



T. D.  
MCKINNEY  
&  
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WYLIS

COPPERHEAD  
ROAD

## COPPERHEAD ROAD

...Cameron clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Coons and all those wonderfully sympathetic bastards weren't going to take Bolt away from him. It had happened once; separating them, ripping away half Cameron's soul. He wouldn't live like that again.

"I won't stay away." Cameron glared, half furious with Bolt for giving in. "You have two and a half days. Then you're mine and I don't give a rat's ass what anyone thinks about it or how damned dangerous being with you might be."

God, Bolt looked good raking a slim-fingered hand through that curtain of hair. Confused but gloriously appealing. And he was Cameron's, even if the concept was more than Bolt could wrap his mind around just yet.

"Okay, look. The subtle approach ain't working, so I'm just going to lay it out. Yes, I asked for two and a half days. But, Cameron, it's going to take a hell of a lot longer than that if I have to be watching your ass as well." His eyes begged for understanding. "You do *not* want to be around the people I'm dealing with. And they sure as hell aren't going to want you poking around. What part of real, gun-toting, knife-wielding, kill-you-as-soon-as-look-at-you, actual danger am I not getting across?"

Cameron's teeth ground against each other, anger unabated, raging all the more that such people formed part of Bolt's life. "I get it. Alright! You have your damned time. But

when it's done, you're out of this, if I have to take care of it myself. I will load your extremely sexy ass on the next plane to China if I have to. Guns and knives or not. You are going to be with me, damn it..."

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# COPPERHEAD ROAD

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COPPERHEAD ROAD  
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# CHAPTER 1

“You’d think a man like that would be ashamed to show himself in public. After the murders and all.”

Cameron Fontaine didn’t bother sighing. It wasn’t worth the breath. Evelyn’s words only confirmed his awareness that small towns had long memories. And the more scandalous and salacious the event, the longer community memory lingered. The sins of the fathers and mothers forever joyfully passed down and explored with gleeful revulsion over and over. He didn’t want to know what they said about him, though he had a pretty good idea.

Right now, he did his best to ignore it, not even glancing across the diner where Evelyn scrubbed at the counter as she

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vented her latest bile. Instead he tried to savor his first sip of coffee, looking out at the early morning, the heat and humidity already making even the air-conditioned interior of The Shrimp Basket barely tolerable. But then Bay Mignon, Alabama, in late June wasn't a place for those without a fondness for the heat.

"Who? What murders?" Toby Fisher sounded far more interested in his grits and eggs than Evelyn's latest rant.

Cameron couldn't blame him for the disinterest and didn't bother to look up from his copy of the *Mobile Press Register*. Lord, the woman could blather on. Whatever had Evelyn stirred up couldn't be that interesting. Not compared to the sports section anyway. But then he wasn't dating her and so, unlike Toby, blessedly wasn't expected to reply.

"Bolt Truitt."

The playoff recap blurred and darkened, the print skittering off the page of its own accord to leave it blank and empty. Rather like Cameron's thought processes. Bolt? Back in town after all these years? Cameron's heart set up a wild Mardi Gras beat, or maybe the rhythm of a jazz funeral, rampant joyous celebration of something long dead and gone.

"After what his daddy did, you'd figure he'd be mortified to walk the street, much less sit down in here and order supper last night just as fine as you please!" Evelyn huffed in the sort of righteous indignation only a Southern woman just a step or two above white trash could manage. "Handsome as homemade sin and just as arrogant as Silas Truitt ever was. And just as worthless as Quillar, I'd be willing to bet." Her



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outrage reached out to scoop the previous generations of Truitts into her indignation.

*Ah, yes. That.* Few scandalous memories lingered longer in Bay Mignon than that of the Truitt family. Well, there was the tale of racially mixed twins hidden on the upper floor of the Peacock family mansion until they were old enough to ship off to boarding school up in Massachusetts. And the one about the policeman from Raleigh and his ghostly boyfriend. Those might outlive the Truitts' infamy, but it would be a near-run thing.

"I don't see Bolt has anything to be ashamed of." Cameron folded the newspaper and set it beside his coffee mug. He had never quite managed to let this particular scandal go unchallenged, either. He reckoned he never would. Bolt deserved that much from him. And if he concentrated on Evelyn being a gossipmongering old hag he wouldn't have to think of Bolt being back in town. Thinking of that might just leave him unable to function.

Evelyn huffed again and tilted her nose up, the action setting hair frosted just past the point of slightly trashy swaying. "Well, if my daddy went stone crazy all hopped up on dope and shot my mama dead in the middle of the courthouse square before putting the gun to his own head, I'd lock myself up in my house and never come out again."

Cameron took another sip of his coffee and wrinkled his nose at the bitterness. "I don't see any reason for Bolt to become a hermit. He wasn't even there when Quillar killed Maybelle and himself. I can vouch for that." He stirred extra

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half-and-half into the brew and tried not to remember Bolt's face when old Sheriff Coons Senior told the other boy what Quillar had done. Few of Cameron's memories hurt more than the blank incomprehension on Bolt's face. "I'd expect folks to have some sympathy for a boy who lost his parents that way." Of course, sympathy for Bolt from anyone but Cameron might make headline news in the *Baldwin Times*.

Evelyn's rouged mouth drew up. "I might if he wasn't following in his daddy's footsteps. The Truitts have always been white trash outlaws and it doesn't look like living out west changed that where Bolt's concerned." The sour-lemon expression made her dark eyes glitter. "But then you always ignored that, didn't you? I forgot you and Bolt were tighter than sin."

"So we were."

Ah, if the old busybody only knew.

\* \* \*

Cameron watched the red-brown waters of the Tensaw River flow past a tangle of cypress knees and water hyacinths before swirling to wash the narrow shore of Copperhead Landing. He should be up at the house working on the blueprints for a new WolfeCorp business park in Dallas, but his brain wouldn't fix on design elements. Not with Bolt Truitt reappearing in town. A shiver belying the morning's heat ran through Cameron. Just thinking Bolt's name set his heart tumbling into winter cold, frost rime covering the inside of his chest. It didn't matter how sultry the weather, Cameron hadn't

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really been warm since the night Bolt left. He settled back and tried not to let that eternal cold claim him.

The post holding up the roof of the old boat dock supported Cameron as it had many times. He'd leaned against this same ancient cypress the last time he'd seen Bolt. Just stood here and watched the other boy walk away, shoulders hunched against the cold of a misty rain. Watched Bolt vanish into the night while Cameron's heart broke and he crushed a cheap Valentine's box in his hand. He'd hated February fourteenth with a passionate bitterness ever since.

Even now Cameron could hear that break in Bolt's voice as his first lover and only love split their world in half, never to be mended. *"My uncle says I have to leave tonight. I don't want to, but I don't have any kind of choice. He's my guardian now so I gotta do what he says. I can't run off and make a living myself. He's got work out in California for me. I can save up until I'm eighteen."*

Eighteen. Almost two years away. Back then such a thing loomed as an unimaginable eternity to be apart. Standing on the cusp of manhood, unsure of their place in the world, of their future, of who they'd become. Two kids afraid of failure, of looking dorky in front of their classmates, of being who they really were. The only thing that didn't hold uncertainty or fear was their love. Their one anchor.

Until Quillar cut the anchor rope and set them all adrift in the middle of a hurricane. God knew they discovered rumor, innuendo, and public opinion could buffet and rage as hard as any storm the Gulf ever brewed. And devastate a life just as

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completely.

The post Cameron leaned against had seen the secret tears, the lone witness to his misery because Southern men never cried in front of anyone for anything less than their mama's funeral.

Two years of loneliness and desolation. Two years that turned into fifteen. Time had dried the tears but never erased their cause.

The river rolled on leaving no tears today, just unending regrets and a sense of loss that iced Cameron's stomach. He tossed the tan oval of a live oak leaf out into the water and watched it float away, its direction at the mercy of the river.

"If that's your truck, you got two flat tires."

Cameron pushed to his feet, starting at the interruption, and turned to the speaker. "Damn it! I just bought new ones and I knew that kid was mounting them wrong. I'm gonna..." His heart skipped and skidded, taking his voice with it. It couldn't be.

A phantom stood at the edge of the dock. Long blue-black hair gleamed in the dappled sunlight. Cameron's heart rocketed across the deep tea-colored depths of the Tensaw to meld with the one hidden under a white T-shirt emblazoned with the perfection of Steve Earle's latest album. The shirt hugged lean muscles, and emphasized broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Light eyes, a sharp contrast to ebony brows, grew wide with recognition.

"Cam?"

It just couldn't be real. It had to be an illusion, wishful

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thinking. So much altered by time and adulthood but still, those eyes, that perfectly formed mouth... It could be no one else.

"Hello, Bolt." Now if Cameron could just catch his breath and ease his runaway heart back into his chest where it belonged. "I heard you were home." Sometimes the Fontaine ability to appear unruffled under the most imposing enemy fire served him well. The easy tone didn't betray that his knees had become jelly or the bottom had dropped from his stomach.

Long legs encased in tight denim, worn threadbare and nearly white, carried the vision closer. The color matched Bolt's eyes. Just like it always had. Oxygen vanished from the pure blue sky. "Lord, Cam! It's been fifteen years!"

Half a lifetime. Cameron could only nod.

Those pale-denim eyes scanned him up and down. "You grew." White teeth flashed in a tanned face. So did a diamond just below the curved line of Bolt's lip. "And filled out. Real nice." A generous mouth pressed to his.

Cinnamon. Bolt tasted of cinnamon. He'd always loved cinnamon toast for breakfast and cinnamon gum at intervals throughout the day. Cameron couldn't walk past Flora's bakery without the aroma of her sweet rolls bringing his lost love to mind. But then almost everything in and around Bay Mignon brought Bolt to mind.

