and almost made him turn back.

He didn't knock and the door wasn't locked. Alex slipped into the room and had the door shut behind him before Tom was able to turn around and see him. He pressed himself to the door but Tom neither spoke or rose from where he sat at the small desk, pen in hand.

After the silence stretched out, unbroken by angry protests, to a point of pain, Alex spoke. "What're you writing?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

Tom shook his head. "I'm still trying to finish a letter to my mother." He turned back to the desk and ignored the blonde and the wide, warm eyes.

"That should be easy, shouldn't it?" The lack of anger in Tom's voice drained the tension from Alex's shoulders. Uninvited, he moved into the room and perched himself on the foot of the bed.

"My mother isn't like yours, it's not so easy. I always feel like a liar when I write to her. Everything important to me I have to hide from her."

"So, stop hiding it, tell her the truth."

That made Tom laugh a little in bitterness. "No. Dear Mother, I'm in Baton Rouge and I visited my dead male lover's grave. After that I was as weak as Father claims and failed to save a laboring woman and her child. I'm staying with James here in the city, by the way I've been laying with him since we were teenagers, we happened to meet on the riverboat. I'm traveling with a young girl who is actually a boy who I've done lewd things with and by the way I happened to murder three men shortly after meeting him. Don't worry, Mother, they weren't the first men I've killed and won't be the last. So, dear, Mother, your youngest son is a failure as a doctor, a murderer, a sodomite, and by the way how are you?"

"Lewd things." Alex smiled warmly in memory.

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Would it make you feel better to tell her?"

"That's not the point, it isn't about me. She doesn't wish to know. They think I'm being selfish by wandering around and not settling down and raising a family. They can't even understand that little thing, how could they even begin to understand my life?"

"You don't even let them try, you barely let me try and we share lewd things."

"Alex, if you really were a young woman and my father received word that I was connected to you, he would be livid with rage. You aren't the sort of woman I should be attached to. You're Southern, your family isn't wealthy, you aren't part of society, you would not be acceptable and he would do anything to remove you. That's the best to be hoped for if you were female. They'd never forgive me for what I really am."

The empty bitter words, the broken loneliness of a child unloved by parents, was obvious. They were things Alex wanted to tackle, to wrestle to the ground and force from Tom's life but that would only make the man more aware of his own vulnerability. The only way to get Tom to keep opening up, to keep speaking, was to ignore the little gains they were making.

So Alex jumped on the least threatening, the best distraction. "You're attached to me?"

The blank emptiness cleared and Tom huffed in gruff amusement. "I'm getting used to you, leech that you are."

There was no malice in the words. "You know you like how I suck on to you."

Tom's eyes widened at the bold statement.

"You walked into that one, don't give me such an easy opening to tease you and then look all shocked and horrified when I take it!" Alex scolded but he softened his expression. "I'm sorry you feel you have to lie to your mother but that's her fault not yours. If she loved you the way a mother should, you could tell her anything."

"Is that how you define love?"

Alex shrugged and picked at the threads on the quilt, uncomfortable having the conversation turned around on him. "I don't know, besides my mother, no one's ever loved me. She didn't live to see what I am now, she wouldn't have approved but she would have still loved me. I just think, when love is there, honesty thrives."

"I'm sorry." Tom put the pen down, knowing the letter would wait, again. "I didn't mean to chase away your smile."

Alex shook his hair back from his face and forced a smile to return. "You didn't, see? I never worry about little things, anyway. I've been lucky to have the help of kind men."

Tom sat on the foot of the bed beside the painfully cheerful smile. "You lie too easily." He brushed curls back. "We'll find your uncle."

His uncle, he'd forgotten. He'd struggled so much to reach the man and the safety he represented, sacrificed so much, and he'd just forgotten. "Yes, my uncle." He kept the smile steady.

"You're lying again. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it just seemed so impossible." Which was the truth and they were stepping too closely to his truths. "You shouldn't blame yourself for today. I know you wanted to try to save Annie. The choice wasn't yours."

"My father wouldn't have given them the choice, he would have picked what he felt was best for them and done it."

"You aren't your father and I'm glad for that."

"She was your age. Did you know that? Do you know how many girls I've delivered babies to that were your age, some were on their third child already. Years ago, I lost a girl in childbirth who was only thirteen, she'd been married over a year. It makes me ill, they're just children themselves."

Alex leaned over and kissed Tom's lips, gently, chastely. He watched the grey eyes flutter shut in surrender but Tom who generally controlled every aspect of their lewd encounters made no moves to control this. Alex stroked the tip of his tongue across Tom's lips and they parted obediently for him. Gently, he plundered the offered mouth. There was passion hidden in the kiss but it was covered in sadness. He kissed Tom's face, stroking his hands along the neck and strong shoulders, leaning into the man that neither leaned toward him nor pulled away. He kissed spots of flesh on the column of neck that made Tom shiver but every where he touched was cloth.

"Take this off for me." Alex whispered into an ear while he tugged on Tom's shirt. "I want to feel your skin. Please?"

Tom obeyed without question and pulled the fabric over his head. He'd never allowed Alex such intimate contact but tonight he couldn't refuse. Brown eyes swept his body, drank in his flesh.

It was more than Alex had expected. Tom was paler where the sun never touched him but not pale. There was strength in the arms that he'd felt and across the shoulders that so easily carried him but he hadn't expected the chest to be lean as well. There was nothing soft on the man, he was masculine and his body screamed that he was capable of anything. Across his chest was a mat of dark hair, just enough to run fingers across, that tapered to a thin line that lead the eye to a round naval and lower into his pants. It made Alex want to lick that line, trace it downward. It made him want Tom to sleep shirtless every night so he could fall asleep tangling his fingers in the dark chest hairs. His eyes fell to the nipples, round and pink, the flat already raised up to hard desire. From the teasing touches he'd been allowed over the cloth he knew they were highly sensitive, he longed to torment them.

For all the expanse of exposed flesh offered in dirty fantasy, Alex felt little current desire. Something about the night didn't speak of sex but something deeper. He could lead them into sex, he knew he could make Tom respond, pleasure him, guide him to release but something would be lost that way. Something more rare and while he didn't know what it was, he wanted to see if he could draw it out.

Alex let his fingers touch Tom with great caution, feeling the weight of his eyes on his face. He drew his hands across the width of the shoulders, traced the line of collarbone, circled the divot of the throat. Under the pads of his fingers, he could feel the breath hitch in Tom's throat and when he glanced up he saw the face twisted up in barely contained emotion, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

He drew a hand downward, pressing the flat of his palm above Tom's heart. "Such strength, such a brave heart beats here."

The hitched breath became a cloaked sob.

Alex leaned in and kissed Tom's lips again, lightly, teasingly, before he wrapped his arms around the proud body. "Shhhh, it's okay."

They hovered there, on the edge of a moment that would change everything and Tom teetered. He knew he should push the boy away, snap at the blonde to leave him alone. Emotion wasn't something he was comfortable with in the best of situations, anger was expected and allowed, strength, stubbornness, pride, but vulnerability? Vulnerability was a sin, weakness was unforgivable and Tom hated both emotions.

A hand snaked across his hair, fabric scratched across his skin. Clothing was a shield and Alex had stripped some of that armor away but not for the purpose he'd assumed. Touch tore at his control, demanded he not fold back up on himself, fingers slid down his spine in contact that was more comfort than erotic and pulled the threads of Tom's strength with them.

The first sob was the hardest. It wrenched out with sharp pain, stole his breath and cut his soul. The rest were easier. Of their own accord, his arms wrapped around the slender back, pulled the lithe body tight against his own. He clung to the offered acceptance and buried hands and face in the masses of blonde curls. Hidden now in the shelter of the slender boy's strength, Tom wept.

The excitement of traveling by train wore off quickly. Alex found the slower pace of horseback far more to his approval over the loud, uncomfortable train. It didn't help that it would have taken twice as long by horse and he suddenly found himself in no rush to reach his Uncle.

James had said a warm farewell to them and seen them off with a smile. Before he'd turned to leave, he'd pressed an envelope into Alex's hand. Inside had been a lovely letter of encouragement and support as well as a small amount of money. It would be enough to safely return him to Baton Rouge if it was necessary. That night, Alex had stitched the money into the hem of his corset, securing it the best way he knew how.

The farewell between the old friends was more casual. Alex had insisted that Tom spend their last evening going out with James and the two friends had gone out to the towns gambling halls and saloons after dinner. He hadn't waited up to see just when they returned but he could tell from the happy glaze to James' eyes that they hadn't just stumbled into bed for sleep.

He wasn't sure how James managed to see his friends slip out of his life with no promise to ever see them again, and still remain happy. The man's placid acceptance of life and the lives around him awed Alex. His willingness to let go of things when anyone else would clutch tightly a-hold, inspired him. For all his griping about James, Alex admired the man a great deal and wouldn't feel the least hesitation to accept the offer of shelter if he ever required it again.

Farewell's blunt touch was soothed by the thrill of travel. Alex had too much new to experience to dwell on goodbye's sadness but Tom had stood at the railing of their river ferry and watched the city disappear behind them. The first day on the train had left Tom with too much to grumble about and Alex too much to explore for either to speak much or think of things to come.

It was easier that way. Under the watchful eyes of the other travelers they were forced to return to the image of Godfather and ward. The confines were even tighter, the privacy even less, than on the river boat. That left no opportunities for a stolen moment alone with Tom and the excitement of train travel quickly disappeared for Alex.

He watched from a window as the landscape of Abilene rolled past. It was late in the afternoon when the train finally reached the station. Alex's heart was pounding as Tom handed him from the train and led him to a bench on the wood platform.

"Wait here, it's going to take a bit to get the horses unloaded. I'll be back." He eyed the wide eyed blonde. "Okay?"

Alex nodded. "Okay."

"Stay out of trouble!" Tom warned as he left.

Alex sat alone. It was a cow town, a nothing place a few years before. The railroad had changed that. Now it was a thriving town filled with life and boom. He entertained himself watching as the life around the train swirled. People came and went, things loaded and unloaded but apparently this train carried no cattle because the dusty men that stood around seemed to hold no function.

An hour slipped by and still Alex sat waiting. The train's crowd began to thin out, the people on the platform grew less and still Tom didn't return. He didn't start to worry until the train's whistle blew and pulled away from the station. That drew him to his feet and he walked the length of the platform, scanned around and saw no sign of Tom anywhere. The other side of the platform proved just as useless.

Tom had told him to wait and wait he would. For all he knew Tom was finding a stable for their horses or arranging rooming, something. If he wandered away from the platform Tom would have to search around for him and that would only anger the doctor.

"Hey pretty lady." A voice called behind Alex as he was heading back toward his bench.

Alex ignored the voice and kept for his bench. When he sat down he saw the group of three men, dusty cowhands, sliding over to him. The bottles they held were well consumed and the

contents had made them bold.

"Waiting for someone, pretty lady?"

Alex ignored them as they drew closer.

"Train's gone, you fresh off it?" The center man called. "Hey! Talking to you! We can show you round the town. Pretty thing like you could use a good showing around." The other two snickered.

Alex lifted angry dark eyes. "You're drunk so your rudeness can be over looked. Go away, my affairs are none of your concern."

The trio continued to tease and laugh, the jokes would have been too subtle for a real lady to grasp but Alex understood.

"Must I call a sheriff? Go away."

The ringleader spat. "Bitch!" But they wandered away.

Alex decided he didn't like Abilene. It wasn't just the drier air or the green of spring that carried the knowing of summer dryness but the city lacked the beauty of Memphis or the charm of Baton Rouge. Or maybe it was that Tom wasn't here, he felt a touch homesick while waiting alone.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Four

As time faded Alex had another more pressing problem. His bladder was aching. He really needed to piss, and soon, it was growing urgent. There didn't appear to be any outhouses in sight. He glanced around and still there was no Tom in sight, there was nothing to be done for it, he had to find a secluded spot.

Unhappily, Alex wandered away from the train platform, across the tracks and to a small grove of trees. He found his way behind a tree, glanced around before hauling up his skirts and squatting down. One thing he'd had to learn was how to piss and make it still look like he was a girl. It wasn't difficult in a skirt, the fabric hid so much. It took a little balancing, holding the fabric with one hand while using the other under the skirts to keep from pissing on his boots, but he'd done it often enough over the years that it was easy.

With a sigh and careful eye to avoid the puddle being quickly absorbed into the dirt, Alex stood and soothed out his skirts. He was halfway back across the small glade of trees when a voice stopped him.

"Well, pretty lady wanted to get cozy like."

Alex didn't even turn, he didn't need his eyes to see. The voice, the tone and drunken slur to the words, spoke more than words could. A cold shiver of prey settled in his stomach and he hurried to clear the screening trees.

He didn't make it. The snapping of twigs and other debris on the hard packed ground was his only warning of pursuit before hands grabbed his shoulders. The smell of sweat and stale animal

barely covered by the reek of whiskey, wrapped around him as firmly as the body. Alex opened his mouth to shout or scream but found it covered by a thick, calloused hand. He bucked and squirmed but the man holding him was strong and easily dragged Alex deeper into the trees.

The one holding him laughed and inhaled deeply. "She smells nice."

The one that had taunted him on the platform, the ringleader of the group of friends, stepped close. "Pretty ladies always smell nice." He let a large, wide knife flutter in front of Alex's eyes. "Don't scream and you stay a pretty lady. We just want to have a little fun, that's all."

A real lady would have fainted from fear alone but Alex had survived far worse, seen far worse. He wasn't the delicate thing he appeared to be and while he was frightened, rightfully frightened, he was smart enough to keep his head together. The man with the knife stepped closer, forcing Alex back tight against the restraining body, his hand slid out touching blond hair and smooth skin.

The touch made Alex ill, he tried to jerk away but there was no where to go. He could feel the drunks fingers leaving streaks of dirt over his face and neck. Normally he'd bargain, beg or trade to free himself and get away as unharmed as possible but with his mouth covered there wasn't anything he could do. The wandering hand slipped lower, over his chest and down. Alex forced out muttered protests, knowing what the worst case situation would be.

The worst did happen. The hand slid lower and boldly grabbed between his legs. Only instead of finding the flat planes of a woman, there was an unmistakable fullness. The drunken cowboy paused, his hand went from sexual play to uncertain exploration. "What the..."

"What's wrong?" The one holding Alex asked, his grip slacking a little.

Alex bucked again, fought and struggled but they quickly pinned him in place once more. Only this time the one not holding him had his hands sliding up under the skirts. Rough hands found the slit in the bloomers and didn't find a woman there.

"Fuckers a boy!"

"What?"

Alex forced himself to laugh behind the gagging hand.

"You think this is funny, freak?" The cowboy swung out and brought his fist into Alex's ribs. "Fuck! I got a hard on for a boy! Fucking freak!" The words were punctuated with violence.

"What do you mean?" The second said, letting the gasping woman drop to the ground.

"I mean, it's a boy!" The man bent down, knife out.

Alex saw it and forced himself to move. He was almost to his feet when a boot lashed out and impacted with his knee. The pain was sharp and instant, his leg spasmed and gave out. He fell hard onto the ground but he didn't stay there long. Hands fell on him, pulled at cloth, tore fabric. Alex tossed up his hands, trying to grasp onto a wrist or arm, to find some balance in the chaos. The hilt of the knife landed heavily on his head, knocking his hands and his senses wild.

When his vision cleared enough for focus to return, Alex found himself devoid of most of his clothing. What the pair were unable to tear, they cut. He felt cold metal against his hip and jerked wildly away. The blade cut into his skin, sliding free and leaving him in only his chemise. The blood was bright as it slid down his leg, soaking into the white fabric.

The chemise was bunched up and the truth of his gender was exposed. "See! It's a boy!" The

first exclaimed, showing the evidence to his friend.

"What the hell were you thinking, boy?" The second shouted. He kicked out and his booted foot caught Alex's back, kicking the skinny blonde sideways. "You think you're a girl? Huh?"

They beat him and Alex found himself unable to block the blows that landed. For all their anger, they still avoided his face. His lip was split but that was from landing on the ground, his cheekbone was swelling but that was from a stray blow. For the most part, they aimed their attack to his body and that left Alex few options.

You like being a girl, huh? You like shaking your tail for decent men to see? You want to be a girl so badly! You want to be a woman, fine! We'll treat you like a woman, like the prick tease you are!"

Hands buried themselves in Alex's hair and lifted his head up. The man standing over him smacked the back of his hand down across his face. Alex closed his eyes and let the blow land, let his head roll with the impact. There was no point in trying to fight, even now with his legs freed of the tangling skirts. His knee wasn't working, his breath burned like fire in his lungs, the blood roared in his ears. He was too hurt, too beaten to try for escape now. The only option left was submission and the hope of survival.

The men were muttering obscenities, the leader the more vocal of the pair. Alex kept his eyes closed until he heard a cry of startled pain that wasn't his own. When the hands on him let go and he was able to push back the pain and open his eyes, he saw the leader of the pair scrambling backwards away from his friend. The friend was trying to crawl to his feet but a dark shape kept hitting him, knocking him down.

It took several heartbeats, several painful breaths for Alex to understand the dark shape was Tom. The sunlight seemed cold on him, his coat gave him a menacing air. He was silent in his beating, and swift. The man at his feet was soon down and still and he was rounding on the obvious leader. Alex couldn't see Tom's face but he could imagine it was fierce, the cowboy nearly pissed himself in fear.

"You like to play with knives?" Tom growled out but he kicked the blade from the man's hands. "Should I teach you what happens to little boys that play with knives?" But his own knife stayed sheathed. Tom gathered the man up by his shirt and started hitting him. Blow after blow rained down and the cowboy soon was limp and unconscious but still Tom hit him.

"Tom," Alex forced out. "Don't kill him, they're drunk. Please, don't." He didn't care if Tom killed them or not but he knew Tom would. "Please."

Tom stopped. He froze with the limp, bloodied man hanging from the grip he had on his shirt. It took several breaths to push his anger aside and force his hand to let go of the man. There was blood on his hands and he wiped it off on the beaten cowboy before he moved to where Alex lay.

It was a pitiful sight. The blue dress Alex loved so much had been torn and cut from his body and lay in puddles around the clearing accented by most of his clothing. The chemise had been torn, letting the snagged and ruined length of his stockings and legs show. It was bloodied near his hip where it had been cut and the flesh below was cut as well. The blonde hair was tangled, dirty and disarrayed, the face below it was bloodied and red. The boy lay where he'd fallen, looking small and broken in the afternoon sunlight.

Tom hurried to his side and knelt. He took the face between his hands and turned the dark eyes into the light. "Are you okay?"

The worry, the fear, in the grey eyes made Alex smile. He reached out a still gloved hand and touched the side of Tom's face. "I'm fine now. I was worried you'd left me."

He shook his head and forced out one word. "Never." He swallowed hard and forced emotion aside. His hands began to probe the bones of Alex's face, the tender wound on his head. The slid down across his body in quick efficiency, checking and learning each wound. Even though the touch was gentle, it still drew out painful gasps that made Tom hate himself.

He stripped off his coat and draped it around the boy's slender shoulders. As Alex watched, he moved around the clearing gathering up cloth. He balled it into a tight bundle and knelt back down. "Can you hold this?"

Alex nodded and accepted the bundle. "I thought you'd left."

"I found your uncle, I wanted to surprise you. I'm sorry, I should never have left you alone. I,"

He pressed fingers to Tom's lips. "Shhh. It's okay, you came for me." He glanced to his legs. "I don't think I can stand."

"Don't try, you're knees badly hurt." He wrapped his hands around the injured boy and lifted him into his arms. "Your uncle runs a hotel, it's near by." He'd bought them rooms and stabled their horses in that hotel before he learned that the owner, Albert Asher, lived in a small house attached to the back side of the hotel.

His plan had been to check them in to the hotel, let them clean up and eat, maybe get a good night's sleep and introduce themselves to Mr. Asher in the morning. That plan was impossible now. If he carried Alex into the hotel as he was, people would ask questions. A beaten guest would bring the attention of the owner and Alex's uncle would meet him this way, one way or another. Worse, there would be gossip and gossip was something someone like Alex had to avoid at all costs.

So he carried Alex swiftly to the hotel and around the corner to the back. The house was built tight against the hotel, flush against it but it had it's own front porch and small yard. Tom gently placed Alex, who drifted between awake and unaware, into one of the chairs on the porch. He knocked strongly on the door and waited.

Just before he was going to knock again, the door opened. The man that answered it was handsome. Tom could see some of Alex in the older man. Albert Asher had the same fine boned grace but on him it was less delicate and more graceful. Age had given the man the air of authority, lining his eyes and mouth in deep ruts of laughter. His hair was still thick but white as snow, showing just hints of it's former dusty blonde around the temples.