Sometimes he stood outside Flora's just to lose himself in that smell and remember how Bolt tasted. Other times it all became too much and the mental hurt turned into a physical ache. Those times there wasn't enough Tylenol or Jim Beam

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in the state to ease the pain. Today though, it all fled with that warm, spiced kiss. The ice wrapping Cameron's soul glowed in Bolt's heat.

Cameron groaned and gripped shoulders grown broader than he remembered, mouth opening under strong, soft lips for a questing tongue. So good to feel again the kiss he'd craved! A lean, hard body pressed against him, slender fingers warm on the side of his face, cradling it with the loving care no one else ever seemed to manage. He lost himself in the dance of tongues, in the feel of being back in arms he'd longed for his whole adult life.

"God, I've missed you." Bolt's breath teased Cameron's lips as he spoke. "Not a day went by without me thinking of you. Some days all I could focus on was coming home to you."

Cameron stared into radiant eyes, his hands creeping down, fingers spreading over marble pectorals covered in soft cotton knit. "You missed me?"

"Every single minute."

God, the pain of that admission, knives slicing deep. Cameron pushed as hard as his shattered heart allowed. He wasn't sure which gave him greater satisfaction—the wide-eyed astonishment as Bolt teetered on the edge of the dock for a long second or the huge splash the man made when he hit the water.

Bolt came up sputtering, wiping rivulets from his face.

"You didn't miss me enough to write or pick up the damn phone." Cameron glared down, anger coursing warm and

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bitter through him, awakening dormant pain. It burned his stomach and he clenched his teeth against the rising bile. "I ought to beat the crap out of you like I did when we were twelve."

Bolt shook wet hair from his face. "So you decided to drown me instead?"

Cameron snorted. "It's still only four feet deep there. If you drown, it's your own fault."

Bolt smoothed his veil of hair back and laughed. The sound rocketed over the water, startling and sharp, full of crystal music. He pulled himself to his feet and waded to the shore, clear brown water pouring from his clothes. The already snug shirt clung to every dip and rise of that finely sculpted chest, the pale cotton gone nearly translucent revealing the rare sprinkle of ebony hair across that muscular expanse. "You always were at your best when you got stirred up." He sloshed onto the narrow strip of sand and red clay, presenting Cameron with a view of perfect deltoids. Bolt's boots made sucking sounds. He stared down at them for a moment before grinning back over his shoulder. "Damn it, Cameron, these boots are new."

"And how the hell is that my concern?" Cameron was not going to be appeased by that impish smile. It might have worked when he was fifteen, but not anymore. He could fight off the urge to give up and let go his anger just so Bolt would keep smiling at him.

"I suppose it's not." Bolt's grin grew, all puckish charm. "But I reckon a pair of flat tires might be. So, you want a ride

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into town or not?" Well-remembered *joie de vivre* lit a face too handsome for Cameron's good.

And some things were just as invincible as spring flooding. Cameron sighed and let the most immediate sting of anger recede under the power of that smile. "I reckon."



## CHAPTER 2

“You gonna be mad at me all the way to town?”

Cameron stared out the window, watching the tall trunks of longleaf pines and the tangle of oak, dogwood, and vines making up the undergrowth rush by. He couldn’t turn toward that soft plea, icy certainty deep in his gut insisting if he looked at Bolt he’d never look away.

“Probably.”

He didn’t have to see Bolt’s eye-roll; he could feel it as familiar on his skin as Bolt’s touch had once been.

“You always did have a god-awful temper.” The other man shifted down to climb a steep hill. “That was about your only failing though.” Bolt shifted back into high as they crested the

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hill, the old truck protesting the action. Its dented blue hood shimmied in complaint. "I suppose I shouldn't have kissed you back at the landing, but I saw you and everything just came back like we were still teenagers. I reckon it's a good thing you pushed me in the river before I did any more than that. Getting wet's better'n getting slugged for messing with your life."

Cameron did his best to ignore the faint, compelling music lurking in Bolt's voice and to focus on the words. Too much hurt lay in letting that melody in. "It's a little late for that. You messed it up years ago."

The pickup rumbled and rattled without human voices to cover its asthmatic progress. When the silence pressed too hard on Cameron's eardrums, he finally turned to look at his former lover. "You could have done something if you missed me so damned much. If stamps were too expensive you could have called collect." Anger he could no longer keep dormant simmered, hot in his mouth and red behind his eyes.

Bolt's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel matched his set jaw. "I'm sure your wife would have loved that. Me calling up collect asking for you. I may be a redneck hick but I'm not stupid. And I don't break up marriages."

Cameron blinked. "What marriage? I'm not married."

Bolt's hands jerked, setting Cameron's heart skipping as the truck swayed for a few seconds before it settled back into the right lane. "I didn't know you got divorced. I might have... Well, I didn't know."

Cameron felt the frown knotting his brow. *What the...* That

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was a bit more than coming out of left field; that came from a whole other ball stadium. “I never got divorced because I never got married. What are you talking about?”

Bolt turned those silvery-blue eyes to Cameron for an instant before he pulled onto the grassy shoulder, the tall seed heads of Bahiagrass and half-grown goldenrod thumping on the undercarriage. He slammed the pickup into park. “You never got married? You didn’t meet some girl in college and get hitched?”

“No. I wasn’t interested in girls in college any more than I was in high school. And I didn’t meet any boys I cared about being with for more than a few weeks.” None of those boys, however nice or exciting they’d been, could touch Cameron without bringing Bolt to mind. Every brush of an alien hand, however warm, only made the cold inside deepen. “Why’d you think I married?”

“Because your Aunt Louise told me so.” Bolt’s complexion looked a bit gray under his tan and a fine tremor ran through his arms, though his grip on the steering wheel didn’t loosen. “I did call. Christmas ten years ago. I wanted to... Well, I had something to share with you. I figured you were home from college and all and I knew I’d been bad about writing. I thought talking to you would be best. Louise answered the phone. She said you were out with your fiancé.”

A chain whipped around Cameron’s chest, squeezing tight. His heart thundered inside its bone cage. “She never told me you called at all.” Not even a hint of such a thing. Cameron struggled to breathe, emotions too razor-edged for his body to

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contain. It didn't actually comfort him that Bolt looked as close to passing out as Cameron felt. "And if I know Aunt Louise she said more than that. What she do, tell you to stay the hell away from me?"

Bolt's fine head dipped in acknowledgement. "Said you'd finally gotten some peace and I ought to leave you be since no decent woman wanted her husband's ex-girlfriend calling, much less his ex-boyfriend." Acknowledgment of a hard truth as painful as the knife transfixing Cameron's lungs throbbed in Bolt's voice. "I couldn't argue with the logic of that, especially since I'd been telling you to find someone else for three years."

"Yeah, you did. But that wasn't your call to make and it damned sure wasn't Louise's." Cameron's fingers curled, and he cursed, soft but vehement, every vile term he knew for a woman bursting from him. "Interfering, overbearing..." He drew in a deep, lung-searing breath, seeking control over glowing, iridescent anger.

Bolt nodded, a hank of wet hair slipping silken over his shoulder. "And she never did like me at all. Said my breeding wasn't up to yours. She was right, but it still set wrong whenever she said it."

"I never cared about that." Cameron wanted to smooth that heavy lock back, knowing it would feel like satin under his hands.

"I know. One of reasons I love you so much." Bolt's sigh outlined every muscle under the damp cotton of his T-shirt, drawing Cameron's gaze. "Well, hell." Bolt sat for a moment

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before putting the truck back in gear. “Now you know why I quit writing anyway.”

Cameron reached over and placed his hand over Bolt’s. Electricity sparked up his arm at the contact. The high voltage surge triggered a sharp gasp. He struggled for the breath to speak, “Hold on a minute. You don’t just find out something like this and head on into town like nothing’s happened.”

“Oh, it’s a long way from nothing.” Bolt’s hand trembled under Cameron’s touch. “But I don’t know just what I’m supposed to do about it.” The corners of his lips twitched. “I could go hunt down Louise and slap her right across her lying face like she deserves, but I figure she’d love filing charges for assault. And the last time I did the other thing I’m thinking about, I ended up in the river.”

“I’ll take care of Louise.” Five years worth of hurt and anger extended into fifteen for no reason! Her hatred of Cameron’s sexuality and of Bolt stole good years Cameron could have had with the man he loved. Fury ate at him, but still it could wait until Cameron saw her. If he could ever bear to let her near him again.

Right now he wanted to see if the balm for all those years of pain and rage lay right where he could pick it up. “We’re five miles from the river now. And Bryson Creek is too shallow for me to drown you.” Cameron’s lips spread in answer to Bolt’s. “Maybe I should do the thinking from now on since you were stupid enough to believe anything Louise would say.”

Cameron slid across the two feet separating them. “Put the

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truck in park again. I don't want to hit a pine tree." A few seconds for that to be accomplished passed and he reached to turn Bolt's face toward him. Dear God, Bolt had only become more beautiful with the passage of time.

"Oh, are you married?" Cameron grinned and waited only long enough for Bolt's head shake before welding his lips to his former lover's.

Cinnamon and perfection. No one's kiss felt like Bolt's. Ever. No one gave Cameron this feeling of flight wrapped secure in dulcet wings. Ice melted and cracked, falling away, freeing Cameron's heart to beat without feeling a great section had been carved out and tossed away.

He groaned against Bolt's mouth, the diamond below his lover's lip a new sensation. The hard body wasn't exactly how Cameron remembered it either, but that little moan rising up from the back of Bolt's throat was. Cameron lingered, tongue exploring, dancing with Bolt's until he felt a familiar shiver run through the solid frame. Only then did he pull back. "That's better. We're even now."

Pale eyes stared at him, wide with shock and desire. The need extended to Bolt's body, his jeans bulging with it. "You... Damn. You always did have to have the last word, didn't you?" Bolt gulped great lungfuls of air.

Cameron grinned at the evidence he could still render Bolt breathless and hard with only a kiss. Of course, his own denim felt pleasantly tight as well. "Yep. Let's go. I want to yell at Wilson about my truck tires and then I want take you back to the house so we can talk."