"May I help you?" The voice was a slightly deeper version of Alex's. The man could have been his father and not his uncle.

"Mr. Albert Asher?" He asked but he already knew.

"You have me at the disadvantage, sir, should I know you?"

"No, sir. My name is Dr. Thomas Lambry. Is this your letter sir?" Tom pulled Alex's letter from his pocket and offered it to the man.

Asher took it and turned it over, the look on his face grew wary. "Emily Horne is my sister, yes, this is my letter. Has something happened?"

The urgency wanted him to push the other man aside and haul Alex indoors to treat his wounds but this had to be done carefully. "Something like that sir, your niece is here with me, she's been injured." He stepped back and allowed the other man to glance to the side and take in the sight of just what was on his porch. "I'm sorry sir, I didn't mean to make the introduction in this way. I

stepped into town to locate you and some cowboys,”

“Say no more, please, bring her in. How may I assist you? June!” The man shouted and a woman close to his own age came forward to stand behind him. “Hurry up and get the guest room opened up.”

Tom gathered Alex up in his arms. “Thank you sir, thank you.” He carried the boy inside.

Asher paused. “My goodness, she looks just like her mother.” He shook his head. “What can we do to help you?”

“Hot water and we’re registered at your hotel, our things are there. I need my medical bag.”

Asher nodded. “Right away, I’ll see to it, June, my wife, will show you to the spare room.”

“Thank you.” Tom followed the woman to the stairs and up them. “I’m sorry to disturb your household, ma’am.” She wasn’t the young woman they’d heard spoken of in Memphis.

She waved off the thanks. “None needed, poor dear is family. They didn’t brutalize her did they? Some of those cowboys, they don’t know their place. It’s not safe in these parts for a woman to wander unescorted and unknown.”

Tom settled Alex onto the bed, the room was small but serviceable. “I arrived in time.” He started to peel back his coat and only then remembered how exposed Alex was.

“I know some care, nursing, let me help.”

His hands clutched onto the coat. “Please, if you could, the water?”

She nodded and pulled the door shut behind her. Tom ran a hand over Alex’s face and the eyes fluttered open. “I need you to stay awake a little while, okay? I need you to tell me if this hurts? Do you understand?”

Alex nodded and let Tom pull the coat from around him. Tom’s hands fell to his stomach and carefully started putting pressure at various spots. He gasped a few times and each time Tom would stop and question, probe closer before moving on. Finally he finished and moved aside to strip off his jacket and roll up his sleeves. He sat down on the far side of the bed and brushed the hair back from Alex’s face.

“You’ve broken some ribs, the cut on your leg needs stitched and your knee is dislocated. It’s nothing I can’t fix, but you need to try to stay awake for me. Okay?” He brushed the hair back and told his heart to stop racing.

Alex sighed. “You came for me.”

“Of course I did.” He leaned down and brushed his lips across the damaged pair below him. There was a taste of blood to the kiss.

The door opened and a gasp echoed out. Tom broke the kiss with a guilty start and saw June Asher standing with a basin of steaming water in the door way. Her eyes were wide and they darted from where Tom was raising up from the kiss to the mostly nude and very exposed body on the bed.

Tom glanced down and there was no doubt that Alex wasn’t a girl. He froze. June froze. Alex closed his eyes and sighed. There was a long moment of uncertainty before June drew a long breath.

"Well, I've brought the water, do you need cloth, toweling, bandages?" She asked in only the slightest of higher tones. Her eyes continued to dart from the interrupted kiss to the tattered female clothing on a boy's body.

Tom hurried over to take the water from her. "I, it's just, it's, I..."

She passed the basin to him and held her hands up and lowered her eyes. "Do you need anything more?"

"Whatever you can spare, I'd be grateful for." He glanced to the bed but wasn't sure if Alex was still conscious. "Mrs. Asher, I,"

She shook her head and backed out of the room. "I think Albert would be better to help you than myself. Given the circumstances and such."

"Mrs. Asher, should we leave?"

She glanced up to the solemn grey eyes and saw the worried fear behind them. "Don't be silly, even I can see this child is Albert's niece, nephew, whichever. We don't turn our backs to family." She stepped back into the hallway. "I'll send Albert right up."

The door shut and Tom rubbed a hand across his eyes. So much time had been spent worrying about what Mr. Asher's reaction to the truth would be. They had several conversation on how to even approach the subject to the man, that to have it so easily dragged out into the open seemed almost anti-climatic. Tom wasn't one to easily accept understanding and just because Mrs. Asher brushed off the shock didn't mean that it would be so casually accepted when the crisis had passed.

There remained no reason to keep Alex dressed. Tom took the time to remove the last of the torn clothing, using a drape of the torn chemise across his hips to preserve some modesty.

"I know you're awake." Tom muttered as he slid his hands across the bruises on the boy's side.

"Can we pretend otherwise?" Alex cracked an eye open.

Tom shook his head. "Not until I see how bad that head wound is. You need to stay awake, don't worry, I'll have to sedate you to put that knee back into place."

"She took it well, maybe things will be okay?"

The knock on the door chased words away. Tom moved to open it and then quickly to take some of the burden from the older man. He stacked the cloth toweling and bandages to the side and made room for Mr. Asher to set the cases down.

"I didn't know which of your things you needed, I, well, this is a sight awkward." His eyes darted to where Alex lay on the bed but he shut the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Uncle."

The man studied the injured face. "You really are Emily's child, you look just like your mother." He shook his head and turned his eyes to Tom. "Are you really a doctor?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, we'll worry about questions later. What needs to be done?"

Tom felt a weight lift. Medicine he knew and that was a safe retreat. It wasn't Alex on the bed or his uncle beside him, just a list of wounds to be treated and an extra pair of hands to help.

"We're going to have to sedate him, do you grow faint at the smell of chloroform, Mr. Asher?"

The man's face paled.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Five

Once Alex was tended and tucked into the comfortable bed, Tom washed up and put his case back into order. He found Mrs. Asher waiting downstairs for him and while he moved with uncertainty, there was no reservation in her.

"Albert is taking in some fresh air on the porch. I've cider cooled from the cellar waiting for you there. I'm sure the two of you have much to discuss."

Tom nodded. "Thank you." He glanced upstairs. "Alex won't wake for a bit but if you'd be so kind as to check occasionally?"

"Of course. Go on now, you look pale, you could use the fresh air as well."

It would have been easier if he'd looked pale because of the chloroform. He nodded again in thanks and moved to the front door. There was a steady, gentle breeze blowing as the afternoon was fading away and the porch caught the setting light well. The sounds of the hotel and the streets bustle seemed muted here and Tom stepped out onto the smooth wood boards mindful of breaking that hushed world.

"Sit, have some cider."

Tom moved to take the empty chair on the other side of the small table and the two glasses waiting, untouched. "Thank you."

"You've a good hand at doctoring. Neat line of stitches, and you popped that knee back in like it was nothing." Albert picked up his glass and sipped it. "So that's Alexandria."

"Yes, sir."

"And my sister?"

"Dead sir, for several years now."

He set the cider down but let his eyes wander the yard in front of them. "Foolish woman, I shouldn't have let her go. How do you know them? What's your part in this story?"

There was no point in being totally blunt but the truth was far more appealing than a lie. "I happened across Alex when he was in a bad way, helped him out. I promised I'd help him reach you in Memphis. Only, when we arrived, we were told you'd moved here."

Albert was quiet. "I've buried two wives so far in my life. The first, Anna, died of typhoid. I brought Martha out here to save her, I think she died of loneliness. She hated it here, she passed on within the year, before the hotel was finished. June, she was widowed and, well, we struck up a friendship, an understanding." He turned to face Tom. "She says she saw you kissing the boy."

Tom nodded. "I was."

Albert snorted. "I'm not a provincial, son, I've seen my share of things and June used to run a house of loose morals. She knows what she saw was no friendly buss."

"It wasn't, sir."

"So, that's how the boy paid for his way here?"

Tom had a moment of disorientation where he felt like he was being questioned by a version of Alex decades in the future. He shook himself mentally and cleared his head. "No, sir, I've attempted to be honorable to him."

"But you are that sort." It was an accusation not a question.

Tom wasn't going to make this easy. "What sort would that be, sir?"

"The sort of man with a taste for young boys." Albert nearly spat the words out.

Tom stiffened, he found himself sitting on the edge of his chair. "No, sir, I am not that sort." He found the words easily enough but so much more difficult to speak. "I do prefer the company of men, I won't deny that to you. Men mind you, not boys and Alex, while older than he appears, is still too young."

"Put your feathers down, son, put them down." The older man chuckled and settled back in his chair. "I saw how gently you tended him, I'm not blind, but I won't tolerate certain sorts under my roof." He smiled and took up his cider again. "I don't believe you're that sort."
"I'm not."

"You're fond of him?"

"You're taking all of this very well."

Albert motioned to the untouched cider. "Drink, I promise it's not poisoned." He waited until Tom took up his glass. "That's better. You young people think you invented everything! I've seen many things, made and lost fortunes, used to carry guns just like yours. I've had friends I'd trust my life to that took only men to bed. Would you be more comfortable if I ranted at you about morality?"

"No sir, just surprised. Alex has been worried."

"We'll get to Alex in time. There are advantages, Dr. Lambry, to having been born to a dirt poor family instead of which ever uppity up hall you were spawned in. Do you know what happened to my sister?"

"Illness I believe, sir. Alex would be the one to ask that of."

Albert nodded. "She was eleven years younger than me. We're half siblings. Our father would get drunk and beat the tar out of us both. I raised her from little on up, our folks passed on when she was six. By the time that girl was fourteen there was no stopping her. Ran off with some man or other one night, didn't hear word from her for years. She'd gotten herself in trouble with one fellow or another but said she wanted to get her life straight, settle down somewhere, raise her babe up right." Albert shrugged. "I had money then so I sent her a sum, bought her a house, supported her claim to being a widow. Gave her the chance to be respectable.

"I was told her child was a girl, should have known better. She wrote me, saying it was going to have to be a girl. Said she didn't know how to raise a boy alone. I didn't think a thing of it when I

learned a had a niece, Alexandra. She sent letters occasionally, when she needed money. Sometimes sent pictures of her and the girl but I haven't seen my sister since she ran off. That boy laying up there, he looks like Emily at fourteen."

"He's sixteen."

Albert shook his head. "I reckon he would be. The last I heard from Emily was in reply to that letter I sent, the one you have. She said all was well."

"I wouldn't know sir, you'd better speak to Alex of this."

"She raised him as a girl?"

"Yes, sir."

He shook the glass in his hand. "This should have been the hard cider."

Oddly, that made Tom laugh. "It might have made this easier."

The laughter infected Albert too and the pair laughed lightly. "Whoa, this isn't something you have dropped in your lap every day." The laughter dried up. "I'm not ignorant of the ways of the world. If Emily died, it must have left the boy in a difficult way. You say he was trying to reach me?"

"Yes sir."

"And found himself in less than scrupulous hands?"

Tom nodded and studied his hands. "On several occasions from what I gather."

"Emily wasn't the most sensible of creatures. That poor child." Albert rubbed his eyes. "Thank you for your care, Dr. Lambry. Will you be moving on now that you've delivered my kin?"

The idea hadn't even occurred. "Sir, I, that choice will be Alex's, and yours. I'll be staying until Alex is settled. I have grown fond of him." That was a painful confession. "I want what's best for him. My plan was to stay until he'd found the opportunity to tell you the truth of his gender."

"And if I'd reacted poorly?"

"I would've dealt with that had the situation arose."

"But you wouldn't have abandoned him?"

"Never."

"The men that attacked Alex, will they be complaining?"

"They were quite drunk. When they wake, I doubt they'll remember what happened." It was truth but it didn't hurt that he'd knocked them senseless.

Albert sat back in his chair and let his mind churn over everything. "Well, this has been enough of these dark topics. I'm too old to get wound up over little things, I'll need to think about this some. Tell me about yourself, Dr. Lambry? Heard any noteworthy news lately?"

Tom took his first sip of the cider and tried to tell himself to relax. Things had gone both better and worse than planned and what was done was done. Instead of pushing things, he turned his thoughts instead to any gossip he'd heard on their travels.

"Someone returns to the land of the living." Tom's voice rumbled out.

Alex let a hand flop up to rub his eyes, groggy and very, very sore. "God damn I feel like I was hit by the train." He groaned and let his hand slid over the tender knot on his head, the bruised and split lip, down over tightly wrapped ribs, all trying to sort out what pain was from what location. "You came back for me." He forced his eyes open and they locked onto the face that made him feel safe.

"Silly, boy." Tom set the book he'd been reading aside and reached out to brush stray curls back. He didn't expect Alex to sigh and lean into the touch, the casual motion made his heart flutter. "You were right, you are tougher than you look. That was quite a beating you took."

Alex shrugged as best as he could but he saw the worry in the grey eyes. "It's easy to take a beating when you don't know how to fight. You just sort of lay there and whimper." He grinned a little at the self mocking.

Tom's face stayed serious. "I shouldn't have left you alone."

"Couldn't be helped, I can't be guarded all the time." He closed his eyes and steadied his nerves. "So, what's the damage?"

"A couple of broken ribs, five stitches on your hip, and a dislocated knee, nothing that won't heal if you behave."

"That wasn't what I meant, with Uncle Asher?" He swallowed hard and met Tom's eye. "How did he take it?"

"Better than you'd feared, he was pretty accepting. He's thinking a lot of things over right now. I'm going to stay around until everything is settled, if you'd like."

That soothed a knot of worried fear larger than his concern over his uncle. "Very much so."

"He seems like a good man. It was odd speaking with him, he looks a great deal like you." Tom smiled softly. "Subtracting out the skirts and such."

Alex glanced away. "I'd imagine he would."

"He is your uncle."

"Mother used to say he was a drunkard for too many years but sober he could be trusted. Tom, I..." Alex wanted to ask to stay with the doctor but the words faded away. He couldn't do that, he'd asked too much already.

"What is it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, really. Thank you for coming back for me."

A large hand swiped curls back again. "Silly, boy."

Two days slipped by where Alex was forced to stay mostly to his bed. His knee, painfully swollen and carefully wrapped up, prevented easy movement and his ribs throbbed with any sudden, clumsy movement. He saw little of his uncle, the man practically avoided the sick room but Tom and his aunt June were always by his side.

Alex had his hands tangled in yarn that his aunt was rolling into a ball. He found he was growing

fond of the older woman, comfortable with her being around. There was something in her solid, unshakeable ways that eased him.

"It's a right pity you were born with the wrong parts, child, you'd have made a perfect wife for someone." June laughed as their discussion of knitting worked itself out.

"I happen to like my parts, thank you very much."

"It seems that handsome Dr. Lambry likes your parts too." She winked and laughed when the boy blushed.

"He's a kind man." He turned his attention to the yarn.

"Albert seems to like him."

"My uncle doesn't seem to like me. Is he truly so upset that I'm not a girl that he avoids me?" It was a subject they hadn't broached.

June shrugged and kept rolling the yarn. "His position in this town is slippery. It's a lot to consider. Give him some time to work his thoughts out, he won't be turning you out into the street if that's what worries you."

"I wasn't worried." Oddly, he found the words to be truth. "Has he ever spoken of me? Of my mother?"

"In passing, Albert isn't one to speak of the past. He's a different man now a days." She reached over and patted the uninjured leg. "Just give him time."

Alex nodded but he was unconvinced. There was little doubt to the larger truth now and surely his uncle had seen it. It was a greater weight, a heavier pressure, on their future relationship than any concern over what clothes a boy should wear. Lies were so much easier to accept than cold, honest truths. He didn't know which way his uncle would sway when even Alex was uncertain of his own feelings.

"Cheer up, don't look so sad!" June smiled warmly. "You're too young to frown so."

"Of course, Aunt June." He forced the smile to his face but his thoughts remained dark.

"Ah, Dr. Lambry, good of you to join me, good of you." Albert held the door to his office open and let the taller man in. He'd had the house built so the office connected the home to the hotel, it was a choice he'd never regretted.

Tom nodded his head as the door was shut tightly behind him. "Your wife has been kind enough to lend a hand in caring for Alex."

"Yes, June is quite fond of the boy. Please, have a seat, we've things to discuss."

"I thought as much." Tom lowered himself into the offered chair but Albert took the chair behind the desk not the one beside Tom's. It placed a physical barrier between the two of them. "This is about Alex."

"Yes. It's placed me in an awkward situation, one I think you can respect."

"Of course. This isn't going to be an easy conversation, Mr. Asher, it might be best to be blunt."

Albert smiled thinly. "I like you, Dr. Lambry, I like the way you speak plainly. Another time and place, you and I may have become friends."

Tom nodded slightly, seeing no need to disagree. "Perhaps so, sir."

"Alex presents a situation with no happy endings or easy answers." Albert sighed and fussed at a book on his desk. "Frankly, the boy makes me ill at ease. My sister and I were not on the best of terms, seeing the boy reminds me of faults and mistakes of my past I'd rather forget." The cold expression softened. "But the boy is my kin."

The conversation paused but Tom felt no need to make the situation easier on the older man. He sat silent and waited.

"You know the boy better than I do. I would like to offer him a place here, in my home but I can't allow him to stay dressed as a girl. It's not right."

Tom shifted in his seat. "Alex won't be happy living as a young man. He has no experience with it."

"He'll gain experience by doing it. I can't have him staying as he is. My place in this community is respected, people look up to me. This is where I plan to live out my days. I've a young couple that does most of the work of running the hotel, I'm comfortable here. I can't risk losing all I've worked so hard to achieve."

"Alex is a very convincing girl. He's fooled some harsh critics, he's quite skilled."

"That's not the point!" Albert cut off but he drew a breath and settled himself down. "This isn't a town back East, there are far more men here than women. A girl, young and as attractive as Alex presents, will have several suitors. How am I supposed to deal with that?"

Tom shook his head. "I wouldn't know what to tell you, sir."

Albert waved the words off. "I know this town. People will wonder why I disallow my pretty niece to receive suitors. It'll raise questions, ones I can't answer. What happens if one of these poor fool boys falls for Alex? And worse, if Alex falls for him? Do I allow them to wed? What happens when the bridegroom learns the truth of his bride?" Albert shook his head. "And if Alex manages to hide the truth, what is said when children never appear? A family is a valued resource here, a woman that is sterile is too often put aside or scorned."

They were all valid questions, ones Tom had raised in his own thoughts. "It's not an easy situation."

"No, it's not. If the truth is discovered it will reflect very poorly on me. I could lose everything I've built here. That is something I can not risk. There is a place here for Alexander not one for Alexandria."

"He'll make a pitiful boy."

"I'd rather him be mocked for being a weak boy than have the truth of his gender ruin me."

That placed an angry lump in Tom's stomach but he couldn't disagree with the man. It was a situation he hadn't asked for, he had a right, kin or not, to maintain his life. "I'm not sure Alex will agree to that."

"That's why I wished to speak with you. Would you be willing to convince the boy that it's in his best interest to live as a male, not as a female?"

Tom hung his head and steadied his thoughts. He weighed all that had been said and all he knew of Alex, stacked everything up logically and tried to think of what was really best for Alex. The answer wasn't what he'd expected it to be.

Tom lifted his head and locked eyes with the older man. "Sir, I don't believe it is in Alex's best

interest to live as a boy. I think it will only bring him misery." He shook his head. "That choice will have to be his and his alone, I won't sway him either direction."

"You believe that firmly?" Albert folded his hands in front of him. "There is nothing I can do to change your thoughts?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Would you be willing to take custody of Alexandria if he chooses to continue to live as a girl?"

"Sir?"

"Please, I'm not blind. If he truly was a girl I'd be insisting you wed the poor thing. It's obvious to anyone with eyes that you've already sampled the marriage bed. I should be demanding you make her honest and not let her be a whore like her mother."

The vehemence in Albert's voice surprised Tom and it caused him to take a mental step back. "Alex isn't a girl and I've not taken him to bed." Which was only half a truth as he had allowed Alex into his bed, just not in the way Albert meant.

"I can not undo what my sister has done. If Alex chooses to be Alexandria instead of Alexander, I will expect you to do the honorable thing. I can not have that child around me dressed as a girl, I will not allow it!" Albert's fist came down on the table.

The action was such a gross over reaction that Tom cocked his head to the side and tried to make sense of it. There was something to the larger picture that he was missing, some piece he didn't understand, that once placed would make everything clear.

"Sir," Tom began slowly. "The truth of it is, we're both men, I can not wed Alex. No matter if it's Alexander or Alexandria."