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Bolt continued to stare for a minute before that blinding Hollywood smile bloomed, diamond glinting when the sun caught it. "Talking would be good. Kissing would be better." He eased the truck into drive.

Cameron nodded. "Oh yeah. It always was."

\* \* \*

"We should take this slow." Bolt gasped, breath coming in pants as Cameron's hands roamed over the smooth planes of his lover's chest and back.

Satin skin, warm over hard muscle greeted Cameron's questing touch. The boy he'd known had grown into an exceptionally beautiful man, all lean lines and whipcord muscle under golden skin kissed with just a hint of copper. The same Creek ancestry that colored Bolt's skin gave his hair blue-black glory. Cameron tangled his fingers in that raven silk and melded their forms tight, lips seeking out the tender spot under Bolt's chin.

Bolt tasted of salt and green earth and smelled of clean river mud and open pine flats. And felt better in Cameron's arms than he'd remembered. Every man Cameron had been with was a watery reflection of this, lacking real substance and depth. They all floated into his life and drifted away without leaving a ripple. They pleased Cameron's body but couldn't reach inside him.

But Bolt swept away all the barriers damming Cameron's need to touch, releasing floods of pure desire. He awakened something so long dormant the stirring of that lost need ached

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deep inside Cameron. Feeling had slumbered far too long.

*Screw taking it slow.*

“I think fifteen years may have been slow enough.” Cameron pressed Bolt tight to the solid oak panel of the bedroom door.

The moan from Bolt confirmed the other man’s agreement with the statement. Soft cotton eased higher, bundling under Bolt’s arms, baring more to Cameron’s touch but not enough. He swept the shirt away, letting it fall to the polished floor so he could stare at the body revealed.

Swirls of color gracing the curve of one shoulder drew his gaze. A dragon rendered in jewel tones climbed Bolt’s bicep to twine with a crimson rose. Safe in the dragon’s embrace, the rose held Bolt’s pet name for Cameron in its heart.

“Damn.” Cameron’s fingers traced the flowing script embedded in his lover’s satin skin. Dozing emotions roused and the ache grew, tightening Cameron’s throat, spreading heat through his veins.

“Now, I do remember telling you I got a tattoo. And that it said *Cam*. I wasn’t messing around when I said I thought of you every day. Even if I didn’t call.” Solemn eyes, pale as moonlight, challenged Cameron to claim otherwise. Bolt hadn’t forgotten that push into the river, it would appear.

“Yeah, I remember, but I sort of figured you’d have wiped out my name.” Bright-colored skin tingled against Cameron’s fingertips, the dragon breathing whenever Bolt flexed a muscle. Cameron stared, fascinated.

Bolt shrugged. “The way I felt about you never dried up



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and died. I knew it was stupid and hopeless, but no one ever accused me of taking the smart road anywhere.” He closed his eyes as Cameron’s touch followed the outline of the tattoo, midnight lashes fluttering over eyes gone nearly silver. “You were taken—or so I figured—but that didn’t mean I stopped loving you.” Breathless gasps broke the sentence into pieces.

Cameron’s heart sped. He wanted to say the same words but couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not just yet. Too many things lay wrapped in admitting it. First he needed to know if the consuming burn he felt every time he remembered Bolt was real or just teenage fantasy built into a dream castle from a Romeo and Juliet complex.

“Let’s see if I recall what you like.” As if he could forget. Finding the right spot had never been a problem. The warm hollow at the base of Bolt’s throat fit the curve of Cameron’s tongue perfectly.

“Shit, Cam!” Bolt’s curse came out a bit more vehement than he remembered and the voice deeper, but the shiver that ran up Bolt’s frame felt wonderfully familiar. It set the embers deep inside Cameron glowing. He’d never been able to extinguish them, not alone or in the arms of another man. They stayed, banked and waiting to flare up whenever he thought he might just possibly be over Bolt. Time to find out if they could finally flare and burn out, or if they’d always be just a little too hot for anyone else to really touch him.

“God, every time you do that I can’t decide if I’m gonna scream or weep with joy.” Bolt’s strong hands fisted Cameron’s shirt from his jeans before finding warm skin

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beneath. "You could always manage to fire and freeze nerve endings at the same time."

"You've gotten eloquent." And more exciting than Cameron remembered. Each touch of those elegant fingers, every stroke against coppered skin added gasoline to the fire running through him. Cameron suckled that sweet spot again, hands happy to explore, to find all the spots they once knew. Everything about Bolt just stoked Cameron's desire to new levels of heat.

Bolt gasped again. "They make you go to school in juvie."

Cameron didn't want to dwell on that. They could discuss all the trauma of their youth later. Right now, Cameron wanted to touch and ease that deep ache in his gut.

He knew he could make Bolt come just by staying in that glorious little spot. He'd used it a number of times in less-than-discreet situations in their adolescence. But today wasn't one of those and Cameron needed more. Hard planes of stomach and chest made his palms tingle and taut copper nipples pressed against his skin. Bolt's big silver buckle took too long to unfasten and Cameron cursed faintly before he managed to get it undone. Some other time he'd slide his knuckles up and down that worn denim fly. Right now he needed more of Bolt's skin.

"Cameron! Slow down. I want..." The button on the jeans popped open and Cameron ran his fingertips under the waistband of Bolt's underwear. Tender skin, so soft and warm, hid there. The action freed another of those wonderful little moans from Bolt. "Oh, Christ, forget it. I just want you."

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Good. Because now that he had those tight jeans open, Cameron had no intention of slowing down. The old crystal doorknob turned under his hand and he steered Bolt past that portal. He'd always wanted Bolt in his bedroom, in his bed. The one place they'd never been together. The idea of facing Cameron's father if caught had killed even the strongest adolescent hormone overload.

Gleaming oak scuffed under Cameron's boots as he pressed Bolt toward the bed, finally pushing him down onto the white-on-white quilt. He stared, transfixed by raven hair spread across the old comforter, by long limbs sprawled in disarray, by that delicate patch of inky hair peeping from Bolt's open jeans. "Dear God, you're gorgeous."

"I ain't complaining about the view from here either." Amusement sparkled up from silvery eyes, a snowy smile, and the diamond studs set at lip and ears. "Damn, you got tall." Desire flushed coppery skin and widened jet pupils.

"So'd you." Cameron wanted to explore every inch of that length, too. In a bit. As soon as he quenched the nuclear furnace raging through his veins. He knelt between Bolt's spread legs and ran his hands down the length of that smooth chest and firm abdomen. Bolt's head tipped back, long column of his throat begging for Cameron's attention. He explored there for a moment before working his way to that broad chest and down. His lover's river-kissed, salt-rich skin tasted of all the things Cameron craved.

Bolt yelped and arched his back when Cameron bit, gentle and careful, just above the patch of darkness peeping from the

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waistband of white briefs. He licked the spot before kneeling back and grinning at his startled lover. "I'm not sixteen anymore. I learned a few things along the way."

Bolt shivered. "I noticed."

Cameron chuckled and reached to pull off first one of Bolt's still very damp boots, then the other. Their *thump* as they hit the floor pleased him more than he thought so simple a sound could. The wet socks followed, giving Cameron a moment to admire the elegant narrow feet. "Still ticklish?"

Trepidation widened Bolt's eyes further. "Cameron..."

"Don't worry. I never did torment you that way, did I? I know you can't stand to have anyone mess with the bottoms of your feet." Cameron massaged a trim ankle, Bolt's foot jerking when he pressed a kiss to a high-arched instep. "Yep, still ticklish." He grinned before releasing that pretty ankle and moving back to the waistband of Bolt's jeans.

Sharp tugs freed long limbs from damp denim, admiration for the glory of slim thighs setting new heat low in Cameron's belly. He'd take the time to savor those. Later. Right now, hard desire tenting the white cotton of Bolt's briefs claimed all his attention.

"I see some other things haven't changed either." He pulled the underwear down and dropped them on the jeans. He fisted rigid want and bit that spot just a few inches above it again. "Do I still get you harder than anyone you can think of?"

Long fingers threaded through Cameron's hair, pressing him to river-scented skin. "God, yeah!" Bolt half sat up, his

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fingers tightening, urging Cameron away from that glory to Bolt's lips. Cameron continued to play with the granite length in his hand as he let Bolt ravage his mouth, his lover's kisses hot and frantic. Tongues dueled, dancing with abandon against each other as Bolt's body arched and relaxed only to arch again. A sharp cry broke the kiss as Cameron pressed his thumb across his lover's tip, slickness there sweet as new cane syrup to his senses.

Cameron scrambled in the bedside table for a moment, finding the tube he needed to spread a new sort of slick, then easing a finger into his lover just to watch Bolt's head tip back and his mouth go slack. Cameron fought his own belt and zipper as he pleased Bolt, adoring the way the other man fisted the quilt tight, hips working to match the rhythm. Cameron had to finally release Bolt long enough to push his own pants and underwear down, growling at the delay.

Cameron bent one of Bolt's long legs to his chest, ankle warm on Cameron's shoulder so he could reach what he wanted so badly. When he pushed inside, tight heat welcomed him and he paused, gasping, just savoring that delicious warmth embracing him.

Bolt's lungs bellowed, one hand gripping Cameron's upper arm, the other fisted in the quilt. Sweet profanity fell from his beautifully shaped mouth, offering encouragement and gratitude for something that felt so damned good. The sound of it loosened the tiny hold Cameron maintained on passion. Desire demanded he do all he could to turn Bolt's words to primal sounds of ecstasy, to push them both beyond the ability

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to speak.

He drove into his lover, pumping velvet hardness, finding the spot that drew screams of pure rapture from Bolt, tension so tight and deep in Cameron's gut it ached. A prolonged cry from Bolt and creamy wetness coating Cameron's hand turned the ache to a cramp. Neon flashed across his inner eye as the world shattered, exploding into jewel shards.

He collapsed into Bolt's arms, chest heaving, mind blank.

"You didn't use a condom." Bolt's voice sounded weak.

"I forgot." Cameron could do no more than roll to lie beside Bolt and try to remember how to breathe normally. God, he'd forgotten how absolutely incredible they were together, too. Watercolor images had lingered, vivid but surreal somehow. But not the high-definition version. And fifteen years of practice definitely catapulted them into HD. Wow.

"You can't do things like that. Especially with a guy like me." Bolt's panting fractured his sentences.

Cameron managed to turn his head to look at his lover. "Are you HIV positive?"

"No." Bolt's eyes drifted closed. "But you can't ever tell. And you didn't ask either."

"I forgot. Seeing you sort of destroyed any thought but taking you to bed as hard and fast as I could." He smiled up at the ceiling. And as perfect. Sweeter and more...more than he'd ever fantasized. "You want to know if I'm positive?"

"Are you?" Bolt's lazy voice didn't hold any concern, just honeyed bliss and utter contentment.

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“No.” Cameron found the energy to link his fingers with Bolt’s. “You done lecturing?”

“Yeah.” A smile spread across Bolt’s face. “I don’t have the air to preach at you.”

“How come you didn’t say anything, either?”

Bolt’s smile grew. “I forgot.”

Cameron’s fingers tightened around Bolt’s as he let his laughter join his lover’s.

## CHAPTER 3

Cameron checked the seal on his newly remounted tires and tried to ignore the niggling hurt that Bolt wouldn't stay the night. It made sense intellectually to take some time and think, to cool off without raging hormones and unquenchable desire clouding every thought. But Cameron didn't want to cool off just yet. He wanted to flame and burn until his hands didn't tremble just thinking of touching Bolt.

Damn it all to hell! It wasn't unreasonable to want to finally hold the man he loved all night long without fear of parents or truant officers seeing them. And it wasn't selfish to want to start seeing if he and Bolt had what it took to make a life together. The emptiness had chewed on his insides, eating



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away at him more with each passing year. So, yes, one more day was too long to wait. One more night did make a difference and no, he for damned sure didn't want to talk about it.

"I think this might do better." Cameron schooled his face into a bland mask, hiding the turmoil inside. He straightened, swiping his hand through the straight swath of hair blocking his vision and wiped away stray ash-brown strands clinging to the sweat caused just from thinking of Bolt before he held out a hand to Wilson Owens. "Sorry about being so testy earlier. I was a little bit pissed off." Still was, but for a whole different reason.

The sandy-haired garage owner nodded. "Can't really blame you. I'm actually sort of glad it was you and not some other people around here. You at least aren't likely to come after me with a tire iron or a shotgun."

Cameron laughed. "I save those for more important things."

Wilson joined the laughter, his ruddy narrow face going a brighter shade of red. "Can't fault you for that. Want a cup of coffee before you head out?"

Cameron nodded. He wouldn't get anything done on his designs even if he went home. He'd just think of his lover and wonder why Bolt of all people suddenly decided to be reasonable and cautious. And he wasn't ready to sit down alone for a soul-searching session just yet. He didn't need to analyze what he felt. The immediacy of each emotion vibrated on his skin, leaving him raw. He felt like anyone looking at

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him should be able to see it glowing on his flesh. Bolt was home and, by God, more wonderful than Cameron ever dared dream.

He shivered in the sultry heat of an Alabama afternoon. Yeah, coffee suited him fine. Anything to distract him for just a little while. He settled in Wilson's little office, greeting the other two men already there.

He sipped a cup of too-strong coffee and listened to Vincent Harding complain how the economy had everyone on earth wanting to pawn their stuff and no one able to buy it.

"I reckon that means you can't open a new shop just yet. Not that I see why we need a third one in Bay Mignon." Jase Arnoux's odd multicolored eyes glinted, the old man's grease-stained coverall adding to the car-shop smell of the office. "What do you need with more money anyway? You can only spend so much."

"Yeah, but Becky can spend a whole lot more than I can." The newly bleached teeth Vincent acted so proud of flashed at his joke. "That woman'll bankrupt me if I don't keep the income up."

Jase shook his iron-gray head. "You picked her; you get to live with her."

"Yep. Good thing the perks outweigh the drawbacks. She looks awfully good in those itty bitty dresses that cost so much." Vincent's attention turned to Cameron, gaze too sharp for comfort. "Was that Bolt Truitt I saw dropping you off?"

"Yeah." Cameron figured it would come up eventually, what with Bolt being the new and interesting thing in town.

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“He was down at the landing when my tires went flat.” No need to go into what they’d been doing since then.

Wilson eased into the squeaky chair behind his desk. “I heard he was back in town.”

“I would imagine everyone’s heard that by now. That boy was prime gossip material when he was just a kid.” Jase shifted and stretched one leg. “What’s he doing back here? Figured he’d be glad enough to never see this place again.”

Cameron shrugged. They hadn’t gotten to that. They hadn’t gotten to much yet but finding out their bodies fit together better than they ever had. And that Bolt thought they needed time to think before they checked that fit again. “Didn’t ask.”

Vincent shook his head, unnaturally dark pompadour unmoving. “Well, hell, Cameron. How are we supposed to find out what’s up if you have no curiosity?”

Jase snorted, derision curling the corners of his mouth. “He don’t need any. You got enough for him and the rest of the town.”

“And a damned good thing, too.” Vincent grinned over his coffee cup, unconcerned at the old man’s disapproval. “I hear Bolt’s been hanging out with Claxton Ferris at all hours. Sounds like Bolt’s taking up where his daddy left off.” He shrugged. “Not a big surprise I guess. Silas ran moonshine just like Elar did before him. And Quillar had half the swamp planted with pot. Bolt’s just following in the family business.” He let loose a snort to match Jase’s. “Hell, Claxton keeps half of Mobile in crack, so maybe Bolt’ll make some money. Be

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the first Truitt not drowning in debt.”

Cameron put a firm hold on his temper. This wasn't a new enough accusation to rate an outburst. He'd heard it all so often the knife edge of it had gone blunt and couldn't cut him any more. “I don't see where what Bolt's doing or who he's seeing is of that much interest to anybody. We both knew Claxton; we all went to school together.”

The look Jase shot across the motor-oil tinted room conveyed approval and a touch of respect.

Vincent's far less flattering one said Cameron was a fool. “You said the same thing when Geraldine told us Bolt dropped out of school. When we heard he'd been in trouble out in California you said it was likely a mistake. Him getting sent to prison just made you say he probably had a bad break. When are you gonna give up defending him and realize being charming doesn't keep him from dealing and using? He's gonna get you in trouble one day.”

Cameron settled his cup on the edge of Wilson's desk, the rising fire in his stomach threatening to boil the contents. “I need to get back to work. I've got a deadline.”

Wilson eased to his feet, a hard glare warning Vincent to stay in his chair. “I'll walk you out.”

He waited until they were on the asphalt in front of the business, a selection of used cars in a semi-straight line before them. “Look, Vincent's a pain in the ass and always has been, but he's right about one thing. Bolt Truitt's not exactly what you'd call operating on the right side of the law. Selling used cars and having the boys working for me I do, I hear things.”

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Concern put heavy lines on Wilson's forehead. "It's not just gossip, Cameron. Bolt's dealing. And not in little amounts. I hear he's supplying Claxton with enough high-grade to keep that man's business going. And you and I both know that's not as small-time as Claxton pretends it is. I don't want to see you get in trouble."

A broad hand caught Cameron's shoulder. Wilson must have read the tension preceding a punch to the jaw. "Cameron, look. I've known you your entire life. I know you got a soft spot for Bolt deeper than the Tensaw during high water. But it really doesn't look good. All I'm saying is be careful, okay?"

"Okay." The real caring in the older man's tone kept Cameron's fists from knotting and his tongue from forming hard, sword-edged words. "I just hate seeing people jump to the worst thing they can think of when they have no evidence." He opened the door to the gray F150 and swung into the cab. "None of us know what Bolt's life has been like. I think we need to wait a while before we go declaring him the next Clyde Barrow, don't you?"

Wilson's still-boyish face crinkled in a smile. "I suppose so. See you, Cameron."

"See you." Cameron cranked the truck and headed out, mind in far more turmoil than he dare let show on his face. Despite his anger and his defense, he had no idea why Bolt had returned to Bay Mignon. No idea what his lover's life had been for the last ten years. He prayed Wilson was wrong, because he damned sure wasn't ready to play Bonnie to Bolt's Clyde. Maybe Bolt was right; maybe they did need to talk.

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“Yes, sir. I got the new suggestions and I don’t see any problems. It’ll be done by the deadline you set. Thanks, Mr. Wolfe. I appreciate your confidence in me.” Cameron flipped his cell phone shut and considered the several fax sheets spread out on his drafting table. Good ideas. Really good. And nice to see a corporate mogul who actually liked getting his own hands into a project. Too bad Cameron couldn’t think straight enough right now to implement them onto the blueprint.

He stretched and glanced at the clock. Dinner time. He had not the least urge to cook. Or do much of anything. Except think of Bolt. And thinking of Bolt made him hard. Not a condition that helped get any work done.

He pushed away from the drafting table, considering going upstairs and fantasizing about Bolt versus going into town for a meal. Fantasizing about Bolt would lead to sleeping, and by the time he woke up everything would be closed and he’d be stuck with a can of tomato soup for supper. Not too appealing. So food first and imaginary Bolt later. Yeah, much better plan.

Of course, having the real Bolt upstairs would be an even better one. Then Cameron wouldn’t care if he had food or not. But his lover had discovered maturity and introspection, so Cameron would just have to feed a different hunger.