"The only ones to know Alexandria isn't a female are under this roof and I wasn't speaking of a formal service. Alex would become yours to do with as you please, I would pass his care onto you and inscribe the union into the family bible. Once the two of you leave Abilene I don't care how you explain your relationship to others."

"You're serious about this? I could horribly abuse Alex, you don't know me."

"My instinct says you wouldn't." He brushed the concern aside. "It's that or I turn the boy out. I will not have him living under my roof as a girl, I will not! He looks too much like his mother. I can not allow him to do so."

"So to spare yourself the pain of her memory you would turn your only kin over to a strangers care?" Tom was a few moments away from just gathering Alex up and taking the boy away. His uncle seemed a touch unstable and the indifference displayed would be painful for Alex to see.

"He seems well tended by you so far. He'll fair better in your care than by himself. Those are the options I'm setting forth." Albert rose to his feet. "Should I present the choice to the boy or shall you?"

Tom knew how Alex would wilt under his Uncle's cold demands. "I'll speak to him."

A smile brightened Albert's face. "Good, good, I'm glad we could reach an agreement. Of course I can offer some small sum toward the boy's care if he stays with this nonsense. Consider it a dowry."

Tom stood but didn't return the smile, he suddenly felt off balance but he let the older man guide

him from the office. "Excuse me, I should speak to Alex right away." He pushed his way forward and disappeared up the house's stairs before Mr. Asher could unnerve him any more.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Six

The door to Alex's bedroom was open but he knocked on the frame anyway. It gained him the attention of both Alex and June, the last of the stray yarn quickly being wrapped between them.

"Dr. Lambry."

"Ma'am." He glanced to Alex's solemn eyes and then away. "If I could have a word with Alex alone?"

She smiled and gathered the yarn up. "Of course, should I send up tea?"

Tom shook his head. "No, thank you, it won't be necessary." He stepped aside so she could leave and latched the door behind her.

"You look like you've heard bad news. What's happened?" Alex spoke softly, struggling to sit a little straighter in the bed.

Tom moved instantly to help. He eased the boy higher against his pillows but the contact of his hands on the bare skin above the bandages made him want to caress the boy further. He sat on the edge of the bed but shoved his hands into a coat pocket.

"I have something for you." He pulled the silver case out and handed it to the blonde.

Alex turned the latched, etched silver case over in his hands before opening it. Inside was the picture of himself and his mother, the one he'd carried for so long. The one that had always been kept in the silver case she had given him until one of the men that he'd been passed to had sold it.

"Oh, Tom..." He felt tears well up but it wasn't over the case but the meaning behind it. "It's lovely, thank you, so much, thank you."

Tom ducked his head. "I remember that day in the forest. How you told me one of those other men sold off the case. You smiled because you were able to keep the picture. Someone took something so dear from you but you still smiled at the memory. I don't know how you do that."

Alex clicked the case shut and grasped its cool metal in his hands. "You're leaving me."

A strong hand reached out and swept curls away. "Silly boy."

The smile that Alex turned up to Tom was small, shy but warmer than the summer sun. "You're not leaving me?"

"Not today but we need to talk." The smile disappeared. "Alex, your uncle and I have talked. He doesn't mind you staying here, says you're welcome to, if you live as a boy."

"But, I..." Alex felt his world crash down. The case in his hands reminded him not just of how wonderful Tom was but how horrible other people could be. He wasn't sure he could return to living like that and survive. It was bad enough to be so mistreated but to be so tenderly cared for, to have a taste of something so sweet, he knew it would break him to be hurt again. "I have no options."

The deep cutting sadness on Alex's face poured over and into Tom. "There is one other option. I don't know if you'd find it favorable but if you don't wish to live as a boy, your uncle will turn your care over to me. His suggestion was that you become my," Tom had to close his eyes to force the words out, they felt absurd. "That you become my wife. He feels I've already, that we've already, I mean..."

"The only man who hasn't is accused of fucking me." Alex whispered out for Tom.

"It wouldn't have to be that way. I could arrange for you to attend a school until you're of age and then maybe a place as a governess? There would be options for you. I'll see to it you're taken care of and you won't have to, I mean I wouldn't expect you to..."

Alex reached a hand out and brushed it across Tom's face. "Silly, man. I've wanted you to take me to your bed from almost the moment I saw you." Tom's hand rose to cover his own. "I would rather live as a boy than be a burden to you. You've been beyond honorable to me, I won't repay it with further trouble and worry."

"Is this the same creature that yelled at me his admission to enjoying being prettier than most women? I won't be happier if you dress in ugly clothes and cut your hair to an ugly boys length, no matter how aroused I get at seeing you in pants. I'm happy when you're happy but he is your uncle, your kin. If you want to stay here and get to know him, I'll respect that."

Alex's face screwed up in hidden pain, twisted in doubt. He turned his face away rather than face Tom.

"What's wrong?"

"Tom, he's," Alex forced out in a whisper, needing to tell someone, desperate to have someone else know. "He's not my uncle."

"Don't be silly, of course he is, he looks just like you."

"I know! Of course he looks like me! He's my father." Alex gasped, the words slipping out and with them the horrible burden of truth. "Oh God." He covered his mouth with his hand. It had been so easy to just blurt it out and now he would have done anything to take it back.

The pieces began to fall into place in Tom's head. "Are you certain? That's quite the accusation to be making."

Alex shook his head. "I wasn't until I saw him. I read my mother's journals while she was ill, I burned them. She ran away at fifteen because he was getting possessive of her, jealous of her, acting more like a spurned lover than brother. Her writings were honest, she recorded her less than proper behavior but she cleaned up her life and moved in with her brother when she was in her early twenties. His first wife had recently died and she tended his house for a few months. He began being possessive again but she had no where to go so she stayed."

"Alex,"

"She wrote that he came home drunk one night and attacked her, forced himself upon her and several weeks later she feared she was with child. Me, I was that child! He bought her our house and sent her money to keep the town from knowing he'd fathered a child with his own sister!" His

hands were balled up into fists and tears slipped from his eyes.

"If you knew this, why'd you struggle so hard to reach him?"

Alex shook his head and wiped the tears from his face. "I needed to know if it was true. I needed to look him in the eye and see if I looked like him. I needed to know if he was my father. I needed to. I needed to know if my uncle was really as obsessed with my mother that he would do such a thing. I just needed to know the truth. I'm sorry Tom, I'm sorry!"

Albert Asher was obsessed with his half sister, Emily. How many times in the past two days had Albert gone on about Alex looking so much like his mother? Tom had lost count, he'd chalked it up to guilt at failing to help a family member and the shock of grief at hearing she'd died. What if it was more? It made sense now why the man was so adamant about Alex dressing and living as a boy. Tom felt his stomach turn over.

"Alex,"

"I know, I know what I am. I don't expect you to care for me. I can live as a boy, I can do it. Maybe it's time, you know? Maybe she only dressed me as a girl was because she didn't want to see him in me? Can I blame him for not wanting to see her in me? I'll be okay." He forced a thin smile but tears stained it.

"Alex, shut up!" Tom snapped. "You can't know why your mother raised you this way, it may be as simple as she said. Raising a girl was something she knew but not raising a boy, besides, does it change anything? What feels more right to you?" Tom gathered the hand he'd been holding between both his own. "You don't have to answer that, I already know. Nothing has changed."

"Tom, I'm,"

"You're beautiful and bright and full of life. You're amazing and you drive me insane with frustration. You make me feel like I can do anything. So? Your family is a little disturbed, you haven't met mine yet. Tell me to go away and I will but Alex, I don't want to send you away." The words spilled out and Tom felt himself blushing a little under the embarrassment of their honesty.

"You'd still want me, even knowing all this?"

He raised the hand up and pressed it to his lips. "I don't want to leave here without you. I don't want you compromising the wonderful person I've learned to enjoy. For as long as you want to, I want you beside me."

Alex sat, too stunned to feel the pain from his wounds, and the tears slid unnoticed from his eyes. For once, his thoughts didn't swirl around like angry bees. For once, the bitter fear of unspoken truths wasn't nipping his heels. Never had anyone known his past, known his parentage, known his soul, so well and accepted him because of, not in spite of, it all.

"Say something? Please?"

"For as long as you'll allow me to, I'll be beside you."

Tom fell forward and gathered the slender, battered body up against his own. Mindful of wounds and causing pain, he wrapped himself around Alex, letting blonde curls tickle his face. Alex pressed tightly against him, borrowing deeper against his chest. Slender hands wrapped around Tom's arm and gripped it close.

"Promise me one thing?"

"Only one?" Alex asked.

Tom chuckled at some of the boy's spirit rebounding. "For now, yes."

"Okay, what is it?"

"Occasionally dress as a boy for me? Not often, not in public, because I don't expect you'll stay dressed long that way."

Alex laughed around the snuffling tears that were filling his eyes. "Maybe, maybe if you've been good."

Tom pressed his face down past the thick hair to whisper into an ear. "Just you wait until you've healed, you'll see how good I can be."

Alex shivered at the deep, echoing words. "Promises, promises."

Tom let Alex cling to him until the hands wrapped so tightly around his arm slackened in their grip as their owner slid into restful sleep. He soothed a hand across the still head and when that drew no protests, he lowered the slender body back onto the bed. He'd compared Alex once to a stray kitten and that wasn't far from the truth. The boy could sleep anywhere and even when most people would be kept awake by the pain of throbbing knee and ribs, he'd drifted away. It made Tom feel a moment of pride, he took some of the credit for the blonde's rest. Alex had, after all, fallen asleep in his arms. He tugged the blankets carefully up over the slumbering form and gently pressed a kiss to the half buried head. There was something he had to see to that couldn't wait.

He stepped lightly until he was from the room and the door safely shut behind him. Once he was fairly sure that his leaving wouldn't wake Alex, he hurried down the steps back to the office where he'd left Albert. Tom was too angry to knock, he pushed the door open. Albert stood up from behind the desk, the picture falling from startled fingers.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Tom glanced to the picture of Alex and his mother and back up to Albert. He moved without thinking, running on anger and fear. Before he was aware of just what he was going to do, he had Albert by the throat and the man slammed against the nearest wall.

"I know the truth!" He hissed out. His grip tightened just enough to be painful but the older man wasn't a match for his strength or anger. "I know what you did!"

"You don't understand!" Albert struggled with the grip at his throat but the cold, ice grey eyes were burning him. "The affair was consensual."

"You raped her!"

Albert tried to shake his head no but the grip on his throat limited that. "No, she resisted at first but later, she gave herself willingly to me. She loved me and I her."

Tom growled but he was grateful Alex only knew of the one occasion. "You raped her. She had no where else to go but your care and you violated that. Of course she wouldn't continue to fight you, how could she win?"

"It wasn't..."

"Hold your tongue or so help me I will hold it for you!" Suddenly, he saw the man for what he was, pitiful, aging, with only the thinnest of veils over his own guilt and remorse. Tom pushed the man aside, letting go of the neck he wanted to twist between his hands. "There is no justification,

no rationalization. Just be glad that Alex only is aware of the one time, if he had to live with the burden of your sins I can promise you that you'd already be dead."

The coldness in the doctor's voice left little room for doubt. Albert straightened himself up and soothed out his clothing. "He knows?"

"Your sister kept a journal."

"Foolish woman." He shook his head and sighed.

Tom paced the room, trying to convince himself that murdering the man wasn't a good idea. "You're filth. To think you had the nerve to ask after my preferences, to go on about certain sorts not being welcome under your roof when you've assaulted your own sister! Sit down, Mr. Asher, you need to write out a paper for me."

"What do you want?"

"Sit down!" He roared, knowing he was shouting loud enough to be heard in house and hotel and not caring.

Albert sat instantly.

"Take up your pen and write this: I, Albert Asher, do sign away all rights, duties and obligations to Alex Horne and pass full guardianship to Dr. Thomas Lambry. Sign and date it today. Alex is going with me when he's well enough to travel and if you give me so much as a moments trouble over it I'll make sure every soul in this god forsaken cow town knows what a incestuous bastard you really are." He watched the older man's pen sliding along the paper.

"You're," Albert paused, signing the paper with a flourish. "You're not going to tell anyone about this, are you?"

Tom leaned across the desk, using his larger frame and height to force the other man to sit back slightly. "I should. I should tell them all. I'd love to see them mocking you for the ugly twisted soul that you are but I won't."

"Thank you."

"It's not for you! Alex has enough to deal with, I won't add further to his burden."

"Still, it's kind of you. I'm a different man now, I used to drink excessively. It wouldn't be fair to punish the man I am today for the wrongs I committed as a younger man."

"Fair! Don't even attempt to play that card with me, old man." Tom went back to pacing. "How was it fair to your sister who had to live with your wrongs every day! You deserve every punishment that rains upon your head but it won't be meted out by my hand."

"How do you wish to proceed from here?" All pretense to sympathy of remorse suddenly was set aside the moment Albert saw that Tom wasn't to be swayed.

"You'll introduce Alex as your niece."

"And you?"

"Her husband." It was an uncomfortable lie but he needed it clear that Alex was taken and not to be trifled with. He turned to gather up the signed paper but his eyes fell on the picture that Albert had dropped on the desk. "Alex will continue to dress as a girl. He's going to look like the spitting image of your sister. You're going to think that woman's come back from the grave to torment

you. Just you remember that Alex isn't his mother and unlike her, he has a protector. If you so much as think about laying a hand on that boy, if I even see the slightest hint of an improper thought in your eyes, I will be very, very unhappy. I'm a doctor, I know a hundred ways to take a man apart and I will enjoy peeling your skin from your flesh. Do I make myself clear?" Albert nodded.

"Do we have an understanding?"

Again he nodded, there was no doubt in his mind that the threat was real.

"Good, now, for the next few weeks, we're stuck here. Behave, play the part of the good uncle, address the issue of Alex's parentage with him, whatever. Resolve whatever you need to with that boy now because you will never see him again once we leave. And never, for a second, forget who he is! Do I make myself clear?" He snapped the words out.

"Yes, very. Thank you."

Tom shook his head and left the office. He'd have to watch the man closely, very closely, but at least both men knew where the lines had been drawn. As he walked outside for some fresh air, Tom mentally kicked himself. He'd actually been starting to like Mr. Asher and his easy acceptance of things.

A week slid away and then two and it saw Alex out of bed and moving stiffly around with the help of a cane. Tom directed June into the town to purchase replacements for Alex's ruined clothing and Alex gratefully accepted. It was only behind closed doors that he complained of the dull colors and simple style. It made Tom laugh, so many serious issues and things and Alex was fussing over clothing.

"Don't laugh at me." He'd folded his arms over his chest, his hair falling in free curls about his face.

"I'm not laughing at you." He smiled across the small room. "Honest, I'm not."

"It's dark blue, Tom, dark blue!"

"Hush, don't worry about it. I was thinking."

"Dangerous endeavourer."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry, go on."

"I was thinking we should travel a bit. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you like to go?"

"You're serious." The idea was overwhelming.

"Name it, Paris, London? We could tour Europe or Africa or South America. Or, Asia, they'd like a pretty blonde like you in Asia, we could spend a season in India."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I've never had a chance to travel. It was assumed that I would when I wed and that's not likely to happen. So why don't we? What's to stop us?" He liked the idea of seeing new

things, seeing Alex's reactions to the wonders out in the wide world.

"Anywhere I want?" He asked carefully.

"Name it."

"Could we, maybe, go back to North Carolina?"

"Anywhere in the world and you want to go home?"

Alex nodded and set the ugly blue dress aside. "Mother had some jewelry, it wasn't anything special but it had been her mothers. When she was ill, she made me promise to hide it so it couldn't be sold off with the rest of our things. I did, and I never told anyone. The minister that took me in? I hid it in his house but it's not an easy spot to get too. When he woke me up to tell me I was to leave with his friend, it was the middle of the night. I had no chance to get to that hiding spot. I just figured I could get it when we came back." He sighed. "We never went back."

The vast world had been laid at Alex's feet and he wanted to retrieve a piece of his past. Tom leaned forward, slid a hand into the blond curls and tenderly kissed the uncertain lips. "Of course we can go back. We'll go straight from here, maybe swing north to drop in on my family for a little bit. Then south again, stop in and see James, maybe keep going south. We could spend some time in New Orleans if you'd like? Stop fussing at that dress, as soon as we're back East we'll find you prettier ones."

"After I get my mother's jewelry, I don't care, take me anywhere, I'll follow." He paused and smiled lightly. "How pretty of a dress?"

In totality the pair spent nearly six weeks in Abilene. Tom ventured about the town freely, liberating cowboys of their pay at endless poker tables. Not once in all the nights he'd gone out had Tom spent more than a few hours away and it was always when he knew Alex was safely in bed or when Albert was occupied with other distractions. He watched the older man and kept close to Alex when his Aunt June was busy. At the rare occasions when Alex and Albert did speak alone, Tom made sure it was sitting on the porch.

Alex stayed close to the house, inside or on the porch. The combination of broken ribs and twisted knee made travel painful. Even after he'd healed, he found no desire to see more of the growing town. As days slipped away, he found himself longing to leave.

So when the day finally arrived when he could board the train, eastbound this time, his heart was light. Tom had bought the tickets under the name of Dr. and Mrs. Lambry which allowed them to share a sleeping compartment. They'd still have to be discrete, even if he could get Tom to lift his sanction on sexual contact, but just the pleasure of sleeping next to the older man was enough.

"You're sure you didn't want to see more of the town or anything?" Tom asked as he helped Alex settle into the seat nearest the window. The boy was wearing his 'ugly' blue dress and Tom thought it looked rather nice on him.

Alex nodded. "I'm certain. Dirty, little cow town, it has nothing to offer to me." The stitches had come out of his hip a week ago. His ribs were still sore but not sharply painful and his knee was moving but weak in supporting weight and Tom still hadn't pronounced him fit, just fit enough to travel.

"You didn't even see it."

"I saw enough of it, and you saw enough of their gaming tables for both of us." Alex leaned to the window as the train began to move. "Bye! Goodbye! We'll write!" He shouted out of the open window and waved at his Aunt and Uncle who smiled and waved back.

Tom sat back and let Alex wave his farewells, just grateful he was leaving with Alex beside him.

Finally, the platform was out of sight and Alex flopped down beside Tom and sighed. "God, I'm so glad to be gone!" He picked idly at the dark fabric. "All that time, he never once spoke to me, never once told me he was my father. I kept waiting for him to say something but he never did." He glanced at the window and back to where the platform and the town were located. "Was I wrong? Maybe my mother was mistaken?"

Tom shook his head. "You weren't wrong. We had a conversation and he admitted it to me."

"You had a conversation?" Alex raised an eyebrow and wondered what fight he'd missed.

"How else do you think I gained guardianship of you? It didn't happen magically, it had to be discussed and resolved."

"What was my dowry?"

"There wasn't one because you aren't my wife."

"Well, that's disappointing. It should, at the very least, be a fat cow or something useful."

That made Tom grin but he hung his head to hide it. "You're sure about this, going with me, I mean?"

Alex reached over and took one of Tom's hands. "Completely. There's nothing back in that town for me, nothing I want or value. I'm right where I want to be." He lowered his voice just to make sure no one could or would over hear him but Tom. "So, doctor, I'm feeling fit. You have my uncle's permission to do with me as you will. Whatever shall you do with me?"

The idea sent shivers across Tom's skin. He'd become addicted to the blonde in far too short of a time and the enforced absence had only made his desire greater. "You're fit when I say so, it won't kill you to wait. It won't kill me either."

"So you are looking forward to finally claiming me as your own?" Alex tried to make the words playful but they came out heavy and serious, needy even.

Tom nodded, his eyes darkened with emotion. "I don't need to claim you, you're already mine."

Alex sat for a moment in uncertain silence. The dark grey of Tom's eyes, the serious tone, the deep and very real possessiveness around the man all pointed to the words being said in seriousness. That couldn't be, they were too wonderful, made him feel too safe and warm, for them to be real. It had to be a joke. He floundered, not knowing what to say, frightened it wasn't real.

Tom glanced away and out the window. "Presumptuous of me, I'm sorry."

A gloved hand turned Tom's face back to meet the dark brown of Alex's eyes. "Presumptuous? Yes, but also true. I'm already yours. I just want to make sure you've a reason to keep me." The honesty was cutting him and making Alex feel raw.

"My reasons for keeping you are found up here." Tom tapped on the side of the blonde head. "And have little to do with what you're sitting on."

"Well, not so little." Alex teased but the words didn't hide the tears that had welled up in his eyes.

"Hush, you! You're healed enough when I think you are. Rest if you want to heal faster, I'll watch over you."