He plucked his keys from a hook by the door on his way out, pausing on the wide porch to look out toward the sunset. The land dropped off at the edge of his yard, the steep hill leading down to the river bottoms. From here he could see the

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glint of the Tensaw through the trees, the sunset reflecting red on the water and the tin roof of the old Truitt house. Copperhead Road wound from the landing a half mile along the river to the old house. Was that how Bolt found him at the landing this morning? Maybe. Someone had kept it up and kept tenants in it. Bolt's uncle, Cameron suspected. Now Bolt had taken up occupancy so he'd go right by the landing any time he left the house.

He headed down the steps of the old plantation house. The shack down on Copperhead Road couldn't hurt him anymore. He'd worn that ache out years ago. Tonight, it only stirred his curiosity. *Why did Bolt come back? Not for me.* And Bolt had been grown and his own man for over ten years, able to go where he pleased. So why now?

Cameron didn't have any answers, and no new ones came as he drove the five miles into town. He found the questions made supper in a restaurant or the diner less appealing with each spin of his tires. He didn't want to make small talk. Fast food would do for tonight. His own company beat hearing more rumors and innuendo about Bolt.

A swing through Hardee's drive-through for a burger would work. Cameron opted to park in the back and eat while the food was still hot. He settled on the tailgate to catch whatever breeze he could while he ate his dinner.

He watched the comings and goings from the trailer park behind the Hardee's to the laundromat in the old Winn-Dixie shopping center as he bit into the burger. Kids chased each other past empty stores while disgruntled teens lugged

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hampers, following equally disgruntled mothers.

Movement off beyond the swings caught his attention. A set of tubes and slides, their condition such that no parent in their right mind would let a child near them, congregated in faded primary colors. Two figures stood, clearly visible in the artificial lights of the parking lot, the one passing an envelope to the other in exchange for a package not much bigger than a man's hand. All done with deft ease. A battalion of dark moths whirled and dived inside Cameron's stomach, seeking desperate escape. *Bolt?*

Claxton Ferris strode away with his package tucked under one skinny arm while he straightened a ball cap over a dirty blond mullet with the other. But Cameron didn't care about him. The moths' desperation turned to frenzy as his focus settled on Bolt shoving the envelope into his waistband, dropping his T-shirt to cover it before turning to leave in the opposite direction from Claxton. That turn faced him directly toward Cameron.

Bright silver-gray eyes widened, perceptible even at the distance between them, but no deep copper flush heated that tanned skin. Bolt's lips parted, Cameron's name passing over them followed by a colorful curse. All of which Cameron could have handled if his...ex-lover hadn't held that gaze without a trace of shame.

The burger in Cameron's hand lost its taste and he set it back on its wrapper, barely aware of the action.

*Not a drug buy. Please, God, not a drug buy.* Bolt couldn't be dealing.



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But of course he could. Pain lanced through Cameron's heart, a shaft of black ice freezing all the warmth he'd rediscovered. After all, a drug sale had landed Bolt in juvenile detention for a year in California. Cameron still had the letter admitting it. Bolt's shame then had been heartfelt and real, regret flowing with every word. Had years and familiarity erased the knowledge of how wrong it was?

Not rumor. Not hearsay. Real, and right before Cameron's eyes.

The ice melted in the fires of rage, black anger dripping into Cameron's veins, poisoning the moths. It killed everything but the need to get away, to not look into that gaze and see a lie. The rest of his dinner got crushed into a ball and tossed into the truck bed. Cameron doubted he'd ever feel like eating again. The keys rattled in his hand before he managed to get them into the ignition. *Damn it, Bolt.*

The remains of Bay Mignon flowed past, probably a little faster than the law would like, giving way to pine covered hills and tangled creek bottoms. Those passed far faster than the speed limit allowed. Cameron didn't care. He just wanted to run. From everything. The cab of the truck smoked with the heat of his curses. Gravel skidded as he braked in front of his house, slamming the truck door as he got out and stomped up the steps to drop onto the porch swing.

"I thought you were different..." The words whispered over dry lips while his brain less-than-gently reminded him just who Bolt was—a Truitt. Bootleggers and drug dealers as far back as anyone remembered. "God, Bolt, you swore to me

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you'd never get into that shit again after L.A. You told me so many times you weren't going to be like your daddy and your granddaddy. No moonshine, no dope. You were going to be somebody."

Cameron's stomach roiled at the memory of that oh-so-smooth deal and he dropped his head into his hands. "Dear God, no." Too practiced and too smooth to be unfamiliar. Only someone who'd done that pass of money for drugs often could make it look that easy. It only took seconds. *How many years has he been dealing?* Cameron's hands shook with the need to cry. Or maybe that tremor came from the need to wrap them around Bolt's neck and shake until one or the other of them passed out.

The rattletrap truck swinging into his drive made it look like he might just get that chance. Cameron pushed up off the swing to stand at the head of the porch steps, waiting for Bolt. Even now the lure in the swing of those lean hips and that bright gaze wasn't dimmed by the knowledge that Bolt hadn't lived up to his promises. It just hurt like hell.

"You trying to kill yourself? You drove back here like a crazy man." Pale eyes snapped with lightning. "I swear to God, if you'd wrecked and not killed yourself I'd have beat you to death."

Purest outrage lit Cameron's gut. The corpse of dead faith turned into a bomb that exploded with such fire he could hardly see through the flaming wreckage. He felt his voice drop into that soft, cold tone only deepest anger produced. "Give me one good reason not to do the same to you right

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here. You promised me you were done with dope.”

Now a rose flush did brighten that golden copper complexion. “I did. I won’t pretend otherwise.” The porch light gleamed on hair darker than the gathering gloom outside. “I can’t... I know it looks bad. It looks damned bad. But it’s not. It’s...” Bolt’s lips pressed tight. “Cameron, for all of my growing up, you were the only one who believed in me. I didn’t have anyone else. Then I went to California and didn’t have anyone at all. Oh, my uncle was well enough, but I knew every time he looked he saw half of me was the man who killed his sister.” Bolt met Cameron’s gaze without flinching, though his color bloomed a bit higher. “I got in trouble. So then I had a record. I earned a GED while I was in a damned cold, overcrowded prison for under-aged felons.” Bolt drew a long breath and looked away, finally unable to face Cameron. “I did the best I could.”

“You could have called me.” Cameron shook, vast control needed to keep from swinging the clenched fist at his side. “Damn it, Bolt, I’d have done anything for you.” Yesterday’s conversation pricked his memory, dousing the anger, washing it away in with a different pain. “But you did call, didn’t you? And you got Aunt Louise instead of me. And got fed a pack of lies.” The fist relaxed, hope blossoming in the wake of renewed understanding. “It doesn’t have to keep on being the way it was. You can get out of the dealing now. You don’t have to just survive. I...”

“And do what? Live off of you? You gonna take me in, Cameron?” Bolt climbed the first two steps, bringing him

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close enough to touch. “Keep me here with you?” The musical tone turned to silk. “The fairy tale we dreamed of. You and me in this house. Or any house. Together.”

God! The thought of that turned Cameron’s insides to warm jelly. “Well, you wouldn’t have to actually live off me, but why not? The house is paid for. I’ve got a good job. You could do anything you wanted.” *Just as long as you’re here with me.* Cameron found he couldn’t breathe with Bolt this near.

The touch of Bolt’s fingertips on Cameron’s cheek sent the lightning from Bolt’s eyes into Cameron. One final step brought Bolt close enough their bodies brushed. Electricity sparked, making Cameron’s body jump. “You’d do that and never say a word. Dear God, you’re an even better man than I remembered. I knew you’d grow up to be something special.” The current followed the path of Bolt’s fingers as they trailed down Cameron’s neck to settle over his heart. “Damn, I love you.”

Cameron shook now with emotion far different than anger. “Bolt...” His breath came in short bursts. “We need to talk and figure out how to get you out of this before you get arrested again.” The thought of Bolt locked away chilled Cameron clear through.

“I’ll take care of it. It’ll take me a little while, but I’ll work through it. I can’t just drop it and walk away. It’s too dangerous.” Bolt’s hand slipped from Cameron’s chest down to his abdomen, tingles lingering in the wake. “But it will be over. Just give me some time.”

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“How much time? Bolt, you shouldn’t wait. Maybe the sheriff can help. If you turn in whoever’s supplying you, he might...” The suggestion cut off as Bolt’s lips feathered over Cameron’s, his brain losing track of anything but the satin feel of those lips. The diamond tickled.

“Do you remember the first time you kissed me? We were twelve and a half and you got all pissed off because you thought I was staring at Maryalice D’Olive’s ass.” Warm breath teased the corner of Cameron’s mouth.

“You were.” Cameron leaned toward the fingers slipping under his T-shirt to stroke just above his waistband.

“No, I was trying not to stare at yours. But I couldn’t very well say that in the middle of recess with half the seventh grade around us. So I told you I’d look at whatever I wanted to.” Bolt’s arm slipped around Cameron’s waist, pulling them close together. “You came storming down to Copperhead Landing after school looking for me. You pushed me up against a post and kissed me like you were going to brand me yours with nothing but your lips.” Bolt’s touch climbed Cameron’s spine. “I realized right then boys were better than girls and you were better than all of them.” Bolt pulled back enough to stare into Cameron’s eyes. “You still are.”

Firm lips claimed Cameron’s, pressing their bodies tight, Bolt’s desire pulsing against Cameron’s hip. The fire of Bolt’s touch and the glory of his kiss pushed concern to the side to be dealt with later. “Take me to bed, Cameron. Remind me what it’s like to have you believe in me.”

The moan welling up from Cameron’s core provided the

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answer he didn't dare put into words. He'd believe in Bolt again regardless of what his head declared rational. He'd believe for as long as he could. The alternative hurt too much to even imagine.

\* \* \*

"Where the hell did you learn that?" Cameron struggled, but his hands stayed tight in Bolt's grip against the banister. That lean form held him immobile, his hands behind him locked in one of Bolt's. Throbbing need pressed tight to his thigh, proof Bolt felt the power of their bodies in contact as much as Cameron did.