Wrapped in the promise of safety and security, Alex nodded, settled in and pretended to sleep. As the train rocked them, carried them forward, he watched Tom.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Seven

Alex's hometown wasn't a large place and the railroad didn't connect to it. That suited him just fine as it meant they once again took to riding. It amused him to ride slightly behind the proud, straight back of Dr. Lambry and more than made up for the passing aches in his ribs and the soreness of his knee.

There was a mixed sense of joy in their travels and remorse. Part of Alex had prayed never to return here and part of him was small, weak and would have done anything to return to even a slight chance of his childhood. It swung his emotions as they drew closer, made him worry and chew on his lower lip.

"Tom?" He called out mid-afternoon. The day was bright, sunny and hinting of the summer that lurked around the seasons turning.

"Yes?"

"Could we stop for the day? There's a good place to camp near by."

Tom glanced up to the sun and back to Alex. "We should make it to your town before dark, do you really want to stop?"

Alex chewed a little more on his lower lip. His head nodded vigorously. "If you wouldn't mind? I'm a little nervous. There's a creek where I had in mind, we could wash up easily enough."

"You'd rather camp out than sleep in a warm bed?"

Alex nodded and waited.

Tom tossed up his hands and gave in. "No skin off my nose, lead on."

The near by place to camp was a half mile from the road. Alex led them around and about the wooded hillside until they could hear running water. From there he followed the creek clear flowing until he found a spot shallow enough for the horses to cross. Tom just rode behind and shook his head, letting the blonde guide them along the far bank until the woods suddenly thinned and opened into a sunny, flower filled clearing.

It was obvious the clearing was Alex's idea of a campsite. The boy turned his horse around and smiled at Tom. "Lovely, isn't it? I knew the flowers would still be blooming."

Tom slid from his saddle and moved to help Alex off his own horse. The boy's knee was healing

but he didn't like taking chances. Which was only a half truth, Tom liked the feel of his hands circling the corseted waist, the feel of the warm body counting on his strength and help. Alex smiled, trapped between horse and doctor before he stood up on tip toe and pressed a quick kiss to Tom's lips

"Thanks."

The kiss and just as quickly delivered word of gratitude came too fast for Tom to react. By the time his stunned mind was working, Alex had slipped away to limp around the sunny clearing, arms held wide to the sunshine and breezes. Tom watched the silly display with a tight, warm feeling in his chest. It was a feeling that made him want to laugh with Alex and spin himself around the clearing.

He chased away the absurd thought. "If this is where you want to camp, we should settle in."

The blonde giggled and bounded over as gleefully as his wounds would allow. Wildflowers were tucked randomly into the curls, accenting the golden strands with reds and blues. Alex curtsied, slid a black eyed susan behind Tom's ear and moved to tend the horses.

His first reaction was to pull the flower from where it had been place but when he raised his hand up he found he couldn't. Shaking his head at his own ridiculousness, he left the bright flower where it was nestled. The cool length of the green stem pleasantly tickled him, physically and emotionally.

Alex had insisted that blankets be spread out on the ground like a picnic and once his camp chores were finished, he flopped happily down. The blanket was set close to the small fire Tom had started and currently knelt by, feeding larger branches into the growing warmth. Brown eyes watched him feed the fire but the only movement from Alex came when the boy pulled the ties from his hair and shook it out.

When the fire was safely tended, Tom moved to add himself to the blanket, easing himself down with a softly muttered groan. He was rubbing at his lower back when Alex rolled onto his side and stared up at him.

"I used to run away to here all the time as a child."

"It's a little far from home isn't it?"

Alex shrugged. "Further then the other kids would go. My mother knew I roamed so far out, she let me go one day a week off by myself if I wanted to. She'd pack a lunch for me and I'd steal a blanket from my bed, she called it dreaming time. Pastor Barnes didn't let me so I had to sneak off but I still did it. Not often enough though, not nearly."

Tom glanced over and saw the shadows of pain hidden in the dark eyes but before he could figure out what to say, Alex laughed.

The blonde head dropped back down onto the blanket and watched the high, fluffy white clouds over head. "Once, when I was on my way home, oh I must have been thirteen or so, I took a different route. I came across Jimmy McMasters, this awful pimply faced boy two years older then me. He was sitting under a tree, his pants open, moaning as he stroked himself." Alex laughed harder. "I hid behind a tree and watched him."

"Naughty."

"Indeed! I knew I was a boy and that boys should be attracted to girls but I'd never once looked at my friends that way. It wasn't until I saw Jimmy's pretty pink penis and got so, so..." Alex

grinned wickedly. "Well, never mind. It just felt right so I never worried about it. How about you, Dr. Lambry? There must have been one moment that brought everything home for you? Or were you always so logical and just knew?" It was a question he'd always wanted to ask another man like himself but had always been too afraid. The men he'd been passed to, used by, hadn't been like Tom. Alex had never been sure they'd actually been attracted to men or it was just younger boys they liked.

It wasn't a memory Tom visited too often but Alex's smiling joy wove a safe bubble around them in the sunshine. "I didn't always know. I mean, I knew about relations between men and women far younger than most boys but it was just clinical knowledge."

Alex made a face. "How sterile! Relations is such a proper word, I'd love to hear you say sexual intercourse or better, plain old fucking, rutting."

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Please, do continue." Amusement dripped from Alex's words.

"James and I were at school and well, he'd been noticing women from almost the day he was born I think. He should have been an artist, he's an eye for beauty. I didn't think anything of it until the other boys around us were noticing girls and I wasn't. It was just that I enjoyed being around my classmates more."

"Your male classmates."

"My male classmates." Tom agreed and found himself smiling back. "I guess I was fourteen or so, I don't remember really, but I was supposed to be away until nightfall. I came back to our room early and found James in bed with an older boy."

"Was he top or bottom?"

"What?"

"James, was he top or bottom? I want an accurate mental image."

"Does it matter?" He prayed he wouldn't blush, prayed the frank conversation wouldn't make him hard.

"Of course it does!"

"Bottom," he muttered out. "James prefers bottom with men. Anyway, I about died of embarrassment but it clicked something in my head. It made sense, it was erotic and it didn't matter that I knew it was wrong."

"So? Did you join them?" Alex sighed. "That would be a lovely sight."

Tom stared sideways at the happy, lustful look on Alex's face and couldn't tell if he was being teased or not. "No, I didn't. I tried to pretend it didn't happen."

"And did that work?"

"No," he sighed. "It just made me very aware of all the boys around me, in ways I shouldn't have been aware of them."

"So when did James finally seduce you?"

"He didn't, it was one of our teachers."

Alex sat up. "You're teasing me now! Here I've been serious and honest and you pull my leg."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not teasing you. He was friends with my father. It wasn't something I sought out but he said he'd disgrace me to my father if I didn't." The teasing melted and Alex smile fled. "It wasn't unpleasant. He didn't force me." He found himself saying that anytime the issue with the Dean came up. Everyone else seemed so much more appalled by the situation then he'd ever been.

"It still wasn't right."

He shrugged. "I don't think of it often. This is a lovely place to camp."

Alex laid back down, his smile was soft and gentle. "It is, isn't it."

They lay together in silent peace, lazing in the sunny afternoon. Birds sang and called back and forth to one another from the trees, the horses grazed happily and the fire cracked. For a few moments the world faded away, disappeared and the pair lay in the stolen moment.

Alex moaned softly. "I'm thinking naughty thoughts." He whispered.

It made Tom chuckle. "When aren't you?"

The chuckle wasn't returned. Alex stood in a fluid, graceful movement that denied his injured knee. He stood with a serious, almost intense expression at Tom's feet. His nimble fingers began to work at buttons and ties, loosening and removing the layers of cloth that surrounded him.

"What are you doing?" Tom whispered, the teasing amusement from a moment before gone.

Alex didn't answer, the chemise pulled easily over his head. The fabric fluttered to the green grass, a white pool of light among the summer grasses. He stood for a moment, bare chest a sharp contrast to the blue sky above him, wearing only his bloomers, stockings and shoes.

"Alex, someone will see." His heart was pounding, his blood had become fire. There was no hiding the growing bulge in his pants.

Alex paused from the removal of his shoes and stockings, one dark legging half way removed and glanced over Tom from under the shower of his hair. "I'm the only one to see."

"But..." Tom's breath caught in his throat as Alex peeled off the last stocking.

"The horses will know before we ever will if someone approaches." The bloomers fell aside and Alex stretched in the warm sunlight. "Oh, that feels so good." The bruises on his body had healed and now were gone. The angry line of the slice on his hip was a pink line and his knee, while still sore, looked solid and healed. It wasn't even swollen any longer.

He knelt down on the edge of the blanket, within easy and unmistakable eyeshot of Tom. A slender hand slid across his neck, over his shoulders, knowing what kind of image he made. He allowed stray fingers to tease one of his nipples and his eyes fluttered shut as he sighed.

"What are you doing?" Tom's whisper was deep and hoarse.

Alex let his head loll, using the motion to flip his hair out of his eyes. "If you won't play with me, I'll play by myself." His left hand trailed down his chest, scraping nails over sensitive flesh and hard ribs before draping across his waist. His right went right to his cock and he stroked the growing erection with bold, unashamed abandon. He let his head roll back, exposing the length of his neck, and moaned. "It's better if it's your touch but oh, I like you watching."

"Oh, my God." Tom was sitting up now, transfixed. Alex was almost too beautiful, the sight became one of almost pain to watch. The breeze drifted across the clearing, stirring tree limbs, flowers and golden hair as one soft dance. He watched the hand languidly tease the hard length, hiding and showing the beauty of the teasing flesh alternatively.

The left hand slid up to tease a nipple again, not so gently this time, on their way up to the soft mouth. The lips parted and first one finger, then two, disappeared inside. Dark eyes opened to mere slits and locked onto Tom's as a third finger joined the first two and all three disappeared into the wet confines up to the hand. The lips quirked in a slight smile as the slick fingers withdrew. The very tip of a pink tongue slid out to give a final swipe to the soft finger pads on their way out. With brown eyes locked to grey, the saliva slick fingers lowered and wandered back.

"You wouldn't..." Tom forced out.

Alex didn't need to answer with words. The first digit slid inside his body and he cried out, a hushed, whispery cry. Tom had been treating him like he was fragile glass that would shatter with too harsh a touch. He wasn't made of glass and he was hungry for a deeper, rougher contact.

The second finger joined the first while he was still too tight but the small amount of pain only sharpened the pleasure. He was forced to close his eyes and the hand stroking himself stuttered in it's rhythm. He smiled as his body adjusted and the fingers he was teasing himself with slid more easily.

"So tight, it's been so long." He was rewarded by a soft echoing moan from Tom but he kept his eyes closed. "I haven't even allowed myself to do this since we met." He forced the third finger in and his entire body shuddered in pleasure. "Oh, God, I wanted it to be you, wanted it to be your cock." His hips snapped forward into his hand at the thought.

Alex heard a growl, hungry and soft, and the rustle of fabric as his only warning. Strong hands cupped the sides of his face, tilted it upwards. He kept his eyes shut but his mouth fell open as demanding lips covered his own in a kiss. A hungry tongue devoured his breath. It broke all sense of rhythm for either hand and shut down any logical thought. Alex melted into a hungry creature of need but lacked the coordination to fulfill that need. He whimpered weakly into the mouth consuming him. Strong hands caught his wrists and pulled his arms away from his body. Alex whined, moaned but the hands held tight.

"Alex, I..." Tom murmured against the smooth flesh of the blonde's neck.

The younger man moaned and writhed in the grip that held him. "Please," he moaned. "Please, fuck me, please, I need you so badly, please."

Tom's teeth bite at the flesh he'd been teasing. The words stripped him of control and he knew he was lost when Alex moaned deeply at the too sharp nip he'd just received. There wasn't time, there just wasn't. Tom needed to be in the boy desperately, it was a growing awareness that if he didn't give in and just take Alex, he very may well die.

"What?" Alex asked breathlessly when the warm body holding him moved away. He opened his eyes only to see Tom stretched out over the blanket, one arm thrown out and rooting in one of his bags. When the hand found what it sought and was pulled from the bag it was wrapped around a tin of salve. "Oh, please, oh, please, yes." Alex sighed and nearly tripped over his own body to turn around. Goose bumps broke out over his skin from anticipation and desire, his entire body felt tingling and alive.

When Tom saw that Alex had slid around to offer himself up to be taken, he nearly came. He teetered there, stunned by his desire, drunk on the sight of the peachy pale skin and round, tender ass. "Oh God, oh holy God." He whispered out but his hands were swiftly freeing his

weeping erection from the fabric of his pants.

Tom was panting, his breath rose and fell in jagged gasps but he managed to get the salve open and some of it on his fingers. The lightest of touches to Alex's ass caused the boy to slid the flesh fully against the teasing hand. The long, slender legs slid widely apart in open invitation and with not a hint of shame or modesty. He stroked across the hidden entrance, teasing in a light touch with the salve slippery fingers.

When he tried to ease a finger into the tight passage, Alex whimpered in hungry desperation and slammed his hips backwards. He whined and bucked against the contact. "More, please, fuck me, please, I'm ready, please, Tom, please."

Tom's brain melted. All the late night fantasies about this moment dissolved. He'd planned out their first time together a hundred, a thousand times, and not once did it play out with Alex naked in a field of wildflowers, begging to be fucked. He was lucky to remember to smear the salve over his aching cock. The touch only made him hunger deeper, it did nothing to ease the pain of need.

With his hands shaking, Tom knelt behind Alex. The tip of his length just brushing against the slicked entrance. He struggled for his control, frightened if he entered the blonde now, he'd be rough and almost violent. The hips in front of him twitched and Alex moaned. His back arched and he writhed his body in hungry desperation. The sight was too much for Tom, he pushed forward. The world shrunk down to the point of contact. Nothing existed outside of their joining.

Alex sobbed and pushed back with enough force that he buried Tom fully in his body. He was shivering now, trembling beyond control, drowning in pleasure as his body was overloaded. He moaned and writhed and shattered in the perfection. Even the nagging pain of so sudden a union only added to the intensity of the pleasure.

Tom groaned, lost, abandoned to pleasure. Alex hadn't been teasing about being tight, he was frightened he'd done harm to the boy, but the blonde was moaning, writhing like a possessed creature, clearly lost in his own world of pleasure. He tried to use his concern for Alex to ease his need back but it had him by the throat and refused to surrender it's grip.

As carefully as he was able, he slid out and just as gently thrust back in. Alex gasped, his hands clawing at the blanket below him. Tom struggled with his control, trying to be gentle, careful. His eyes drank in the stunning sight of Alex, bathed in sunlight, being impaled by his cock.

"No, no, you're holding back." Alex forced out, his voice more of a boy's in passion than it ever was. "Let, go, Tom, let go." He sighed as the gentle thrusting continued. "I won't break, please, fuck me, fuck me as hard as you can, please Tom, please, I want you to claim me, please, fuck me until we both stop aching."

Deep inside of Tom, something shattered. It was brittle like glass and fell away as softly as a feather tossed on a wind. He pushed into the willing, begging body far harder than he'd intended. His hands gripped the slender hips, holding them in place to accept the forceful thrusts he was delivering. He felt the tremors in Alex's flesh and it spurred him to take the smaller man harder.

"Oh, yes, oh fuck yes, harder, Tom, please, oh, God, oh please." Alex whimpered, his entire body shaken with the hard pounding Tom was finally offering to him. He could feel it in the trembling hands that held so tightly to his hips, he could feel it deep in his body with every consuming thrust, Tom had surrendered himself. It wasn't Alex being taken, it was Tom. Each thrust that rocked his body, chattered his teeth and shivered desire along his nerves was another part of Tom that was being given to Alex.

Alex's words disappeared into high pitched gasps, short, broken moans as soon as Tom slid his hand around the blonde's aching length. The strong, rough hand stroked him in time with the

forceful thrusts and tore Alex between the two pleasures. It became too much, desire became a white hot need that seared him and Alex gave himself over to the fall.

Hot sticky come splashed out, sliding over Tom's hand and he shivered. The body consuming his own rocked, shuddered, grasped at him in a vain attempt to refuse him escape. The blonde's moans twisted from desperate to blissful and into contented mews. Tom grew momentarily rougher. He thrust with just a fragment more hungry violence before his body lost control. Groaning, he forced himself deeper into the easing body, jetting his release. Every fiber of his flesh and soul echoed the desire to merge with the wonderful creature he'd found lost in the woods.

When his breathing slowed and his heart stopped pounding such a rapid beat, Tom glanced down to where Alex had slid away from his grip. The boy lay on the blanket, half curled up on his side. His legs were drawn up near his chest. One slender arm was draped over his hip, the other was pinned under his body. The blonde hair hid the beautiful face but Tom knew what he'd find.

Now that the need was spent, sense and logic returned. He'd practically raped the boy, the delicate, slender, fragile looking teenaged boy. It was rare that he ever lost that much control, even with James or Sam he'd only seldom surrendered to such a hungry joining. He hadn't even undressed, just opened his pants and used the body offered to him. It wasn't what he'd wanted their first time to be, Alex had to have been hurt. He had every reason to hate him.

There was little chance at repairing such unforgivable violence but he reached a hand out to brush curls aside. "Alex?"

The blonde muttered and sighed. Long arms stretched out and lean legs slid between Tom's knees. The curls tumbled away but the face that shined up at Tom wasn't hurt, or upset. The expression was one of an angel. A very lewd, happily sated, contented angel that had just been roughly fucked and apparently had enjoyed it.

Brown eyes opened to mere slits danced. "So help me, Tom, if you say you're sorry I'll kick you in the balls." To prove his point, he lifted one leg up until his shin was gently resting against Tom's groin.

"Did I hurt you? I didn't mean to be so rough."

Alex stretched again, arching his back and smiling wider. "I meant you to be so rough. My God that was fabulous. It was completely what I needed. Now, unless you have complaints, stop thinking, shut up, and lay down. I want to be snuggled."

A touch baffled by the unexpected response and the lack of guilt he felt, Tom shook his head and laid down. Alex was instantly pressed to his side, curving along his body. The blonde fit against him perfectly, filled in the spaces and gaps and pillowed easily against him. It felt good, it felt right. Tom snaked an arm out to grab the edge of the blanket and flipped it up over them. The arm he had around Alex pulled the boy closer against him and with a sigh of his own, Tom gave into the gentle happiness he was feeling. Next time, he promised himself, they would do things a little slower. There wasn't a single doubt that there would be a next time.

The sun warmed them and Alex was lazing in half awake peace tucked against his side. Tom found his body spent but his mind running in circles. The idea of harm, any harm, coming to Alex chilled him. He wanted to hold the younger man tight against him forever, shelter him from the world's harshness. One of his hands was idly playing with the springy golden curls as if he'd spent his lifetime soothing them both with such causal touch.

It was easier to live his life alone. Safer, simpler, but not as warm or as comfortable as what he was feeling right in the fragile perfection of the moment. James was right, he couldn't keep hurt away, not forever. He was only keeping happiness at bay instead. It hadn't been idle jest on the

train, Alex was already his the question remained, would Tom allow himself to be Alex's?

Tom shifted his weight a little and it shifted Alex against him. The blonde made a half awake sleepy sound of protest and being disturbed and Tom smiled gently.

"Alex?"

"Hmmm?" He nuzzled his face against the warm fabric under his nose.

"Forgive me for asking this, but would you tell me about this Pastor Barnes?"

The languid body went suddenly tense. Alex pulled his face from the warm chest just enough to glance up at Tom. He was laying still, his eyes shut and somehow that felt more safe than if he'd been faced with those grey eyes. His body stayed tense but he laid his head back down. "What do you want to know?"

Tom let his hand return to toying with the curls. "Whatever you want to tell me."

A long moment of silence hung over the clearing before Alex snuggled closer back against Tom and forced his body to relax. "He's older than you, quite a bit. Slender, soft but not fat, just, slender and soft. Most people see him as kindly and almost a meek man." Alex fell silent but he swallowed hard. No one had ever cared to ask him about his past, no one had ever cared enough to listen. He wanted to tell Tom, tell him everything but the words were sticky and difficult to force out.

He glanced back up to Tom but the man's eyes were still safely shut. "He'd come into my room at night. He'd tell me, hush, hush now, don't fight God's love. That he was going to show me God's love. He'd touch me, put my hands on him, then it was mouths and then it was, well, I'd just lay there. I'd just lay there with my eyes closed and pretend I was somewhere else but when he tried to, I..." Alex had to draw a breath, slow and steady and make sure the grey eyes still were shuttered before the words would shake loose. "I said no. He did it anyway, I couldn't stop him, I fought but..." In his memory he could hear it, his own cries and sobs, the man's grunts, the creaking of the bed. Memories he never re-visited, thoughts he never returned to. "Once he'd, well, there wasn't much use to fighting. He was always pleased that I accepted God's love.

"It takes something from you, gets under your skin. It never becomes easier but you learn that it won't kill you, that you can survive it but you never feel whole or clean, not really." He wiped quickly at his eyes and swallowed the tears he refused to shed. "I try never to think of unpleasant things. We all have unpleasantness, it's nothing special. It's just, Tom, laying here, dirty, sweaty, naked, with you? It's the first time since then that I've felt clean." The quiet words faded off and Alex tucked himself in tighter still to the strong body. Hoping he hadn't said too much, showed too much.

Tom was glad his eyes were shut because he wasn't sure Alex would understand the anger and pain in them. He wrapped his arms tighter about Alex and pulled the slender boy tight. There was no doubt, it wasn't even up for debate, he did belong to Alex. But knowing it and admitting it were two different things.

Tom leaned over and pressed a kiss to the top of the hidden blonde head. "I won't ever let any unpleasantness touch you again. It'll have to go through me first." He kissed the head again and let the scent of lavender sooth him.

They lay together in warm silence until Alex sighed and surged upwards. He hovered over Tom, letting his hair tickle down to tease the serious face. The smile that tugged his lips upward was real, small but true.

"We stink." He bent down and kissed the willing lips. "We should wash off before it gets dark."

Alex kissed Tom again, leaning into the hand that rose up to brush hair aside. "God, you're so handsome." He sighed, kissing Tom's nose before retreating. "So, wonderful." He whispered.

"Odd, I was thinking the same thing of you."

Alex lifted his chin and his eyes sparkled. "Of course you were! I'm stunning!" He laughed at his own silliness and slipped, naked and bare, from the warmth of their blanket. "Now, get naked, Doctor, you can't bath in your clothes. I promise not to bite, lick maybe, but not bite."

The teasing words and the sight of Alex kneeling to dig clean clothes and soap from his bag, stirred Tom. He was, without a doubt, totally addicted to the blonde. A glance, a few simple words, and he was enthralled. The best, or worst part, was that Tom didn't even mind his captured status.

Later that night, as Alex returned to the warmth of the fire from his final trip into the woods to empty his bladder, he paused and had to smile. Tom had moved their blankets. Now, instead of sleeping across the fire from him, Alex was set up to sleep right next to Tom. It was such a subtle move, such a touching one, that it made him pause.

Tom glanced up at the sound of Alex's return, suddenly nervous, and found the boy hovering just outside of the fire light. "Is this alright?" He fussed a little bit with the blankets.

Alex nodded and moved on stiff and limping knee back to the fire. "Everything appears to be right where it should be." He smiled as he lowered himself down onto his blankets.

There was a tense, uneasy, moment as Tom settled down onto the blankets. Alex didn't instantly press against him and that disappointed him. It would be easier if the blonde snuggled in, it was so much more difficult to reach over to him. He needed it, the feel of the warm body close to his own. It was one of the hardest things to adjust to after Sam's death, the cold emptiness of sleeping alone.

He turned on his side to face Alex, wondering how to ask for what he wanted. Like everything else, he didn't need to put his wish into words. Somehow, Alex simply read his mind, or maybe he craved the contact as much as Tom did. As if they'd done the same every night, Alex turned on his side as well, facing away from Tom. He scooted over, sliding as much under Tom's blankets as his own, and fit his back tight to Tom's chest.

With a sigh, Tom draped an arm and then a leg over Alex's slender form. They fit perfectly together as they lay, spooning, in the clear early summer night. Alex sighed, happy, warmed, and angled his body slightly so he was half sleeping on his stomach. He tugged at Tom's arm until the larger man was half sleeping on top of him. That was how Alex fell swiftly asleep, wearing Tom like an extra blanket, tucked in and under his arms. For as much as Tom wanted to linger, awake and enjoying the moment, sleep quickly clawed him down as well.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Eight

The town that they rode into late the next morning was ordinary enough. A neat collection of houses sat in an orderly array, white washed fences outlines green yards. There were several shops and stores. It looked like a perfect, peaceful, small town. People moved on the street, going from work and chores with mild haste.

Alex rode slightly behind and beside Tom. He'd been unusually fussy that morning in nerves, brushing his hair twice, straightening his dress about his frame countless times. Now he rode with a straight spine, a set and resolved face and a gloved hand wrapped around the bouquet of wildflowers he'd picked to place on his mother's grave.

Several people stopped in their tracks as they rode by, noticing and knowing Alex's face but never did the boy glance their way. Tom watched them, watched their eyes dart from Alex to him and back. He watched the way whispers gathered in flocks and spread across the summer air of the village. He rode vigilantly, alert to any harm that may seek out the treasured blonde in his care.

"Tom?" Alex spoke softly as they neared the church and it's graveyard.
"Yes?"

"Please, no trouble, okay?" He glanced over and saw the ice in the grey eyes. "I don't want a scene."

Tom nodded. "Of course." But he made no promises. He stayed watchful as they reached the quiet corner the churchyard sat in. It was natural now to hop down and help Alex out of the saddle. Natural to feel the corseted waist, slender and fragile, in his grasp.

"Thank you." Alex whispered, looking up into Tom's eyes but it wasn't for the help from the saddle.

In the nut brown eyes, Tom saw the hidden fear. He nodded in reply and tied both sets of reins to the post. When he'd turned, Alex had paused by the gate to the tidy grave yard, clutching the flowers to him. He didn't move until Tom opened the gate for him and then the boy moved on steady feet across the old stones to the one plot that awaited him.

There was nothing special on the small stone, just a name and date. Alex hovered over the grave, more apparition than a creature of flesh and blood. "We seem to spend too much time wandering cemeteries saying farewells." He finally forced out, while Tom stood silently beside him, hat in hand.

Alex knelt and placed the flowers. He wanted to tell his mother everything. Tell her all the horrible things he'd endured, all the unspeakable awful compromises. He wanted to go back in time and be ten years old again and crawl into her lap, feel her hand sooth his hair, hear her voice whispering her love.

Nothing came out, not a word, or sound. That part of him, the child, was gone. He'd lost it along the way and even if his mother was suddenly risen from the grave, he knew he could never again find the same peace in her arms. His sins were not to be voiced and his absolution was not to be found in her love.

He wanted to tell her about Tom, and James. About the rescue he'd found, not just physically. His heart filled with the need to share with her all the newfound joys. If he'd had the voice, he would have told her of Tom's gentle care, of his stubborn protection, his noble, shamefully hidden love.

Mostly, he wanted to tell her that it was okay. That he no longer was angry with her for dieing and abandoning him. That the blame he'd placed on her memory had melted with the winter snows

and brought him to such a green spring. He wanted her to know that he forgave her and wanted to ask her for the same forgiveness in return.

There was no voice in his body. No skill or strength in words to say all that filled his core being. It left him standing in mute silence, trying and failing to find a way to speak until he finally ended in defeat.

A warm hand fell on his shoulder and Alex glanced over to the solid strength, the rooted oak, that was Tom. The older man nodded, hat bunched up in his free hand.

"She knows." His deep voice rumbled out.

The simple fact that someone else had sensed his plight shook a quivery sob from him. Alex nodded and quickly wiped at his eyes. "Yeah, I think she does."

"When you're ready, we'll get what we came for."

Alex lowered his head for a moment. "I'm ready." He let the comforting hand on his shoulder guide him back from the quiet graves and buried memories, back to the troubled bustling living.

His eyes raised and fell on the tidy house set next to the church, white steeple rising to the blue sky above. "He'll be working on the sermon today. He always does that on Thursdays." Alex's stomach knotted up, turned over and he struggled with the desire to become ill. It was only knowing that someone, somewhere, in the town was watching that kept him steady. No one sneezed outside without a neighbor seeing it, that was the way of small towns. He drew a slow, steady breath and took the first measured step back to his past.

The heels of Alex's shoes should have rapped loudly on the wood planks of the porch, but he was stepping so carefully that they made virtually no sound. Tom's steady footfalls drowned out his own passing, making him feel even less solid, more ghost like. The curtains that hung in the front windows were the same ones Alex had stitched shortly after his mother had passed. He'd made them in thank you for the care, before he'd been taught other ways of repaying his debts.

He raised his hand and wondered if he was real enough to make a sound when he knocked. His head felt light, his legs weak but he brought his gloved fist down on the door and it rattled in a very real way. Alex wanted to step back into Tom's arms and hide but his body was frozen in place.

The door opened and a balding, slender man looked up over his glasses at them. Tom had expected someone menacing, someone who looked evil. The man that answered the door wasn't weak, he obviously spent a lot of time out of doors from the slight tan to his skin but he wasn't large in statue or broad in strength. Alex had been right, he was older than Tom's own age, old enough to be his own father. The wisps of hair still clinging to his skull were graying and random.

"Hello, Pastor Barnes." Alex forced out, trying to keep things light and civilized while remembering the man's hands touching him.

The intelligent eyes behind the glasses widened in disbelief. "Alex." The man breathed the name.

Tom didn't like it. He didn't like the way the name came out as a caress. He didn't like the way the eyes brightened. He didn't like how Alex was visibly trembling with the effort and courage it was taking to hold together. The man was old enough to be Alex's grandfather, he was trusted and abused that trust. Some hidden, hurt part of Tom bubbled up and before the older man could speak again, he acted.

Alex's eyes grew wide and his words of protest dried up in his throat as Tom pushed past him. It was like a force of nature, powerful and just as unstoppable. Quick as a summer rain storm, Tom

lashed out. His strong hand wrapped easily around the pastor's throat. The force of his will pushed the older man back into his own house. Both men moved in the torrent of anger and fear backwards until Pastor Barnes' back hit the far wall.

The eyes behind the glasses widened as Tom tightened his grip. Hands, the skin thinned with age over them, clawed at Tom's strong hold. Inside, Tom raged, he screamed, cursed but outside he was cold and empty. He lifted and the pastor was raised, choking, gasping, to his toes. The panic in the neat living room was tangible, peeking, knowing death was arriving.

Until slender hands fell to the sides of Tom's face and turned his head. Boiling grey eyes locked with wide, soothing brown and his grip eased on the throat slightly. Tom saw Alex's lips move but he couldn't hear it over the blood pounding in his ears, he tried to focus. Curls bounced as Alex shook his head, his face grown sad.

That sunk in, Alex should never look sad. The trapped body slid down the wall, feet reaching flat against the floor again. Breath broke past Tom's anger and washed the sound of his heart beat down to a manageable level.

"Please, please, this solves nothing, please, Tom, please. Don't kill him, please." Alex pleaded, hands holding onto a face he'd never imagined could express so much pain, so much anger and hate. He saw reason slowly returning and Alex nodded and smiled softly.

"He should die for what he's done." Tom forced out, coldly, with none of the screaming rage he felt.

That gave Alex pause, he nodded. "You're right, he should but that stain shouldn't be yours, Tom. Please, for me, don't."

Tom could deny Alex almost nothing. He nodded and turned from the grasping hands on his face to the man he'd nearly strangled. "Bastard." He whispered but he forced his fingers to relax.

Pastor Barnes gasped for air and stumbled away, coughing. "What is going on!" He choked out, turning to see Alex pressing Tom into one of the chairs.

Alex held out his hand to the older man but didn't move from Tom's side. "Tom is protective of me, please, just sit down. We'll be gone soon." He turned back to Tom and was pleased to see more sanity in the doctor's eyes. "I'll be quick."

Tom nodded but he kept his attention on where the pastor was gasping for air, struggling to recover. Alex glanced between the two of them before moving, unhappily from the room. He wasn't sure Pastor Barnes would keep his mouth shut or that Tom wouldn't react violently so he hurried.

Barnes adjusted his clothing, straightened his glasses and continued to rub his throat. "So," He began hoarsely. "Bob passed the boy onto you. How is he?"

Tom ground his teeth so hard he thought they might shatter.

"You shouldn't let Alex have such a free rein, he's a bit wild at times, needs a firm hand to guide him." Barnes settled into a chair across the room from Tom, watching the intense man as much as he was being watched. "There's no point in being jealous. Men with our tastes should stick together, not fight one another. Truthfully, Alex is grown too old for me, I'm no threat to your place."

"You're mistaken." Tom nearly snarled out. "Our tastes are not the same. I don't rape children."

"Neither do I. It's natural a younger boy would be confused and uncertain when he is first shown

the proper way for men and boys to interact. Alex was a responsive beauty, a rare treasure, he learned quickly and I'm sure you're grateful for my early education of him." Barnes soothed.

"Take your glasses off."

"What?"

Tom stood up. "Take them off. I won't cut my hand on the glass."

"I don't understand." Barnes' eyes narrowed. There was no understanding in his world that Tom had attacked him from reasons other than jealousy.

Gently, Tom reached out and pulled the wires from behind the man's ears. He carefully folded the frames up and set them on a side table. There was no rage in him now, what ate at him was colder. A corner of his soul sung as his fist made contact with the confused, smug face.

The sound of something breaking filtered up to Alex and his heart took off like a frightened rabbit. The house was filled with shadowy memory, he didn't even dare glance into his old bedroom. He was worried the sight of the space would shatter him into inconsolable sobs. The only thing that broke into parts was something in the room he'd left Tom in.

He forced the wood floor board back into its slot, pinching his finger in his haste. The pain was good, it gave him a counter point to focus on instead of his fear. As he sucked on the injured finger, his other hand scooped up the cloth bag he'd hidden a lifetime ago. The sound of furniture being shoved and a frightened cry hurried his feet down the steps.

The sight that greeted him didn't seem like one from any reality Alex knew. Pastor Barnes' face was bleeding, blood oozed from his nose, his eye was swollen, his lip split. His limbs moved in uncertain spasm as he tried to escape Tom's grasp. All it did was wiggle his way against the joint of floor and wall and as he flailed again Alex saw the older man's pants had been torn open, forced to his knees.

Tom knelt over him, face steady and cold. In his right hand was the small knife he carried in the side of his boot, in his left he held Barnes' testicles. He wasn't holding them gently, his grip was nearly as strong as he'd earlier had around the man's neck. The look of fear in Barnes' eyes was greater now than when he'd faced death. Tom pulled a little more, stretching the round sacks lower and brought the edge of his knife to the sensitive skin connecting them to the older man's body.

Understanding sunk in to Alex even if that understanding felt insane. "Tom!" He snapped out. "What're you doing?"

"It won't kill him." He answered softly, deadly.

"Don't!" Alex didn't move, frightened if he did Tom would finish the slice he hadn't started yet. Hopeful if he held still Tom would go ahead and do the act.

"It's a fitting punishment!" Tom glanced over to the wide cocoa eyes and saw uncertainty there. "Just walk outside, I'll be there in a moment."

Barnes whimpered, held in place by Tom's painful grip.

Alex didn't move.

"He doesn't even see what he did to you as wrong!" The blade twitched forward, drawing a small trickle of blood and a high pitched squeal from Barnes. "He doesn't feel a scrape of guilt!"

Tom's pleas had a pitch them of convincing but it wasn't aimed at Alex. The blonde shook his head. "You're right, he doesn't see it as wrong."

The blade pushed tighter. The small nick grew, blood slid down to Tom's hand.

"But, you know this is wrong, Tom. Don't."

"It's justice." Tom whispered, the knife sliding a hair more against the tender flesh. Barnes had his eyes shut now, tears rolling down his face, his lips moved in begging, unspoken pleas.

"They say it's justice to lynch a black man that gets about his place too, but I don't agree." He moved closer to where the older man was sprawled. The fear was he saw there was one he remembered.

"It's not the same!" Tom growled out, struggling with himself. Knowing that it would be so easy to draw the sharp blade in a quick motion and castrate the man but also knowing that it was a line that if he crossed he could never return from.

Carefully, Alex knelt down beside Tom. He didn't touch either man. "Pastor Barnes, what you're feeling right now? It's a tenth of what you did to me." He spat the words out, gaining strength as he went. "I begged you to not touch me, not to fuck me but you did it anyway. I cried, I fought but you were stronger, you took something from me I can never get back. Tom's right, it would be just for him to take something from you. I want him to." He paused at the whimper of fear from Barnes and the groan of need from Tom.

Alex struggled with himself. "But unlike what you showed me, I'll show you mercy." He shook his head. "An eye for an eye, that's what you preached but you know, we're all blind that way. Taking from you, doesn't give back to me." He rested a hand on Tom's over the knife. He glanced up to the cold grey eyes before he stood up. "I'm ready to go, Tom."

Tom growled but the knife went from Barnes' groin to his eye level. "Next time you so much as think of touching another boy, remember this." And he squeezed, with all his anger and strength and had to clamp the hand holding the knife over the man's mouth to muffle the scream he let loose. Tom held on until the scream dribbled off into whimpers and only then did he let go. "Remember!"

Barnes sagged into a sobbing heap on the floor. Tom wiped the trickle of blood off of his knife onto the man's shirt. He put the blade away and stood up. "The pain you're feeling is nothing compared to what the boys you touch go through. You're getting off easy you sick fuck."

"Tom?" Alex called from the door.

"Right there." He tossed back but before he walked away he kicked the injured man one last time, not hard enough to break ribs but enough to knock breath away and cause the man to hurt for days to come. "Never forget!" He hissed one last time before turning to follow Alex out the front door.

He helped Alex back onto his horse without having to be asked. The blonde had simply stood at the side of the broad creature, trembling. Tom didn't even bother handing Alex the reins, the boy still clutched the cloth bag he'd recovered. Without waiting for Pastor Barnes to find a gun and shoot them or shout to the town for help, Tom mounted his own horse, took up both pairs of reins and let them out of town.

They moved swiftly for several hours, putting distance and time between the encounter but after a time, even Tom needed to stop. He watched and found a good place to pause, slightly off the main road. Alex was as limp as a rag doll when he eased the boy from his horse and still clinging to the cloth bag.

Tom tethered the horses and still Alex stood, unmoving. He brushed curls back and tried to peer into the down turned face. The normally so expressive features looked dead, empty, the way they had when Tom had first found the boy.

"I'm sorry." Tom swallowed hard. "I lost control."

Alex huffed a little, his breath catching in his throat. "If you'd any idea how often I'd thought about doing what you nearly did." The caught breath turned into a sigh. "Tom? Would you do something for me?"

"If I can."

"Sit with me a little?"

The eyes that met Tom's were brewing with loneliness and fear. "Of course." He took one of the slender hands, it fell limply away from the cloth bag at his touch, and led Alex across the clearing to sit with their backs to a fallen tree.

He wrapped his arms around the slender shoulders and Alex responded by burying his face into Tom's neck. His gloved hands tucked up against Tom's chest. Cradled there, Alex clung to the strength offered to him and let himself tremble. Tom's hand soothed across the curls, down across tense neck and shoulder muscles and just held on knowing that when he was ready, Alex would let him know. Until that time, they'd sit against that log until the world came to an end.

As the days slid away, Alex remained silent and withdrawn. Tom would catch him staring off into space, eyes blank, face slack. It was so similar to the quite depression of those first days after he'd freed the boy that Tom worried. At night, Alex would cling to him but it was strictly for comfort and Tom left it there.

When they stood, about to board another train, Tom paused.

"Last chance to back out." He tried to smile at Alex but it came out more as a grimace. "My family aren't the easiest of people."

Alex just shook his head. "No, I don't mind. You're right, you should visit home while you can."

"Damn, I was looking for a reason to back out too." He teased and it drew a ghost of a smile from Alex.

"Kiss me."

Tom glanced around the busy platform. "Here?"

Alex nodded but for the first time since seeing Pastor Barnes some sparkle was in his eyes. "Right here, and like you mean it."

"I,"

"Kiss me."

Tom couldn't refuse the light he saw, the return of some of the blonde's spirits. He let a hand slid across the beautiful face before pressing a chaste kiss to the other's lips. A soft, tip of a tongue teased and deepened the contact and the world around Tom dissolved. His other hand came up to settle on the other side of Alex's face, thumbs resting lightly on cheekbones as the deepening kiss reminded him of how addicted he was to Alex.

He broke away with a guilty start and glanced around. They'd gained some looks, a few enjoying the show and some 'tsking' in disapproval. Not one person had even the slightest hint of knowing what they'd just seen in their eyes. Tom, a man, had just full out kissed another man in broad daylight, in front of a crowd of people and none knew.

Alex sighed and licked his lips a little bit. "Thank you."

"What was that about?"

"Besides the fact that I've missed kissing you?" Alex smiled softly. "I can handle your family, Tom. You could bounce me on your knee and they aren't going to know." He tossed his head toward the train. "Now, I'm not riding all the way to Philadelphia on the back of a horse if I can avoid it."