"Dated an FBI-academy washout for a week or so." Bolt's tongue wound a mesmerizing path over Cameron's ear. "Boy was a flake, but he did teach me some awfully fun moves. So what do you think, Cam? We having fun?" Cameron shivered, chest heaving while Bolt rained such sweet torture on him. "Have I got your engine revving now?" Bolt's free hand wriggled between them to grab Cameron's crotch. "I do like your engine. Always have, Cam."

Cameron knew that grin. "One joke about cam shafts and I will prove I can still hurt you. Badly."

Bolt's fingers tightened, delicious pressure where Cameron wanted it so much. "You sure about that?" That talented hand worked up and down over denim worn so soft Cameron could almost feel Bolt's fingerprints.

Impish delight sparkled in his eyes as Bolt stroked him. "You dead sure I can't make comments about this shaft,

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Cam?”

Cameron’s eyes rolled back and he tried to remember what he’d been so upset about.

*Right. Cam shaft jokes. Now what was so wrong with those again?*

“I can have all sorts of fun, you know.” Diamonds glittered in the hallway light, catching the glint from Bolt’s eyes. “Cam shafts. Crank shafts. Want me to crank your shaft, Cam?”

“That may be the worst pun ever.” Cameron’s mind blanked when Bolt took firm hold and squeezed. “I’ll save your beating for later.”

“Thought you might get to feeling that way.” Bolt’s hand eased under Cameron’s waistband and underwear, finding bare skin. “I keep this up, you may forget about hurting me altogether.” Slim hips rotated against Cameron.

“Now when did you ever manage to get the best of me, old son?” Cameron took a deep breath to clear his senses just long enough to settle his tongue into the hollow of Bolt’s throat. “Especially when I can still reach this lovely little spot.”

A sharp profanity rocked Bolt’s body, jerking him tighter against Cameron. “You cheat. You’ve always cheated.”

“And what’s pinning my hands so I can’t reach you called?” Cameron cradled that hollow with his tongue, massaging until Bolt groaned. “Now, if I’m going to be accused of cheating, I’d best do it proper.” He drew Bolt’s warm skin into his mouth and bit lightly.

What started as a yelp turned to a whimper and that gloriously hard body moved against Cameron’s. Sweet

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undulations of Bolt's hard desire pressed to the hollow of Cameron's hip.

Cameron waited until Bolt's grip on his hands loosened, sliding down into his back pockets and squeezing his ass. A little hip-thrust of his own sent a shiver through his lover, enough that Bolt had to take a half-step back to catch his balance. Cameron kept the grin inside. *Gotcha! You are so mine now, love.*

"God, how'd you just get finer?" Bolt struggled to breathe. "You make me feel like my head's gonna explode."

"Mmm." Cameron nuzzled at warm cotton jersey until he found a hard nipple, sucking as he trailed his fingers down Bolt's arm until he got the angle he wanted. Then he flipped the other man around, capturing Bolt's wrists with his own and reaching for that silver belt buckle. "You know, there is something to be said for this position. I like it better this way, though."

Bolt turned his head back as far as he could, an eye sparkling through a veil of black hair. "I could lie and say I hate it." His ass pressed tight to Cameron. "But I don't lie to you."

True. Bolt hadn't lied to him. Everything that had passed between them was misunderstanding, others' interference. Cameron took his time undoing Bolt's belt and fly, letting himself breathe a little and relaxing into the feel of that satin skin under his fingertips. "Then why don't we just coast like this for a few minutes? Since you don't hate it."

Bolt pressed against Cameron's hand, breath shivering in



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and out. “You have some weird shit ideas of what’s coasting, honey.” Slender hips pushed back and forth. “Keep doing that and I’ll get way past not hating it.”

“You were always so easy to melt.” Cameron grinned into the curve of Bolt’s shoulder. “Putty in my hands.” He groaned a little himself over the granite glory in his hand. “Well, not exactly putty, I guess.”

“Not putty, no. And I think I know a position I hate even less.”

Cameron had the briefest sensation of flying, of Bolt’s arms cradling him, then of the polished oak floor coming up to meet him.

Bolt’s long body settled over Cameron, hips working again. “Oh yeah, I think I even like this one.”

“What the—” Cameron wriggled under the sudden weight and found he couldn’t move. “How the hell did you do that?” The mind-blowing friction over his ass prompted a groan. “Dear God...”

“I told you. I learned a few things courtesy of the U.S. government.” Bolt nipped at Cameron’s neck. “And FBI agents are all pervs. Wait’ll I show you some of the things I’ve found out.”

“Feels like I may not have a choice.” Between the sun-warmed patch of wood floor and Bolt’s warmth from above, Cameron decided sticking around for a lesson or two sounded about perfect. “Show away, love.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear.” Bolt shifted and raised Cameron enough to work at belt and fly, jerky motions

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pushing them down around Cameron's knees. "First I want to get my hands on you proper."

"Shit, yeah." In all their time as lovers, Bolt had never taken control quite like this. Cameron's whole body trembled in anticipation.

Bolt's form wiggled, something crinkled and tore. "Hands and other things." He draped himself over Cameron again so he could kiss and nuzzle in Cameron's hair. Silken desire rubbed against Cameron's ass with each move. "I'm real into the other things part of that right now."

"God, Bolt..." It wasn't the first time Cameron had played the sub, though he found as a rule he preferred leading things. But this felt so perfect, letting Bolt have his way, letting Bolt take him. Cameron let his eyes drift closed and waited for that hot press of desire into him. "Oh, God, please..."

Cameron's pocket buzzed. The vibration snapped Bolt's body up and away just before a distinctive ringtone sounded. Cameron groaned clear from his toes. "Shit. That's my boss. I have to take it. He never calls."

Bolt eased farther back and Cameron twisted to pull the cell phone from his pocket. "Yes, sir?" He tried not to pant into the receiver. "Sure. I can answer any question you have about the plans. Just let me get to my office." He took the hand Bolt offered, getting to his feet and managing to pull his jeans back up while balancing the phone on his shoulder. He reclaimed Bolt's hand and tugged his lover toward his study, gait unsteady. "I'm sure whatever concerns you have will only take a few minutes to clear up."

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By that time maybe he'd be able to walk enough to get Bolt up the stairs.

\* \* \*

"You did all these?"

Cameron nodded at his lover as he listened to Quinton Wolfe fine-tune an earlier instruction and responded. "Yes, that can be expanded to include infrastructure to hold a mobile of that weight without any significant cost increases. The span connects to load-bearing columns so only the span itself would need to be upgraded." He watched Bolt shift to consider the blueprints without moving them. "Yes, an email to confirm works for me." Cameron let the corporate mogul make the usual courteous but swift farewell before tossing the cell phone onto his work desk. "Sorry. I can't afford to ignore my major client." The strong work light haloing Bolt's form made his mouth dry.

"Cameron, these are incredible." Bolt traced a finger lightly around the edge of the top drawing. "This is for one of the biggest corporations in the country. You weren't kidding about a good job."

"I do all right." Cameron eased an arm around Bolt's waist. "I figured out I like creating buildings. I get the biggest rush out of seeing one of them completed." Bolt's warmth sank into Cameron's bones.

"I always knew you'd end up doing something big with your life, but God, Cameron..." Bolt leaned back in Cameron's embrace. "And you still want me in it."

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That just might be the greatest understatement Cameron had ever heard. “You’d make it...” He struggled for the right word. “Complete. This house gets awful empty some nights. Some days, too. It’s just me now.” He leaned in, molding his form to Bolt’s. “I’d like for it to be just me and you.”

Cameron felt the definite tremor start in those long toes and travel right up Bolt’s spine, that rich voice breathless all over again. “You asked me to marry you when we were fifteen. I didn’t think it could feel better than it did then.” Broad, capable hands clasped Cameron’s and guided them against taut abs.

The feel of hard muscle under soft cotton made Cameron’s palms itch. “So where were we? You still feel the need to show me all you learned? I figure we still have fifty or sixty years. You can spend a good part of that showing off your education. If that’s what you want.”

A smiled blazed against coppery skin. “I gotta get out of this situation, Cam. Then we’ll talk about forever. Right now I just want you.”

The satin heat of smooth skin tingled through Cameron’s hands. “I’m going to hold you to that yes you gave me back then.” He pressed want against tight jeans, rotating his hips over hard glutes. “I want you, too. Just as much as I did then.”

“Well, hell. You got away from me thanks to your phone. S’pose that puts you back—shit, Cam!—in charge. You gonna let me breathe this round?” A groan got lost in a breathless chuckle over Bolt’s lips. “Or just have your way with me like last time? I bet you got a trick or two of your own.”

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Cameron explored firm muscles. "I might have a few that can surprise you." He grinned at the idea of experimenting on his adored lover. "Right now, I don't know. I'm sort of enjoying the slow route." He nipped at Bolt's earlobe. "I like your hair long." He nuzzled into raven silk. "It smells good." Clean, woodsy. Bolt. His hold tightened.

"Daddy always said he wasn't gonna have no son with hair longer than his mama's. I stopped cutting it the day he shot himself." Bolt's breathing quickened, a delicious movement of muscle under Cameron's hands. "Had a fantasy for a long time of watching it curl around you while we made love."

It became Cameron's turn to shiver. That fall of midnight silk brushing his shoulders, cascading over his chest. A tremor ran through him as he freed the burnished silver clasp holding it back from Bolt's face, setting it free. "I'd love that."

That solid form turned in his arms and Bolt feathered a kiss over Cameron's lips. "So maybe we don't have a leader or a teacher this time. Maybe we just need to get all those secret little longings out one by one, huh?"

"Works for me." Cameron buried his fingers in Bolt's long hair, holding his lover close while their mouths and hands explored. Not that any of their longings had ever been secret, not from each other anyway. But new ones had surfaced as Cameron matured and learned all the things a sixteen-year-old didn't know. This soft rediscovery was one of the greatest. To find out what sort of man Bolt had become. And to hold that man here, where he belonged, filled many a dream both waking and sleeping. He eased Bolt's shirt away so he could

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savor copper-toned skin. Cameron pulled his own shirt off, letting it fall to the floor. He wanted nothing between them.