He wanted to think it was his willingness to indulge in such a public kiss that kindled some life back into Alex but Tom sensed the truth. As the train rolled on, carrying the blonde further and further from North Carolina, the tension in his shoulders melted. Mile by mile, the hard, empty edge in the brown eyes faded. It wasn't anything Tom did or didn't do but the knowledge that he was escaping that was freeing him. It made Tom want to vow to never allow Alex to return to the state, ever, and to do everything in his power to make the younger man forget there even was a place called North Carolina.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Twenty Nine

They arrived in Philadelphia on a warm summer day. The air had a sharp heat and the sky was painfully blue adorned with a wispy handful of high, thin clouds. It felt like summer, the heat eased bones and lulled a body to nap, but the oppressive Pennsylvania summer humidity hadn't arrived. The day reminded Tom of his youth, running about, wild, across the city with James.

"It's different." He said softly, not really expecting Alex to answer.

"How so?" The blonde tossed up, glancing around to see what he was missing.

"The last time I was here was just after the war. There were uniforms everywhere. It looks now more as it did before the war."

After the war, the words sunk in and Alex asked, uncertain he wanted an answer. "You brought Sam with you?" It was like poking at a bruise. Tom would always love Sam more, there wasn't anything he could do about it.

He nodded. "It was his silly idea, not mine. My parents live on the outskirts of the city, we'll stay in town today and go over tomorrow." He turned and saw the distant unhappiness that he'd hoped was gone. "Now, I promised you a pretty dress, there are shops here with fashions from the world over." That earned him a smile but it didn't touch the brown eyes. "Should we go now, or would you like to rest a little first?"

"A chance to go shopping? How could I say no. Can we get you something new?"

Tom glanced at himself and then to the men around him. He did look like he'd ridden in from the

untamed wild lands compared to the civilized fashion around him. His father would shake his head to see him dressed so and his mother, well, she'd faint clean away.

"That might not be a bad idea. My parents would be shocked to see me this way." He laughed a little. "I happen to like it."

"So do I but this is a grand city! And, besides, I'd like to see you in a suit." That carried the smile up to the brown eyes.

"A suit it is then but we'll see to your desires first." He offered his arm and ignored the looks they got. He remembered what it was to see the handfuls of people arrive from less cultured locations, he'd watched them himself once. Never, in all his youthful dreaming, did Tom think he'd become one of those capable, dangerous men from the frontier. It was a change that he'd not seen in himself until just now. It was a change he found he liked.

Four dress shops later, Tom was grateful for the stool the sales clerks had pulled over for him to perch on. At his feet sat a half dozen wrapped packages but this time he watched Alex shop with amusement. It was easier to smile when he didn't have to struggle with the idea of how lovely something would be on the boy, or how erotic silk stockings would feel to the touch. One dress had grown to several and he had no desire to deny Alex, the boy was good enough doing that himself.

Each time he caught Alex choosing something with a lower price tag over something more beautiful that he really desired, Tom stopped him. Each time, the brown eyes warmed, glowed with mischief and delight. It wasn't just clothing, Tom had seen to it that Alex now owned several sets of combs for his hair, ornate to plain but all well crafted and ones that pleased the younger's vanity. They purchased gloves and a lovely, though rather plain, woven hat. It had surprised Tom that Alex, unlike most women, had no fascination with hats.

"I'm going to bankrupt you." Alex called out, laughter in his voice, from where he hid still in the side dressing room.

"Shut up and get yourself out here so I can see where my money is going." He nearly shouted back, breaking the quiet of the shop. Whatever Alex had on, it was obviously something that the boy loved.

When he ventured, shyly, into the main room, Tom's heart stopped. The dress was simple, decorated in small knot work buttons and little else. The fabric was the color of summer buttercups, warm, golden yellow and instead of dwarfing the gold of the boy's hair it only accented the peachy sunshine of his natural color. Tom's knowledge of the cut and style were limited but even he could see the dress was pinned back to make it fit the slender frame.

"It's a little long, both in arm and hem and too roomy for such a slender thing." The sales lady started, tugging Alex half way to the side to show how they'd pinned the dress to give the final impression an altered form would show. "But, as you can see, the color is perfect."

It wasn't just the color, even Tom could see the dress made Alex happy. Tom studied the face again and had to shift his weight on the stool, he was wrong, the dress didn't make Alex happy, it made him feel sexy. He'd been learning what that look in the blonde's eye meant, it was a light that had been missing since North Carolina.

"It's a nice summer weight fabric." Alex added but he already knew from the hunger that burned in Tom's eyes that the dress was going home.

Tom pushed his dirty thoughts away. "Have I said no to you once today?"

That made Alex laugh, almost giggle and he hurried over, yellow dress floating around him.

Before Tom could react, a quick kiss was pressed to his lips and then the blonde blur disappeared back into the changing rooms. Leaving Tom to pretend to stern disapproval of such bold displays to the smiling sales lady.

"Thomas Lambry? Is that you?" A woman said from the side of his field of vision.

Tom turned to spot the pair of middle aged women near a rack on the far side of the store. Without thought, he hopped from his stool and stood as the ladies swept over. The one that had spoken and was now smiling widely looked familiar and he struggled after a name.

"Goodness it is you! After so much time!"

"As accused, Miss..." he and just when he was admitting defeat the name returned. "Dunst."

"Mrs. Ackley now." Her smile widened as she took in the plain clothes, the well worn, long coat and the pair of guns Tom still wore.

"Ackley? You didn't marry Jonathan Ackley did you?"

"The one and only! My husband speaks very highly of you, said you were quite the scholar in school and fully credits your assistance with his acceptable marks in Classic Literature."

"Jonathan did just fine on his own, don't believe him." Tom's eye fell to the younger woman that lingered slightly behind Mrs. Ackley.

"Oh, forgive me. My cousin, Beatrice Adams, Bea dear, this is Dr. Thomas Lambry, the youngest in that distinguished family. Are you still unmarried Dr. Lambry? Last we heard you were roaming the wilds of the South, bringing a healing touch to those that least could afford it."

Tom glanced over his shoulder and caught Alex leaving the changing room. The blonde smiled softly and stayed on the other side of the store. "No, I'm, well, the work wasn't as dramatic as you make it sound."

But the glance and returned smile gave Tom away. Mrs. Ackley smiled warmly but her eyes were sharp. "Who is that lovely creature? I don't believe I know her face and here, I thought I knew every eligible young lady in Philadelphia."

Tom kept his expression steady. "Alex isn't from Philadelphia."

"Oh? Miss Alex is a friend of yours?" The lady fished for information.

"Mrs. Lambry is my wife." It was admitted for self preservation to avoid the smiling but rather homely Bea Adams but as the words came out, Tom liked the feel of them.

That set Mrs. Ackley back a step. "Oh, my, well my deepest congratulations. We hadn't heard a whisper of your return to Philadelphia let alone a hint of a marriage!"

"We've only just arrived. I haven't been home yet so my family isn't aware of either states." He smiled to comfort the sudden shocked look to the woman's face. "I assure you, Mrs. Ackley, you haven't been kept unawares, my own family doesn't know. An announcement hasn't been made yet."

The shock faded, softened. "So you haven't been home? And you've no word from home in all this time of your travels?"

"Very little of it, the occasional birth but nothing recent. I look forward to catching up on all that I've missed."

Mrs. Ackley reached out and took one of Tom's hands. "Well, I wish you and your lovely, young wife the best of happiness."

"Thank you."

"Come along Bea, we've much to accomplish today."

Before another word could be said, the pair had hurried from the shop leaving Tom standing alone, wondering what had just happened.

He'd found them a room in a fairly nice hotel and they'd had dinner in it's upscale restaurant. Alex had been charmed and charming and Tom felt oppressively smothered to return to the world he'd been born to.

"I'm not saying it's not nice to be back in a larger city, I'm just saying I don't like going unarmed." He'd grown used to the comfortable weight of the guns at his side, the same way he was used to the fit of his old coat and worn hat.

"But the culture and theater and that food! I've never tasted anything like that." Alex sighed, pulling the gloves from his fingers as the door to their suite shut behind them. "Oh, Tom, it's charming!"

He paused and glanced across the room. "Would you want to stay here?"

"Only if it would please you. I've no attachment to this or any place."

He sat down to write out a note to his parents. "And you're sure you want to go with me tomorrow? I can just forget to mention you in this note."

Alex leaned over him and kissed the side of his face. "They don't scare me, not in the least." He pulled pins and combs from his hair and let it fall in tight tumbles around his shoulders. All of his night time preparations were forgotten when he saw how Tom held the pen. It pleased him to see the man doing something so simple, so innocent, as writing in his neat, quick hand.

Tom finished the short note, sealed and addressed it and left it out for the staff. It would disappear sometime before morning and be delivered without fail. If he simply showed up with no notice, Tom would be scolded, as it was a few hours warning was all he could deliver. He turned at the feel of eyes on him and found Alex studying him with intensity.

"What?"

The blonde head shook slightly, a small smile teased his lips. "I've been distant lately, I'm sorry."

"Nothing to feel sorry for, you had a lot on your mind." A cold fear settled across his spine. What if, in all his long pondering, Alex had settled on the idea that he didn't wish to associate with Tom any longer? There was a heavy weight of serious intent to the boy tonight, focused acceptance, that made Tom afraid.

"I.." Alex started and paused. He had to glance away before raising his eyes to meet Tom's. "I can't imagine my life without you in it, Thomas Lambry." The widened, stricken grey eyes said everything. Alex forced a smile and prayed he wouldn't become ill. "It's okay! I mean, it's not that big of a deal. I'm just really comfortable around you so I just let what ever runs across my silly head out. I didn't mean for that to sound as it did, you know me, never thinking things out." He'd said too much, felt too much and Tom's dumbstruck look said it was way more than he should have.

"Don't." Tom whispered. He wanted to stand and take the embarrassed blond into his arms but his legs refused to work.

"What?" Alex floundered to a halt in his efforts to undo the damage he'd done.

"Don't take it back. Say it again, please?"

The flustered, forced smile fell away. "I can't imagine my life without you in it." He watched as Tom shut his eyes, saw the small shudder that ran across the other man. "Take me to bed, Tom? I've missed the feel of your touch."

With the grace of a stalking animal, Tom stood and softly stepped across the space between them. His eyes locked to Alex's, held them pinned in place while his hands slid across the beautiful face. Bright curls were brushed aside and Tom stood watching the serious face.

He pressed his lips to the soft skin of the boy's forehead. "I've missed touching you." The deceptive ease, Tom scooped the slender body up into his the cradle of his arms. Alex snaked long fingers into Tom's hair, teasing with the tips of his fingers over neck and the shell of ears. Tom's lips met his own and parted to allow Alex to torment him with a gently exploring tongue.

It wasn't easy to carry Alex and accept the boy's hungry kiss at the same time. Tom wanted to slid his hands over the offered body, he wanted to surrender and close his eyes to the kiss and while he held the precious weight in his arms he could do neither. His breath escaped in moaning gasps as he kicked his bedroom door open. The latch hadn't been secured but at this point, he didn't care if he broke it.

Alex laughed warmly into Tom's mouth, nibbling on the trembling lips. "Eager?" He whispered.

Tom just growled in return and lowered the lithe body to the bed. He pressed his weight down upon Alex, not giving the boy a chance to wiggle away, never breaking contact with their mouths. His hands were now free to roam, they slid over face and into masses of hair. They escaped the tangle of curls and traced the long, slender neck to dance across shoulders and down to drag across arms. Across they explored, over layers of fabric, feeling the strength of the corset that Alex used to disguise his lack of feminine curves, down over the curve of hip bones. His leg fell between Alex's and no amount of fabric, no countless numbers of layers of clothing, could hide the hardness there. Tom dragged his thigh up, across the hidden secret of Alex's gender, aching himself at the consuming look of need that crossed the expressive face.

"Oh, Tom..." Alex wrapped his hands into Tom's shirt. "Get this off before I rip it from your body." He opened his eyes and fell into storm clouds. "I want you naked, against my skin." Tom's eyes rolled up and they fluttered shut at the thought alone. His lips parted and he moaned. Now, his thigh wasn't enough contact, he slid his hips flush against the slender body. Hard erection pressed against hard erection, teasing, tormenting, across a gulf of modest cloth.

The reaction drew a smile to Alex's face even as pleasure poured across his body. Tom was so much more responsive then he'd ever have guessed. Whispered suggestions, dirty, lewd talk gasped out, had as powerful effect on his older lover as a carefully aimed touch. Not that the mental image of them both being naked together didn't excite him as well, Alex was already working on the innumerable buttons, ties and clasps that kept him in his own clothing.

They parted long enough to peel cloth from skin. Each stealing glances every time another article was discarded. Alex smiling happily in a soft contented way as more and more of the broad, strength was exposed. Tom's face was set in an expression of hungry lust, his eyes devoured the exposure of a peachy pale shoulder, the length of a stocking clad leg.

That made him pause, his shoes off, his pants still on. Tom knelt by the bed and ran his hands up the outsides of Alex's legs. The stockings were a haunting counterpoint to the strength in the

long, slender legs. He watched Alex's head loll back, his hands fall away from the ties he'd been struggling with. Tom had to look away to press his lips to the boundary where the garters were rolled over the stockings. He kissed the boy's thighs, his knees, letting his hands roam higher to ghost lightly over the weeping length.

"Oh, God!" Alex sighed as his hips arched forward into the contact.

"One time, I'm going spend an hour kissing your legs." Tom's deep voice vibrated the tender flesh under the stockings and turned into a shudder that raced across the lovely body. "But not today." He pulled away with a sigh, letting his fingers trail down the thighs to dart off the round kneecaps. "Not today." He whispered. "Today, you promised me my naked skin against yours."

Alex's eyes grew wide. Just when had Tom learned to turn the tables on him? The rumbling voice, shaky with desire and need, tormented him with image and words. His fingers felt clumsy as he worked at the last of his clothes, pulling corset away from his body, sliding stockings down in untidy clumps.

When he glanced up from where he lay, naked, on the bed, Alex saw Tom standing watching him. It was the first he'd been able to really see the older man, the first time they'd been fully nude together. Nothing stood between them to hide behind and his eyes drank in the sight while Tom's eyes burned his own skin.

"So beautiful." Tom whispered, awed.

Alex smiled, feeling new and truly beautiful. The man's piercing eyes didn't see just the smooth skin, the slender, hard length of his cock, the pink of his nipples, they saw under the skin.

"So strong." Alex whispered back. "You make me feel so safe, so happy." He reached a hand out to Tom and it was all the invitation the doctor needed.

Tom lowered himself down onto his welcoming lover. Skin dragged against skin, it was a torment sweeter than anything he recalled. Alex's lips found the over sensitive spots on his neck and made him twitch and moan. The boy's clever fingers found Tom's nipple and began to tease circles over it. Hips arched up to hips and the tip of their cock's collided, their lengths stroked together.

It was going too fast. Alex was drawing too much out of him, driving him harder, faster, then he'd normally allow. There was something about the blonde that overwhelmed his will, overcame his control. Tom knew that if he didn't do something soon, he'd be driving into the boy, taking him with all the addicted, lusty savagery he felt. While he doubted Alex would murmur even a tiny protest, it wasn't what Tom wanted.

He surged up and dragged the limp and moaning body up higher onto the bed. Tom caught and held the hands that had been tormenting his nerves and flesh and pushed them away to the sides. That was odd enough that Alex opened hazy eyes and tried to make sense of what it was Tom wanted. Normally, Alex was very good at knowing just what his partner wanted but Tom pushed him past all reason and thought.

"What?" He gasped but the rest of the question died as Tom's lips found his neck. "Oh, that's nice." He sighed and arched his neck to let Tom have as much access as he wished.

But Tom didn't stop there, his mouth worked over Alex's neck, down to his shoulders, nipping at collarbones. A wet tongue traced the ridges of bone and downward, lower, to slowly lap against an already sensitized nipple. Alex arched off the bed and strong hands pushed him back down. His fingers tried to find Tom, tried to return the pleasure he was being given, tried to move it back to what he knew, the land where he gave pleasure and didn't need to receive it.

Tom merely brushed his hands aside once more, slowly lapping at the hard nub before catching it between his teeth and tugging. "Oh! Oh, Tom, don't, you don't, I, it's enough to touch you..." Alex tried to explain from the sea of passion he was slowly sinking into.

A deep chuckle slid like a velvet hand across Alex's body. "Still don't understand do you?"

Alex writhed and tried to understand but no sense emerged. "I'm a dumb blonde."

That brought the teeth to bite in sharp rebuke but instead of hurting, it only drew a louder, begging, cry from Alex. "Making you come, pleases me. Knowing I can make you sound like this, thrills me." He turned his attention to the neglected side of the boy's body. "I don't do this because I have to but because I love to."

That made Alex sob. "Please, please, Tom, fuck me!"

The scalding width of Tom's tongue swiped once more across the nipple he'd been tormenting. "Not yet." But the idea had merit, he planned to comply, just in his own time. Tom retreated just far enough to find the tin of salve that he'd wisely tucked near the bed.

Alex's eyes grew wide and he wiggled until his legs were spread wide. "Oh, please, yes, please." He bent his knees and dug his heels into the surface of the bed.

"Shhhh." Tom smiled and bent down to kiss the parted, desperate lips. "We're doing this my way this time."

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Thirty

Alex moaned. No one had ever made him cry out so much, be lost in so much pleasure. He had no pride left with which to even feel a small spark of shame at sounding so whore like and wonton. Tom's lips left his and before Alex could open his eyes the hot mouth returned.

Now his eyes flew open. Tom was doing his best to keep his eyes locked on Alex's face, watching the boy's reaction to the sight of a wet tongue sliding across the shaft of his aching length. Alex knew he looked like he'd been hit on the back of the head with a brick but he couldn't help it. He watched in helpless passion, too overcome to even moan, as Tom slowly explored every inch of his cock with the agile, extended, tongue. He found his voice when Tom's tongue slid across the head of his cock, teasing the slit, circling the width, and he fell back onto the bed, eyes shut.

That was more than Tom had hoped for. He felt the slender flesh pulsing with the rapid heartbeat and he'd not even closed his lips over it. Now that Alex was completely overwhelmed, overloaded beyond the ability to speak or even watch, Tom was ready.

He closed his lips over the soft, velvety tip of Alex's cock while at the same time he slid a slick finger into the hidden entrance. It made the body he was teasing twitch in confused delight. The hips didn't know if they wanted to push forward and force the length deep into Tom's mouth or downward to bury the finger in as far as it could go.

Alex whimpered, trying, struggling to open his eyes, wanting to watch the erotic sight of Tom

sucking him into his mouth. He hung there, suspended, lost, consumed. Tom eased the finger into his body with slow teasing grace while lowering his head down to swallow the trembling length into his mouth. When he bobbed his head back up, the finger slid out. Onward the torment continued as a second finger eventually joined the first and the stilled tongue began to tease.

Alex never made it to a third finger and whatever additional torture Tom had planned. His knees were splayed out, pulled wide apart by need and lust. His hips refused to know what direction to move toward. None of that mattered, with no breath to offer warning or logical thought to form words, he came. As he fell, panting, gasping, his body covered in a sheen of sweat, Tom added another finger and found that spot. It became almost too much, the pleasure of climax, the hot, delicious skill of Tom's mouth, the exploring fingers penetrating him and on top of everything the white hot explosions of pleasure from that hidden spot.

Bit by bit, Alex settled into a trembling, quivering, sated mass of blonde curls and uncoordinated limbs. It took forever for his heart to slow, his breathing to ease, enough to allow him to feel his body let alone speak intelligently. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw Tom kneeling between his legs, a wicked, evil smile like none Alex had ever seen before on his face.

"That was, that was beyond words." Alex sighed. His eyes drank in the sight of Tom and his continued arousal. "Give me a moment to catch my breath and I'll return the favor." He smiled happily at the ideas of how he could show Tom a thing or two about using a mouth to torture someone.

"I don't think so." Tom husked out and before Alex could respond, he'd reached down to scoop up the sated body.

Confused, but more than willing to do anything Tom wished, Alex allowed himself to be picked up. Tom slid to sit with his back close to the headboard and pulled Alex across his lap. Calloused hands slid up slender legs, lifting them to wrap around Tom's waist before sliding back up to the boy's waist. Before Alex could figure out just what it was Tom was planning, the doctor had lifted his hips up and slowly lowered him down onto his hard length.

"Oh!" Alex gasped as gravity and the demanding glow of lust in Tom's body did the work. It took no effort until his ass was flush against Tom's hips and it felt good, very, very good. "This is nice!" He sighed and rocked slightly, sliding Tom's hardness around inside of him. "Oh, my, yes." It was too soon for him to be hard again but Alex knew that it wouldn't take long, not like this.

Tom smiled around half shut eyes. His hands sliding across the delicate frame and soft flesh of the blonde's. They settled on the hips and lifted, removing himself from the hidden Eden in the boy's body before taking delight in returning. It was slower this way, the strokes were shorter, deeper but he could bury his face in the blonde hair. He could wrap his arms around Alex's lean back and hug him close.

He didn't expect Alex to recover so quickly. It wasn't until Alex began to help with the slow, teasing, rocking thrusts that he suspected the boy was far more like James in the libido department than himself. Alex began to kiss him, his face, his neck, his ears. His slender hands ghosted down Tom's back, tracing vertebrae and lean muscle. Those fingers explored backward to Alex's open entrance, touching, teasing, the hard cock easing in and out of his body.

Alex hadn't done that to be dirty or sexy but he liked the look of raw lust that it lit in Tom's face so he explored further. When he thought about it, felt it, it was nice. It was like seeing Tom sliding into him, settling deeply into him. He liked it, a lot, and his sated, half awake cock stirred from its well earned nap and started to harden. He moaned little and arched his back. It brought his hair back to tickle Tom's legs and forced the older man to lean forward to follow him.

That allowed Alex to slid his free hand down the straining spine once more only this time he was able to trace the round, firmness of Tom's ass. The touch broke the easy, soft, slow fucking Tom

had set and shocked the hips forward in a stuttered craving. It was all the invitation Alex needed, he doubted Tom would beat him for any reason now let alone something so minor as his evil plan.

He switched hands. Letting the one that had been mapping the contours of Tom's ass slid forward to tease chest and shoulders while bringing the one that was now slicked in salve from exploring the spot of union, behind Tom. Before the older man could guess at his intentions, he ghosted a finger over the hidden ring of muscle. Alex watched carefully for a reaction, seeking signs to stop or not. Tom's throaty, hungry moan wasn't one of refusal.

"Dirty boy, aren't you Dr. Lambry?" Alex whispered into an ear before he bit the lobe.

"Oh, God, you wouldn't."

Alex chuckled and stopped the gentle, lulling touches to push his index finger into Tom's body. "Of course I would." Tom was wickedly tight, far too tight to do more than tease with a digit or two but the trade off was that he was also extraordinarily sensitive.

Each, slow, teasing, rock brought with it the shallow, gentle thrust into Alex's body, the retreat of the teasing fingers from Tom's and a low, growling moan of hunger from both of their throats. Alex stroked Tom's hair with his free hand, his now awake and aching cock rubbing between their sweat slick bodies. He knew he was pushing Tom's limits but he liked to see the man lose all sense of himself.

They continued for far longer than Alex had expected. Tom clutched at his body, pulling him so close, inhaling his soul with each shaky, gasping cry. Finally, Alex had Tom loosened enough that he could reach and find that perfect, too long ignored spot. There was no doubt he'd discovered it, Tom groaned so loudly the people in the next room would surely be complaining.

"That's it," Alex whispered. "That's it, let me have all of you." He thrust his fingers inside Tom and hit that wonderful place again.

Tom's groan was more sob, broken, needy. He surged forward, dumping Alex from his lap. He made sure the blonde landed lightly on his back on the bed. It took no effort to drape those wonderful, slender legs over his own shoulders. His cock never left the beautiful body but he pulled Alex's hands from his own. The need that curled in Tom's body was too great and he knew Alex was going to need to hold on, because Tom was going to fuck him through the mattress.

There was no thought to a slow, gentle taking, now, it was a race to oblivion. Tom held himself above the precious body, the tender soul and allowed himself to let go. The harder he slammed into the folded over boy, the louder Alex grew and the moaning encouragements that reached beyond words were pushing Tom quickly to the edge.

"Touch yourself." He growled out. "Hard, fast, now!"

"Yes!" Alex moaned in answer. His hands took over his own needs with desperate strokes, exploring outward to touch over his own thighs, his own balls, his own ass, over Tom's cock driving into him and Tom's balls so tight to his body and thighs twitching with exhaustion.

Tom nearly screamed, he clenched his jaw, ground his teeth and the cry came out muffled but still dark, deep and throaty. His hips lost their pattern and stuttered, driving painfully deep, starkly sharp, as he came. The world sharpened to his release and he slid his face along the silken spill of golden hair.

Hot fire spilled into Alex, Tom buried himself as tightly, as deeply into and onto him as he could. The fire rose up, into his body, spread along his nerves, consumed him and finally set him soaring and free as he came again for the second time. His voice was hoarse, small and

shuddering. He whined in his release, his body grabbing greedily to Tom's final thrusts and pulling shuddering gasps from the exhausted doctor.

Alex continued to gasp, continued to dribble out whispery moans as Tom settled against him and his own body stilled. The emptiness of their joining being broken was stunning and made him whine in protest. Tom slid the legs from his shoulders and collapsed next to the fussing, sated, blonde. It was instinctual for Tom to pull the panting body against his own.

Tom sighed and snuggled easily against the other him. "I'm sorry, Alex, I'm not letting you go. I don't care how dirty and sweaty we are, you wore me out and I want to hold you just like this while I sleep." The mention of sleep made Tom yawn and Alex, nestled against him, returned the yawn.

"Is okay." Alex mumbled. "I'm happy like this. You're amazing."

"You're not bad," Tom had to stop to yawn again. "You're not bad yourself."

Alex patted the arm around him. "Sleep, worn out, must sleep."

"Brilliant plan." Tom muttered and pulled Alex tighter.

But sleep didn't settle in as easily for Alex. His heart felt swollen and bruised. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the moment he lay in, exhausted, totally taken by warmth and pleasure, safe, content and he understood suddenly, in love. That was a disturbing thought, it made him vulnerable in a way he'd never allowed himself to be. It tumbled his world upset down, stole the reins of his life away and tossed them into another's keeping. It wasn't quite fear he felt, but the anticipation of pain.

Alex shook his head to clear the dark thoughts. He'd never worried about what the next morning would bring if that worry would spoil the rare, joyful moments of the current day. When he was ranking joyful moments, what he'd just experience was fairly high on the list. He sighed and let the tension slither away from his body.

Tom's breathing had been steady so Alex smiled, softly, bitterly. "I love you, Thomas Lambry." He whispered, needing to voice the sudden raw truth of his emotion, even if no one ever heard it. Just speaking it eased his mind and he slowly dropped into contented sleep.

In the evening dark, Tom's eyes stared over the blonde head. He'd been dozing until Alex shook his head and the tickling curls eased him from deeper levels of happy half sleep. It felt too good to lay there, feeling Alex breath against him, to wish to fade into unawareness too quickly. He'd almost been gone when the whispered confession broke into his world.

It was obvious that Alex hadn't meant for him to hear so Tom stayed very still and did nothing to betray his awareness. He'd never once considered that Alex might be developing feelings for him that ran deeper than mere friendship. Love was a frightening concept now, like a dangerous snake, it had to be handled with extreme care. He couldn't process the confession, it hit his exhausted mind and slid away. As he was trying to ponder what to do about Alex's feelings, Tom slid into sleep.

Tom woke up to the smell of coffee and a hand petting his hair. His skin was itchy and he really wanted to wash off but the pillow he'd draped himself over in lieu of a skinny blonde didn't seem to mind. The steady fingers teasing his hair, sliding along in comforting strokes, made him muttered in sleepy happiness.

That drew a warm chuckle from beside him. "None of that now." Alex whispered. "You need to get up or we won't make it to your parents house at the time you wrote."

"My parents be damned." He mumbled.

"That they may but you still need to get up." He leaned over and kissed the half hidden face. "There's fresh wash water but it'll be cold if you don't get up soon and the coffee just arrived so it's hot."

Tom yawned and stretched but by the time he'd turned from the covers that he'd burrowed into, all he saw was the swish of yellow skirts leaving the bedroom. Even that small glimpse made him smile, made a cold, empty spot in side of him feel filled and happy. It wasn't thoughts to deal with before coffee, let alone before getting clean. He rolled slowly from the bed, scratching and stretching as he went.

"Well, I expected to have to poke you to get you out of bed." Alex smiled from the doorway a half hour later. In his hands were two cups of coffee, black and strong, a planned lure to get Tom moving.

Tom glanced back in the mirror as he lathered his face to shave and smiled. "Morning." He'd already washed off and was half dressed for the day but the offer of coffee dimmed compared to the sight of Alex.

Alex slid by in a rustle of fabric, leaving one of the cups near Tom as he went to sit on the edge of the bed. The room still smelled of sex and it made Alex smile in happy memory.

"You altered the dress already?" Tom asked as he began to shave.

Alex nodded. "I was up early to do it. It's not perfect but it'll be good enough to meet your parents in. I love this color, I feel so, so, nice." He sighed and soothed the fabric out.

"Well, it looks nice on you." He scraped the blade across his face, a random thought occurring to him. "Say, when do you shave? I've never seen you and you never have a beard."

"I don't." Alex sipped his coffee. "I pluck any whiskers out before they grow in."

"Ouch."

"It's not so bad, I'm blonde. It'd take me a year to grow a real beard. I bet you'd look like a villain or a pirate with a beard."

Tom had to glance into the mirror to see the smile teasing the boy's lips. The same lips that had whispered such a powerful confession the night before. It made Tom want to admit to knowing but the day, the moment, was too lovely to risk destroying it.

"You're right, I would. Or I'd look like my father, he has a beard."

"Does he look like a villain?"

"Some days, yes, he does." Tom smiled briefly but it fled as he drew the blade across his neck.

"Well, I like you with a clean face."

"And that's all that matters, yes?"

"Of course!"

Tom watched the boy fidget a little more than normal. He wasn't sure if it was over the midnight confession or meeting his family. "You know, you don't have to go." He settled on the only option open to him.

That brought a bright smile to Alex's face but it didn't melt the worry in the dark eyes. "No, I don't mind. I'm interested in seeing where you grew up."

The lather that remained was easily washed off and Tom dried his face. He had to check his hand at it closely, any mistakes would be quickly be pointed out by his mother. "Just promise you won't hold it against me." He mumbled into the towel, drying the last of the water from his skin.

A warm body pressed against his back, arms snaked around his waist. "Promise, but I can't say what else I might hold against you." One of the hands slid lower to flutter across Tom's groin. "Or what I might demand you hold against me."

The husked words made him shiver. "We don't have time."

Alex pulled away, laughing, cupping his hands around his coffee. "Not now, but it'll give you something to look forward to later." He moved with such a light step out of the bedroom it almost looked like he was dancing.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Thirty One

Tom hired a driver to take them to his parents home. The city rolled by around them and Alex seemed delighted in the sights but Tom sat, hat pulled low and tried to steady his thoughts. It was an unsuccessful effort.

"Sam hated Philadelphia."

That swung Alex's face from the passing sights to Tom's emotionless offering. "Did he ever say why?"

"Too far north." He smiled a little. "He tried to be respectful to my parents but, well, Sam wasn't of the same background. The fact that he hadn't been bred to society is part of what I loved about him but he fussed so much. He grew worried I'd see we were from different worlds and leave. Kept fussing about manners for dinner and how to talk to my mother and her friends, all the while scared that he'd make a mistake and I'd be angry."

"Did he?" Alex slid to sit closer to Tom. "Make a mistake?"

"Oh, several but nothing glaring. They just chalked it up to his being from the South." Tom reached out to try to tuck a rebellious curl back into the tidy style Alex had somehow managed to tame his hair into. "My parents, my family, they're not going to like you. I want you to know, right now, it doesn't matter to me what they think."

Alex caught the hand and held it in his own. "I don't care what they think of me so long as it doesn't hurt you." He glanced out the window to the wide gaps between houses and the larger homes that sat in their patches of green. None were new but all were well maintained and screamed of money.

They turned into the lane in front of one home, the side covered in crawling ivy and the bricks dark, smooth red. Tom sat up straighter and wished he bought a new coat, or a smaller gun. The

old coat would earn him a lecture and he hated traveling unarmed but there was no way he could enter his mother's parlor wearing pistols.

"Tom? Just what did you tell them about me?" It hadn't even occurred to Alex to ask until they were pulling up in front of the house.

"I told them you were my wife." Tom grinned wickedly, knowing it would cause a stir in his parents home but caught off guard by Alex's sudden coughing fit.

"Well, now." He sputtered and let Tom clap him on the back. "Well, I'm glad I asked! When did this happen?"

"Oh I don't know, while we were in Texas?"

"Right, did I have a lovely dress? Oh, I've always wanted a cream dress with green ribbon leaves."

"If it would make you happy, certainly."

Alex leaned over and kissed the side of Tom's face as the coach rolled to a stop. "Delightful!"

"It was that or come up with a complicated lie while dodging mother's attempts to marry me off. It killed two birds this way."

"Ah. So logical of you." Some of the brightness faded from Alex's smile.

Before Tom could even think about the odd edge to Alex's tone, the coach door opened and it was hop out or raise eyebrows with why he was hiding inside. He climbed down and turned to offer a hand to Alex. For all that the boy wasn't still limping and his knee seemed to be well healed, Tom knew those sorts of injuries continued to cause troubles long after suspected.

It was odd being at his front door again. Tom hadn't lived full time in this house since he was thirteen. It had been deemed good for his character to attend the boarding school but he'd always secretly wondered if it was just that his parents wanted the children out of their way. The building hadn't ever really felt like home, it was merely the place his parents lived in and try as he may, his eyes saw little changes to mark the passage of time.

The driver pulled the coach around to the back of the house and the waiting stables, Tom hadn't wanted to be stranded without a means of escape and hired the man for the afternoon.

"Well," he began as he offered his arm to Alex. "Your last chance for escape has left."

"Hush you." Alex plastered the pleasant smile on his face and let Tom guide him up the half dozen shallow steps to the wide wood front doors.

The doors opened before they could reach them and a middle aged man, his hair graying at the temples, stood waiting. "Welcome home, Dr. Lambry."

"Spiers, it's good to see you. How are you?" Tom asked as he led Alex into the foyer. Another servant, a younger man but dressed in as sharp a uniform as Spiers, stood waiting.

The butler easily peeled the light shawl from Alex's shoulders, handing it to the younger man to hold, before turning to help Tom remove his coat. "I'm well, sir, very well."

"Alex, this is Mr. Alvin Spiers, he's been butler here for oh, well, since I was a young man. Spiers, my wife, Alexandria."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Lambry, we were delighted to hear of the union. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Tom answered, seeing that Alex was playing the demure young bride. "I'm sure those were the exact words my parents used as well. Speaking of which, are they in the sitting room?"

Spiers exchanged a glance to the younger man before looking back to Tom. "Your father is sir."

"And mother?"

"Please sir, your father has been anxious for your arrival and wished you escorted to him without delay."

Something was going on, Tom knew it now. It wasn't like his father to sit and wait for his arrival, that was his mother's job. On the rare occasions when his father had the time, he'd arrive half way into the visit and leave shortly after. The only time his father ever spoke privately with him was when he was in serious trouble.

"Well, we shouldn't keep him waiting." He nodded but couldn't bring himself to smile now. "Thank you, Spiers."

"You're welcome, sir, ma'am."

Alex waited until Tom had led them down the hall to a closed door before he spoke. "Are you okay?"

Tom just shook his head and let himself into the parlor. The curtains were drawn back and the warm sunshine and light spilled in. The furniture was set in pleasing clusters and had changed little over the years. Nothing appeared different, not on the surface but Tom saw things missing. Where the tea service should have been set, waiting to be poured, was only emptiness. There wasn't a single fresh flower in the entire room, leaving the space smelling slightly dusty and unused. His mother cut flowers and arranged them from the first days of spring until late in the fall, their lack seemed unusual. Tom wondered, vaguely, if something had happened to her flower gardens.

He glanced around for his mother, something he'd never had to do. If she was in a room, everyone knew it. Slender, almost stringy in appearance, the sheer force of her will and mind consumed the air of a room and focused all eyes on her. If she'd been born a man, Tom had no doubts his mother would have been a powerful force in the world. As it was she ruled her little corner of society with a cold glare and an unforgiving will.

He did spot his father and the sight of the man surprised him. If his mother had been slender to the point of scrawny, his father had always been a powerful man. As tall as Tom and just as strong in the shoulders, when he'd aged he'd put weight on around his middle but still had been able of knocking any of his sons to floor if needed. Now, he'd lost weight, lost the middle aged excess and his skin had a deflated, sagged appearance. The carefully trimmed beard Tom remembered was slightly too long, slightly untended. There was far more white in the man's hair than Tom had expected, his father's hair was still as dark as Tom's own when he'd brought Sam to visit.

Seeing age on his father startled him. The man had always appeared immortal and un-aging. The reality of his appearance contrasted so greatly with the image in Tom's mind that it actually took a few heartbeats to know, fully and totally, that the man rising to greet him was his own father.

"Thomas." The deep voice boomed out, untouched by time and filled the room.

"Father." Tom answered and moved to accept the offered hand. It was only then that he saw the way his father's clothes were a touch loose on his frame. The weight loss was recent. "Father, may I introduce to you, my wife, Alexandria. Alex, my father, Dr. Herbert Lambry."

Alex bowed his head slightly. "Dr. Lambry, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hn." Tom's father grunted slightly. "We'll deal with you in a moment. Sit down Thomas, we must talk?" He waved to the chairs but moved to the liquor in the crystal containers. "Drink?"

Tom guided Alex to settle in place before taking a spot beside him. "Do I need one?"

Herbert nodded and poured some of the drink into a second glass. "You may." The older man pressed the glass into Tom's outstretched hand and slid his eyes over Alex as he sat down.

"Thank you." Tom spoke automatically.

The thanks were waved off. "It's good you came home, I was to send men hunting you."

"What's happened, father?" He wrapped both hands around his glass but didn't drink it. "Are you well?"

Herbert waved off the concern. "I'm fine. Thomas, it's about your mother."

"What about her?"

"She's dead."

"What?" Tom heard Alex's softly hissed breath and knew it was more from the blunt delivery of such harsh news than over the news itself. Tom had spent a lifetime with his father's emotionless, straight forward manner and it did little to phase him any longer.

"A little under two months ago."

"Mother has been dead two months and you were just now considering trying to locate me?" He heard the harshness in his voice growing.

"You've made it clear you've had no desire to interact with your family." Herbert swallowed some of his liquor. "Besides, your letter mentioned you may be paying us a visit."

Tom slammed back the drink and wished he could risk downing more. "What happened?"

"She was ill, for a while, and refused to tell me. By the time she finally collapsed, the cancer was far too advanced. She went swiftly." The words were in the same strong, confident, controlled voice but Tom saw the tightening of his father's face. That was the only outward betrayer of his own inner feelings.

Tom sat and let the news melt over him. He felt stunned but no grief. The news held far less impact than he'd ever have expected. One thought bubbled up. "Did she get my letter?" He hadn't written often enough, not nearly and the idea that he'd struggled to finish a letter that she'd hadn't lived to read was cutting.

Herbert nodded. "It arrived several days before she died. She was still lucid enough to read it." The elder sipped his drink. "Will you be staying in town for long?"

There was nothing else said. No words as to whether the letter offered her any comfort. No concern as to how Tom would take the news of his mother's death, no sympathy or love. It was all Tom had expected.

He shook his head. "Not long, no more than a few days." There was no reason to shorten or prolong their visit because of the news and Tom found he'd be happiest leaving town that night.

"Well, as you know, your mother had a sum of money from her mother. It remained hers and as such, she's willed it as she felt best. She left the bulk of it to your sister, a smaller sum to your brothers and their children and the rest, to you." He motioned off to another room in the house. "I have paper work for you in my desk. It's all finished with the bank, it just requires your signature."

Tom nodded numbly. "I'll see to it." He'd been planning on taking a greater control of his finances anyway and that required a visit to the bank.

"Now, you there, pretty thing? How far along are you?" Herbert settled into his chair with a stern, cold look.

Alex sat just a fraction straighter and recognized Tom's icy glare in his father's face. "Excuse me? I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning."

"Father."

Herbert's finger came out to point at Tom. "You stay out of this! You've bungled this affair already."

"Father."

"When is the child due?"

Tom started to stand in outrage but Alex's light touch kept him in place. Rather than being shocked, offended or angry, Alex merely laughed. It was a light, warm sound in the cold sitting room, a sound not often heard under the Lambry roof. "Really, Dr. Lambry, there is no child."

"I'm not a dottery old fool, I know the son I raised would never marry the likes of you unless you were in a family way. There's no point to denying it."

"Dr. Lambry, I assure you, there is no child. I have been born lacking the anatomical necessities for child rearing, for me to conceive is quite impossible. That was actually how I met your son as I was seeking a consultation with him on how to overcome my inabilities." Alex answered lightly.