Bolt's hair brushed Cameron's back as Cameron bent to suckle a russet nipple. The shiver that caused worked its way up from the very base of his spine.

"Come here." Bolt's gentle melodic whisper pulled Cameron up to soft kisses. "I want you stretched out on that big bed of yours." Strong, slender fingers twined with Cameron's, tugging him to the stairs. Sweet kisses punctuated their journey, slow and wet, filling Cameron with Bolt's taste—clean skin, faint salt-sweat, and male musk.

A flip of the switch by the door and his lamp came on, the golden glow perfect on Bolt's skin. Almost as perfect as the feel of Bolt's fingers curled in Cameron's belt loops, pulling them together. "Do you remember how we swore one day we'd have all the time we wanted and wouldn't have to hurry?"

A frisson of desire worked its way through Cameron. "Yeah. In a real bed." He smiled and spread Bolt's hair over broad shoulders. "I have a real bed, Bolt. No curfew, no parents, no worrying about getting caught."

Bolt nodded, hair rippling with the action. "You gotta admit though, that time we found a spot in the old Terhune barn with all that soft ancient hay had its moments."

"The first time I had a chance to see you completely naked for more than a minute and a half." The grin spreading Cameron's lips felt too good.

Bolt laughed. "Yeah. You looked so good, I forgot to

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worry about the ghost.” Nimble fingers loosened Cameron’s belt and zipper. “You look even better now.”

Cameron stared down, watching muscles ripple in Bolt’s back as he slowly pushed the confining jeans and briefs down. His lover paused to admire the evidence of Cameron’s desire before swallowing it down.

“Bolt!” A sharp profanity punctuated Cameron’s cry. His head dropped back as his breaths came in tight gasps. A few moments of exquisite torture left his knees watery and mind blank.

Bolt pulled back with a grin. “I wasn’t going to speed things up too much. You just looked so good I had to have a taste.”

Cameron held tight to broad shoulders to stay upright. “I wasn’t complaining.” He drew a deep breath, trying to calm the galloping of his heart. “Dear God, that was good.”

Bolt’s grin chased every shadow from the room. “Oh, I can be way better than that. Let’s get you the rest of the way out of these clothes and on that bed and I’ll show you just how much.”

“Just the way we always wanted.” Cameron sighed as the perfect feel of a kiss on the center of his chest emphasized just how right it was.

Loafers kicked away and jeans gone, Cameron welcomed the feel of quilted cotton at his back as Bolt laid him out on the bed. His lover took a moment to finish undressing before climbing onto the bed. Long strands of jet silk swept Cameron’s ankles, midnight feathers drifting up his legs as

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Bolt crawled with deliberate slowness up Cameron's prostrate form.

A whimper escaped the back of Cameron's throat when that barely-there caress became a waterfall of sensation over his chest and he looked up into rich silver eyes veiled by a curtain of ebony. "God, that feels good. And you look so gorgeous like that. Like some sort of fantasy creature."

Pearl teeth flashed. "Only fantasy I want to be is yours." Warm lips pressed to his before Bolt slipped back down Cameron's body, thick hair flowing over Cameron's stomach and sweeping over his erection.

Cameron gasped a new obscenity. Raven locks pooled about his hips and thighs as Bolt dipped his head to the tip of Cameron's aching desire. A deep strawberry-pink tongue swept up the crystal drop there. "Mm, you taste every bit as good as you look."

"And you definitely haven't lost your touch, babe. I always melted when you put your mouth on me." Cameron tipped his head back and sighed. "Tell you something. I haven't exactly been a monk all these years, but nothing ever felt as good as it does with you."

"I know. I did my share of experimenting. However good they were, they weren't you." Delicate swipes of Bolt's tongue from base to tip pooled heat deep in Cameron's belly. "I didn't love them. They were just... fun."

An absurdly impish thought made Cameron grin as he let sensation and the smooth white ceiling clear his mind of anything but Bolt. "Just what sort of fun experimenting did



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you do, anyway?”

Bolt returned the grin. “Oh, whatever came to mind.” He gathered a handful of that gorgeous hair and swept it over Cameron’s erection. “I’d do this and pretend it was you.”

Cameron’s body arched and his breath rushed in at the sensation of a thousand silk strands on hypersensitive cells. “Oh, shit...” He fisted his hands in the quilt and barely managed to find his voice again. “That feels even better than the silk tassels some interior designer from about a decade ago tried on me. Weird taste in upholstery, good in bed. And you didn’t t...” Hmm, maybe leave that part off. The image of Bolt securing him to the oak headboard and doing heaven only knew what had Cameron fighting to maintain control of a mind-numbing orgasm before they really got started.

“Silk tassels? I’m gonna have to let you try that on me.” Bolt slid up Cameron’s body, the sweep of his hair setting each of Cameron’s nerve endings alight. The kiss he pressed to Cameron’s mouth only added to the fire.

“I’ll have to Google it to find some.” Cameron caught that lean waist tight. “God, Bolt, stay there a minute. I just want to hold you here, in this bed, like we always dreamed.”

Bolt’s weight settled over Cameron. “I’m here. Just like we dreamed.” His kiss turned soft, still full of longing but tinged with that regret they shared. The years stolen from them that could have been spent like this. “I think this may be better than I ever fantasized.”

The tension of the day eased in Bolt’s embrace and Cameron found himself suddenly drowsy. He nuzzled the firm

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curve of his lover's jaw. "Stay tonight. I want to love you soft and slow, fall asleep in your arms and have you here when I wake up. Please."

"God, that sounds like pure heaven." Bolt's kiss lingered. "But I can't. Now listen to me before you go off like a rocket. I... There's stuff in my truck and in my pocket. If it's found here you could be arrested. They could take your house. If I had any sense I'd get up and leave right now, but I just don't have that much willpower."

"Damn it, Bolt..." Cameron's fist thumped hard against the quilt. Anger, regret, and love tangled in his heart. "How the hell am I supposed to beat you senseless for getting into that shit in the first place when all I want to do is kiss you for trying to protect me from it?" His heart surrendered and he threaded his fingers through jet silk, sending a rough whisper over those satin lips. "You better make up for bailing early on me right now."

"I can do that." Warm lips claimed Cameron's again, a slender hand slipping between them to gather matching desires and press them together. "How about I show you something else I learned? Suppose I love you like this so I can kiss you and just fall right into those pretty hazel eyes of yours?" Bolt's hips moved, the sweet slide of velvet-covered granite held tight against Cameron's own, setting the pooled heat in Cameron's belly to overflowing.

"Oh yeah..." A deep groan vibrated clear from Cameron's toes. "Oh, man, everything feels so much better with you."

"You just keep feeling that." Each sweep of Bolt's hips

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pumped pure sensation through Cameron. Heat built, a smooth flow spreading out to his limbs. He clasped Bolt close, fingers buried in flowing jet. The silken strands floated about their shoulders, almost as erotic as the feel of their hardness moving in concert.

“God, Bolt!” Cameron fisted his lover’s hair and pressed his lips against Bolt’s ear. “You leave the stuff at the house tomorrow night. I want you here. All night.”

“I want that!” Bolt’s breath shivered in and out. “Sweet Jesus, I want to wake up with you and fall asleep with you every day for the rest of my life. Let me get this all taken care of and I’ll do just that.”

“I don’t want to wait for that.” Cameron arched against his lover’s touch. God, it felt so perfect again! “Please. One night. One full night for us right now. Please, Bolt.”

“Cameron, don’t. Please don’t. Three days. Give me just three days and, God willing, this will all be over and I’ll be able to be yours all night and all day.” Bolt buried his face in the crook of Cameron’s shoulder. “Don’t spoil the now. Let us have this and not worry about what comes next. Please.”

*Don’t spoil the now. Don’t worry about what comes next.* The subtle pain of those words and the uncertainty they birthed dulled for long moments as Cameron’s body tightened and he cried out release. Bolt’s caress sent waves of ecstasy over every nerve ending. Some treacherous little voice in the back of Cameron’s head whispered that those words all too often meant the speaker didn’t plan to hang around. *No. Bolt wouldn’t lie to me. He’s never lied to me. Everything was just*

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*misunderstandings and miscommunication. It'll be okay.*

“Three days.” Cameron plundered his lover’s mouth and teased sensitive skin with a fervor he hadn’t known since he was sixteen. “Then you’re mine.”

Bolt arched and liquid passion flowed onto Cameron’s stomach. “Yours!” Bolt collapsed onto Cameron, arms trembling, his release too strong to allow him to support his own weight. His breath warmed Cameron’s cheek as he panted. “Yours. With all my heart.”

## CHAPTER 4

Cameron decided breakfast in town beat staring at his refrigerator in despair. Waking alone to sheets that smelled of Bolt made Cameron want to shout for joy and weep in heartache. The man he'd loved as long as he could remember had returned. And promised it would be forever. And the sun shone a little brighter and the sky looked a little clearer. If Cameron could just believe it.

Oh, he had no doubt Bolt's love ran deep and true. It rang through every touch and kiss. He just wasn't sure Bolt could break free from the life he lived to build a new one with Cameron. God knew there was no doubt it was where his heart longed to be. Still, thirty years knowing little but survival of

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the fittest and making a dime on the wrong side of the law... Cameron had watched it wear down his teenaged lover and he'd acted as a buffer however he could. But Bolt had been all alone in L.A. How much damage could even Bolt's noble spirit take before the constant effort to rise above everything in a hardscrabble life exhausted him?

Cameron tried to push aside the fear as he parked his truck and stepped out onto the gravel parking lot of The Shrimp Basket. Maybe Evelyn's coffee would distract him. Or that poor fellow who had breakfast all the time with his imaginary ghost lover. Though watching a guy talk to people who weren't there weirded Cameron out. But considering the tight fear wrapping his chest, weirded out would be an improvement. So coffee or strangeness—either would work just fine about now.