Tom nearly swallowed his own tongue in shock. His father sat forward to check his son's expression to confirm the truth. "What kind of defect does she have?" Herbert asked.

Alex arched an eyebrow. "Really, Dr. Lambry, must we discuss such intimate details of my life?" He stretched his accent out, teased with it and played at being a shocked lady. "It's sufficient to know that I am not with child, nor shall I ever be, and your son is very well aware of this fact."

Herbert's blue eyes slid from his stunned and silent son to the bold, lovely young bride at his side. "Well, what is your wish? What is your price?"

"Father!" Tom growled out.

"My price?" Alex stumbled on that one, confused. A cold shiver of memory and what his price had been in the past returned.

"How much money do you want to go away and never bother my son again? It must be obvious to you that he can't stay married to the likes of you? What family do you have? What is your lineage? Thomas is descended from one of the finest lines in this country, do you believe I can allow him to wed you?" Herbert smiled. "Really, child, I'm sure you've pleased my son quite a bit,

a pretty thing like you, but it's time you move on."

"Father, that's enough!" Tom roared and this time he rushed to his feet. His mother was dead, his father was a stranger and he wasn't sure he could pick his siblings out of a crowded room. There was nothing here for him.

"It's all a lie!" Tom moved to pour more bourbon. "My whole life has been a lie!"

"Tom?" Alex began slowly but didn't want to interrupt him.

"It's okay, Alex." Tom forced out before downing the liquor and pouring more.

"What are you talking about?" Herbert asked but he stayed in his chair.

"Alex and I aren't married." He shook his head and half laughed. "Alex isn't even a girl father."

"What?"

Alex wasn't sure if he should smile in pride or frown in worry. "Tom."

"Alex is a boy. His mother raised him as a girl, he's only ever dressed as a girl but I promise you, under the skirts is a boy."

"What?"

Alex smiled now. "Want to see?"

"What is going on here?"

"Jesus Christ, father! Alex is a boy and he's my lover!" Tom shook his head. "My friend Sam? He was my lover!" That showed no comprehension on his father's face. "I lay with men!"

"Since when? Why would you say this nonsense?"

"Since always and it's not nonsense."

Herbert blinked rapidly, trying to put together what he'd heard with what he knew of his son. "But, your mother, she used to line up all those young women..."

"Which I socialized with to make her happy and nothing more. I've always known where my desires were and it wasn't with them." The truth was out now and Tom felt tired. There was no point in stopping there, he may as well burn all his bridges. "I loved Sam, father, more than I've ever loved you."

Herbert rose to his feet but it was a sad action. His former strength was gone, bled away in grief and shock in the last months and he simply couldn't bring himself to strike his youngest child. "No more of this! I won't hear of it!"

"Father."

"No!" He stared at Alex but all he could see was the pretty young girl. "This can be undone, over looked. I'll make arrangements for the girl, boy, whatever to be taken care of. You just need to find a good woman, marry, settle down. War does things to men, that's why I didn't want you to go. You'll understand in time."

"No, father, it wasn't the war, it wasn't the lack of a good wife. I've always been this way, always. It's not going to change and I don't want it to change. More importantly, Alex isn't going anywhere. No one knows the truth of his gender, to the rest of the world he is my wife."

"Stop it!" Herbert's face was going red now, shocked, horrified. "I won't hear of this under my own roof! It's a good thing your mother died, the shock of this would have killed her! How can you do this to her memory?"

Tom stopped, memory flooded over him and he almost laughed. "Mother knew, she never said as much but I think she knew. I'm tired of the lies, Father. I'm sick to death of them. I'm a good man, I'm a better doctor. I don't want your approval or permission." He held a hand out to Alex and the boy hurried over to take it. "Come on, Alex, let's take this out from under my father's roof." His voice was cold, hard but he felt lighter then he'd ever felt in his life.

Alex turned as Tom led him from the room. "It was lovely meeting you!" He called in a light, teasing voice.

"Thomas! Thomas return here this instant! Don't you even consider walking out! Thomas!"

But Tom didn't stop and his father didn't follow. Even in the time it took for them to retrieve coats and wait for the coach, Herbert stayed, stunned, in the sitting room. Tom knew he was frowning the entire time, he hated doing that, hated lying, hated the truth, hated that he'd hurt his family. Until he glanced to the sweet smile on Alex's face and suddenly there was no hate, just a settled sense of rightness.

The coach rolled them away and Alex pressed against his side. Gloved hands cupped his face and turned it to look into brown eyes. "I can't believe I did that."

Alex kissed the worried lips, gently. "I'm proud of you."

"You're as insane as I apparently am."

That only made Alex laugh. "Are we going back to the hotel?"

Tom shook his head. "To the bank to get some things in order. Why? Do you need something at the hotel?"

"Only to fuck you silly."

"Alex." Tom scolded and actually looked around the empty inside of the coach to see if there was any chance anyone could have over heard that.

It made Alex kiss him again, and this time a wet tongue traced the tense lips. "What? Seeing you stand up for yourself got me all achy and hungry."

The sight of those dancing eyes scalding over him, the memory of the night's pleasures, stole Tom's breath and made him forget his father. "We'll be quick at the bank."

"Good." Alex sat back down but licked his lips slowly. "Very, very good."

The bank was unlike anything Alex had ever seen. From the pair of guards at the doors to the copious amounts of marble everywhere. It looked to him like a sterile palace instead of a place of business. Tom's old coat stood out among the very properly dressed men and few women and Alex suddenly became aware of the kind of world Tom should have been moving in.

He'd seen large homes, people with money, fancy clothes and manners were all things he could understand. Even if Alex knew he would never be welcome in such a world he could see it, comprehend it but the opulence of the bank struck home. It wasn't just manners and knowing the right people, it was the day to day acceptance of having wealth. It was knowing Tom could walk into this vast banking world and understand how and where his money was. The sight of the bank made Alex feel small and overwhelmed.

Tom's hand slid into his own. "You okay?" He'd never seen the look of lost confusion on Alex's face and it gave him pause.

The smile returned easily and it wasn't forced. Alex knew he didn't ever have to understand the ins and outs of money and the real world of the moneyed. Tom did and he still chose to be beside him. "I'm fine."

They were greeted and ushered to a small office where they spent the next hour waiting for a white haired gentleman to place in order the myriad amount of paperwork. The bank officer smiled at Alex but treated him the same way he would a young and not very bright child. It was an attitude Alex was used to receiving, most people saw a pretty young woman and simply dismissed him.

"Well, now, Dr. Lambry, before we sign any of the papers, are you certain this is what you wish?"

"Quite. I want all control of my finances in my hands, I want the cash accounts consolidated and the investments may continue to be handled by your agent here but I want my father's name struck from all my property. My wife and I plan to do some traveling, I want full access to my accounts at any time. Are you certain your bank is able to comply?" Tom spoke in cold authority, itching to get back to get away from the bank and not just so he could tumble Alex into bed. He hated this world.

"Oh, we're able to help you with all your needs." The man smiled warmly, his bushy eyebrows crawling on his forehead. "There is the issue of your inheritance. We need your signature here, here, and here. I assume you'd like that established in the same manner?"

"Yes." Tom signed where marked.

"Might I recommend that a sum of it be placed into investments? You already have an excessive amount of cash on hand."

"I'm sorry, I was under the impression it was a small sum."

"Dr. Lambry, your mother's will states that you're to receive ninety two thousand dollars."

Tom didn't flinch but Alex started to choke.

"I wasn't aware that Mother had such a fortune."

The officer smiled softly. "The late Mrs. Lambry had quite a solid head for managing her money. At the time of her death she held almost four hundred thousand dollars. Her will states that half goes directly to your sister, that each of her other children and grand children should receive ten thousand and the sum that remains, which as of today is ninety two thousand, seven hundred and nine dollars and sixteen cents, was to be yours." The man smiled warmly. "The only stipulation of the inheritance is that upon receipt, we were asked to give you this."

Tom stared at the envelope slid across the table toward him, his name written across the front in his mother's tight, controlled hand. He saw the slight shake to the penmanship and knew without even asking, that it had been written while she was on her death bed.

"So, about the option of investment?"

Tom nodded, agreeing but too stunned to care. His own needs were limited, his income from his personal investments alone already provided a strong surplus of return. Every year since the war ended he'd made more money by doing nothing but letting the people that managed it do their job. He saw no need to stop the trend but even Tom was shocked at just how much he was now worth, the total sum, when he did the figuring in his mind, would have made Alex faint dead

away.

"Well, everything is in order, please allow me to step outside a moment and then you can be on your way, Dr. Lambry." The man rose and took a small stack with him and left Tom's stack behind.

When the door to the office shut behind them, Tom lifted the envelope with his name on it from the stack of official bank papers. It opened easily, the seal gave way to the gentle tug and inside was a single piece of card stock. He pulled it out and written across it were three words.

"Go, be happy."

There was no doubt it was his mother's hand writing, even if illness had made the pen tremble. Tom shook his head and showed it to Alex.

"Do you think she did know?"

Tom shrugged and slid the card back into the envelope and placed both into an inside coat pocket. "I can't say for sure. When Sam and I were here, just before we left, I had tea with her. I was going to tell her, if no one else, I was going to tell her. I kept stuttering on trying to find the words and she reached over, put her hand on my knee and told me that sometimes, things didn't need to be said. That once they were said, things could never return to before they were said. That it was better to look away and leave it be. She used it in reference to a bit of gossip but that wasn't how she meant it, we both knew."

"And you agreed?"

Tom nodded. "How could I not? She may not have known what I wanted to tell her but she suspected and wanted it kept at suspicion."

Alex shook his head. "I wish I could have known her."

"So do I."

Any further conversation was cut off as the bank officer returned. Handshakes were exchanged and papers gathered but both Tom and Alex were happy to escape the cool stillness of the bank for the bright sunshine of the outside world. Any worries Alex had held about Tom missing the world of rich banks, fancy parties and proper society, blew away on the breeze that teased around his skirts. He'd been blind to see how much Tom relaxed at leaving, or how much more alive his eyes were when they drifted across him.

What the Wind Carries

Chapter Thirty Two

The pair stayed in Philadelphia just long enough to book passage elsewhere. Tom sent a polite but stern letter in response to his father's efforts to contact him. He made it very clear that while he had no intentions of advertising his preferences, he also had no desire to be fixed or converted to women. They visited Tom's mother's grave but Tom didn't linger there. He stood for a moment, hat in hand, before turning away. His parents had long since abandoned any close ties to him and Tom's grief was more over never having had a loving mothering relationship than

over her actual death.

Only a matter of days after their arrival, they once again were boarding a train. On a whim, they went further north, Tom wanted Alex to see more of the country around him. They spent a month in New York City, dinning in places so fancy that Alex giggled at the thought, attending the theater and shopping before they went inland. Tom found great joy riding alone with Alex across the rolling, green mountains of upstate New York. They'd spent nights sitting by a small fire watching the sun set into creamy glowing orange hues, alone in the deep forests. Together, they saw Boston and went across Vermont and New England before taking a train south to explore.

Tom let Alex pick from there and they spent a few weeks in Washington D.C. and Richmond. They rode across Maryland and Virginia before the summer fully faded to fall and they turned deeper south. Alex led them across city and countryside alike, riding as comfortably as they took trains and boats, letting each day bring new sights that set him to laughing in delight. For all their criss crossing of the healing South, Alex never again set foot in the Carolinas.

By October they found themselves back in Baton Rouge and back with James. Te man welcomed them with open arms and lewd suggestions but his large, empty house was no longer barren. People called every day, dinner's were parties, half of the men and women of Baton Rouge seemed to have become friends with James in the span of their absences and Alex learned that not everything that could be defined as society was as simple as upper class money. They dined with musicians and poets, artists and politicians. James' house was filled with lust and life and joy and Alex was as at home there as Tom came to be.

But as December melted away, both men knew that while they were at home, it wasn't their home. For the new year, they went south to New Orleans and rented an apartment in the French Quarter. Alex delighted in the city and the city seemed to delight in him. During that winter, he met not one, but over a dozen, men like himself as all of Tom's old connections and friends that he and Sam had made while living in the city came back to embrace Alex into their fold. It was the happiest times of Alex's life but as the winter began to pass, Alex saw a change in Tom.

He'd always known that Tom struggled with the memories of Sam in New Orleans. Sometimes, his eyes would go distant, fade away in thought, or they'd turn a corner and someone would laugh and Tom's head would snap around, scanning the crowds for face that couldn't be found. It was how Tom would stand on their balcony every night and watch the sun sink into the west that made Alex's mind up.

Finally, a few days shy of his seventeenth birthday, Alex joined Tom one night on the balcony. "Let's go." He whispered into the evening air.

"Go? The theater doesn't open for another three hours."

"No, let's go, out there." He nodded his head toward the sunset. "Let's go west."

Tom turned and studied the face that had become so dear to him. The months had changed the boy, the underfed quality was gone and Alex had grown a few inches taller but the face was still pretty in it's sharp angles and the body had just grown graceful. He looked less like a fourteen year old girl than a young, clever woman and Tom had found the changes very pleasing. Alex had only become more dear to him as the months faded away and Tom found his life held no meaning unless he stayed awake, lingering after they'd made love, just long enough to hear Alex whisper his private confession of emotion.

Alex shook his head and leaned up to kiss Tom. "I know this is just a city of ghosts to you, let's go west."

"But, you love New Orleans."

"No, I love..." He stopped himself and changed it quickly. "Being near you, the city doesn't matter." It twisted his heart to not just tell Tom but they'd never spoken about emotion and Alex refused to. Tom's heart belonged to Sam, he was happy to have a small corner there to rent.

"Where do you want to go?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't care, let's just do it."

Tom nodded but found he couldn't speak. He pulled Alex close, pressing the slender back to his chest, and wrapped his arms over Alex's shoulders. Alex sighed and let his head fall back against Tom and together they watched the sun disappear.

They said their farewells to New Orleans and set west. Alex delighted in the passing prairie lands and the sharp, dividing cut of the young Rocky mountains. West they went and ended at the far ocean where they found a new city to love. The foggy nights and steep hills of San Francisco welcomed them and in the lively port city they rented rooms. They took shorter trips during the last days of spring, south into the warmer lands of California, and north into the green, ancient forests of Oregon but it was San Francisco that sat, waiting, for their return.

"Alex? Are you occupied?" Tom had been out for the afternoon by himself in the city and found Alex sitting working on stitching a banner for the up coming fourth of July parade.

Alex smiled as he always did at seeming Tom's returned. Some small part of him always feared when Tom was from his sight, the small part that kept waiting for the doctor to grow bored with him and not return. "It's nothing that can't wait."

"Good." Tom crossed the room and took Alex's hand. "Come along."

"I should change if we're going out."

"Come along!" Tom's voice grew sterner but it held no maliciousness.

Alex followed and all of his question were shushed. Tom led them to a hired coach which took them across and out of the city to a small closed off cove with a narrow sharp path that led down to the rough sandy beach. The cool air rushed in off the ocean and Alex smiled, nothing made him happier then seeing the sea so close to sunset. Seals bobbed and danced in the water and birds flew over head.

"Oh, this is lovely!" Alex turned to find Tom holding a basket, a blanket thrown over his shoulder. "Tom."

Tom smiled softly and spread the blanket out. "You like it here?"

"It's heaven! How far from the city are we?"

"Not far." He pulled Alex from where the blonde was fussing with the other side of the blanket. "I'm glad you like this cove, I've bought it."

"That's not funny."

Tom grinned and kissed the stunned face. "I'm not laughing. Twenty acres, the entire cove, the land above. I'll need your help designing a house but I'm sure you're up to the task. Wouldn't you like to see this every day?" He nodded to the ocean.

Alex's eyes stayed on Tom's face. "Yes, I would."

"Good, because I signed the papers today."

"Sneaky bastard." Alex cursed while he laughed but his eyes lit up. "Oh, does that mean we can do anything we want here?"

Tom nodded but didn't need to ask just what it was that Alex wanted to do. He was sure he'd be fishing the boy out of the ocean, as naked as the seals, before too long. The coldness of the water wouldn't keep Alex out for long.

"Before we do, I've other surprises."

"What could be more of a surprise than all this!" Alex tossed his arms out and leaned back into Tom's circling arms.

"Silly, here." He passed the scrap of paper to Alex.

"Agreed idea is perfect, stop." Alex read the cryptic telegram. "Will see you before Christmas, Conrad and all, stop." The name seemed like one he should know but Tom had deliberately removed any part of the paper that gave clues as to who sent it. "I don't understand."

"There's a lot of money to be made here, Alex, a lot. I made some offers to James last week, he did some research, he's moving here to run the company we're going to set up. He's going to move his entire family, down to his wife's lover." Tom laughed.

"James is coming here?"

Tom nodded.

"Oh, we need to warn the city!"

That made Tom laugh. "We're not sure just where to place our ventures but within a month James will have sniffed out the best options."

"I'm so happy for you! It'll be delightful to have James here."

"And he'll get to know his children for a change and he won't be his father's lap dog any longer. It works out well."

"We'll have to invite him to our cove to picnic with us." Alex started to slip away to open the basket, overcome with the wonder of so many surprises.

"Alex, come here, don't fuss at things." Tom caught a slender arm and pulled the boy closer again. "I've one more thing. Here." He pulled the book from the deep pockets of his old coat. "I wanted you to have this."

Alex turned the book over in his hands. "Oh, Leaves of Grass."

It was so much harder to speak and say what he needed to say with Alex right here. "You asked to read it, I, the copy I have, it was Sam's. I wanted you to have your own. I, hell, I'm not good at this. I've marked too passages, read the one with the blue ribbon first."

"Okay." Alex found the ribbon and opened the finely made book. "A promise to California, also to great Pastoral Plains, and for Oregon: Sojourning east a while longer, soon I travel toward you, to remain, to teach robust American love; For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, inland, and along the Western Sea; For these States tend inland, and toward the Western Sea - and I will also."

"Now, the red ribbon." Tom whispered out.

"I am he that aches with amorous love; Does the earth gravitate? Does not all matter, aching, attract all matter? So the Body of me, to all I meet, or know."

Tom pressed himself close, forced himself to hold the uncertain brown eyes. "For I know very well that I and my robust love belong along the Western Sea, for I am he that aches with love."

"Tom?"

"Shhh, I hear you some nights, when we're laying exhausted, sated, together. You think I'm asleep but I'm not, I can't sleep until I hear you whisper that you love me. I don't know why you say it, I'm not an easy man to love, not a man comfortable with love. I've done things that should prevent anyone from ever loving me but still, every night, you whisper it to the darkness and I want to tell you the same but it's not easy for me."

Alex smiled softly but his eyes were wary. "It's okay, I don't expect you to. That's why I say it when you're supposed to be asleep. I know that you love Sam, it's okay but don't ever think you're not worthy of love. I won't debate the issue of you being difficult to live with but I like the challenge."

"Shut up!" He gripped Alex's shoulders and held back from shaking the blond. "Do I love Sam? Yes, I do and I always will but one of the things I regret from my time with him is that I didn't tell him that often enough. I won't make that same mistake again!"

"Tom..." Alex's words died in his throat when the hands gripping his shoulders dug in tighter.

"I love you, Alex, I love you so much it hurts me. You drive me to insanity but I can't imagine life without you. It's a physical pain I feel from how deeply I love you. I wake up at night, terrified, because I've had a dream that you're gone. I hate that I'm older than you because I worry that you'll find someone your own age that you'll wish to be with more. I hate that I'm going to age and grow old and be a burden to you and make you wish we'd never met. I..."

Alex pressed his fingers to the struggling lips. "Nothing will ever make me wish I hadn't met you. I will never find anyone better suited to me, younger or older than you. I look forward to seeing the ornery, troublesome old man you're going to become. And, Tom, when you wake up frightened I've gone, nothing is going to stop me from being there to show you it won't ever happen."

Unbidden and unstoppable, a tear slid from Tom's eyes but it was quickly brushed away by comforting hands. "Alex, I love you."

Alex smiled and it glowed in the warm cocoa of his eyes. He spoke very slowly, forming each word with care. "And I love you, Thomas Lambry." There was a tightness in his chest that took Alex a moment to identify, he'd never felt happiness so strongly before. "We're going to build a house here and we're going to fill it with friends and laughter."

Tom nodded. "Yes." And this time when their lips brushed together it teased with smiles and joy. He lowered Alex down onto the blanket, nibbling the tender spots so well known to him, sliding a hand up under the volumes of skirts to trace across legs. As the sun sank into the ocean, the sound of surf mingled with the voices of the two lovers on it's shore, sealing their love so close to the crashing waves. Vowing with touch and kiss to fill all the coming setting suns with promise, love and life.

The End