The scrape-slide of truck wheels on rocks diverted his attention off to the side as he pushed his door shut. Bolt's beat-up blue Chevy pulled in at the far end of the lot. The fear in Cameron's chest eased even as the tightness grew.

Just the sight of his love climbing down, diamonds glinting in the sun, tattoo half-visible, tight jeans worn and faded, sent hot and immediate desire racing through Cameron. His heart sped, leaping with the need to touch and hold that glorious body close. Bolt's smile made Cameron's knees less than steady and set his body throbbing.

"Well, hey there, handsome." Cameron crossed the several yards separating them to press Bolt back against the old truck, kissing his lover hard and deep enough to get Cameron

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through the day. Cinnamon exploded over his lips, spicy mellow and more seductive than anything Cameron could think of. The scent filled him as he took Bolt's breath into his own body.

Strong hands cupped Cameron's ass, pulling him tight against Bolt's body, squeezing the best sort of good-morning Cameron could think of. He tangled his fingers in Bolt's hair, inordinately pleased it floated free about broad shoulders. Sun-warmed silk flowed over his knuckles. Satin lips, delicious moist spice, opened for him, letting him in. He delved into that bounty, losing himself in the taste of his lover, in the feel of new hardness pressed to his own. He ground his pelvis tighter to his lover, sharing his need, intent on blossoming desire.

When Cameron pulled back just enough for a little oxygen before he passed out, Bolt's eyes shone and his voice went breathy. "Hey yourself. God, you feel as good as you look." Those lean fingers squeezed again, a bright grin promising long hours of making out. Cameron could think of no better way to fill his day.

"All right, gentlemen. I spend enough time telling the teenagers we don't need all that in public. I'd think you'd know better." Sheriff Robert Coons slapped the truck bed in greeting. "Evelyn'll have a fit, right in front of her diner." Dark brows rose as Cameron sighed and let go of Bolt. "Fontaine? What the hell are you doing with... Never mind." Rob Coons's normally pleasant, round face darkened, brows drawing together. "Truitt." His voice turned chill. "I thought I told you I didn't want any more trouble from you."

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“Wasn’t aware of causing any, Sheriff.” Bolt’s eyes went ice-hard, but that rich voice stayed light. “Last I checked kissing my lover wasn’t a crime, or at worst only a misdemeanor for the public display.”

Rob’s color brightened all the more, though Cameron wasn’t sure if it was from Bolt’s tone or the admission of their status as lovers. “Even a misdemeanor’s more than I need from you. Why don’t you just get in your truck and head on back to Copperhead Road? I think that would be better for all involved.”

Bolt’s whole body tensed against Cameron’s. “Sure. Why not. Got things that need doing anyway. You mind if I at least get a breakfast special to go...” A full, beautiful lip curled in pure derision. “Sir?”

Cameron could only stare. If Bolt wanted to piss off Rob, that attitude and tone would manage it with ease. A new, tight band settled around his chest. What if Rob got mad enough to up the “move along” to something that would make him look in Bolt’s truck. Visions of his lover in a jail cell rose up. *Dear God, please don’t let Bolt have anything illegal in there!* He knew the prayer was futile even as it formed and amended it. *Please, please don’t let Rob look in the truck.*

“I think that’s a good plan.” Rob jerked his head toward the diner. “So why don’t you go get your takeout and head home.”

Bolt pressed a quick kiss to Cameron’s cheek. “I’ll see you later, love.” A sloppy little two-fingered salute got tossed at the sheriff. “Y’all have a nice day now.”



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The swing of shoulders and hips invited Rob to say something else.

Shit! Bolt was going to get himself arrested just for being a prick. He took a step after his lover.

Rob pressed a hand to Cameron's chest, stopping him from following Bolt. "We need to talk."

*Crap! Hell's fire and all the damnation that went with it!* "We weren't doing anything but kissing, Rob. God." Cameron shifted back against the truck and folded his arms over his chest. He really hated this sort of shit. He'd put up with it from campus security all through school. "I realize it's not exactly a topic of discussion around here, but I was sure you'd have figured out I like boys more than girls by now." He supposed not having a boyfriend had spared him the harassment until today.

"Oh yeah. Everyone pretty much figured out you were gay before you ever graduated high school. That's not my problem. I don't care if you're kissing a boy as long as you both keep hands above your belt buckles and your clothes on in public. What I mind is the boy you're kissing." Rob sighed and leaned against the truck beside Cameron. "I've known you your whole life. I drove your school bus when you were just a kid and I was in high school. Bolt, too. I liked him; he was a good kid. I thought the two of you were cute together. But he's not the same person he was then. He's trouble now. The sort of trouble you need to stay away from."

Okay, not the lecture Cameron expected. His rising anger slid away, replaced by weary, concerned acceptance. Friends

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continually warned him about Bolt. Nothing new or heart-shattering about Rob's comment. Exhaustion made Cameron's limbs heavy and turned the morning too sultry for easy breathing. "I don't believe people change at their core, Rob. And Bolt got a bad break as a kid." Cameron could see his lover through the window of The Shrimp Basket, dark hair gleaming where it caught slanting sunbeams. Time hadn't altered the other man's looks, but it wasn't that prettiness that attracted Cameron. He'd loved Bolt long before he realized his lover possessed an extraordinary beauty. Bay Mignon never quite got that either. They never saw beyond Bolt's face and his heritage. "Hell, he had several really bad breaks. Just being born with Truitt for a last name is a big inky black mark against you around here."

Rob nodded. "Though not without reason. I arrest his cousins on a regular basis." The sheriff sighed again, sympathy softening his round face. "Look, I know it was hard for him, what happened and all. And I always thought he took after Maybelle way more than Quillar, but blood will out. You know that as well as I do. Some of us hoped his mama's blood would end up being stronger. The Masons are good people. She just made a poor pick when it came to the man she wanted. I don't want to see you do the same."

Old fury rose up in Cameron. "Bolt's not a thing like Quillar!" Always, always, always it came down to who Bolt's parents were. Didn't anyone care about who the man actually turned out to be?

Cameron's eyes stung as he remembered the boy who

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could play nearly any musical instrument you put in his hands, who liked Mozart as much as Garth Brooks. His heart hurt for a child who reveled in the subtle grace of nature, saw a deer as more than a couple of meals for the family, and the river as more than a place to catch fish and race boats. He forced himself to take a long breath instead of a swing at Rob Coons.

God damn them all for boxing Bolt into a cubbyhole labeled "Truitt" and forcing him to live down to that name in the end! If Bolt couldn't get out from under the dealing, they could accept a fair share of the blame. Cameron set his jaw and glared accusation at the sheriff.

Rob's lips compressed. "I don't normally talk about cases and suspicions. But I have a real good idea Bolt's involved in something very dangerous. I couldn't sleep nights if I let you get involved in that." He held up a hand for silence before the hot words blocking Cameron's throat overflowed. "Look, I'm straight. But I've got eyes and I understand he has a bad-boy-with-a-heart-of-gold-desperado charm to go with his good looks. And you two were tight as kids. I'm not surprised you want him. But if you keep this up, you'll just end up somewhere you don't want to be. So stay away from him, Cameron. For your own good." The increased empathy on the sheriff's face altered the laugh lines around Coons's eyes. "You can't save him."

*The hell I can't.* Rebellion roiled hot and burning in Cameron's stomach as he watched the sheriff walk back to a tired-looking patrol car just as Bolt came out of the diner. Bolt's pale eyes followed the car down the street for several

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long seconds on his way to the truck. Cameron expected the anger or derision to continue, but Bolt just sighed. "He's right, you know. Whatever he said, it's most likely true and you really shouldn't be trying to hold on so tight right now. You could get hurt and I'd never forgive myself."

The fury blazed. That this town and all the towns and cities before had pushed Bolt to the point he believed himself as bad as they thought him turned Cameron's vision flaming orange around the edges. The rebellion in his gut boiled up. "He's not right. And whoever else said whatever you're thinking wasn't right either." He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Coons and all those wonderfully sympathetic bastards weren't going to take Bolt away from him. It had happened once; separating them, ripping away half Cameron's soul. He wouldn't live like that again.

"I won't stay away." Cameron glared, half furious with Bolt for giving in. "You have two and a half days. Then you're mine and I don't give a rat's ass what anyone thinks about it or how damned dangerous being with you might be."

God, Bolt looked good raking a slim-fingered hand through that curtain of hair. Confused but gloriously appealing. And he was Cameron's, even if the concept was more than Bolt could wrap his mind around just yet.

"Okay, look. The subtle approach ain't working, so I'm just going to lay it out. Yes, I asked for two and a half days. But, Cameron, it's going to take a hell of a lot longer than that if I have to be watching your ass as well." His eyes begged for understanding. "You do *not* want to be around the people I'm

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dealing with. And they sure as hell aren't going to want you poking around. What part of real, gun-toting, knife-wielding, kill-you-as-soon-as-look-at-you, actual danger am I not getting across?"

Cameron's teeth ground against each other, anger unabated, raging all the more that such people formed part of Bolt's life. "I get it. Alright! You have your damned time. But when it's done, you're out of this, if I have to take care of it myself. I will load your extremely sexy ass on the next plane to China if I have to. Guns and knives or not. You are going to be with me, damn it."

Bolt stared at Cameron for a long moment before setting his takeout box in the cab of the truck though the window and opening his arms. "God, you are something else. Come here and kiss me enough to get me through two and a half days. Then go home and work on your office complex before I get you fired."

Cameron marched straight into the embrace he wanted more than he could ever articulate and did his best to brand Bolt with his kiss all over again, not caring who saw.

He'd wait, but he'd make damn sure Bolt had plenty to think on and remember for the next sixty hours. He grabbed a double handful of that nearly perfect ass and squeezed. "You go on back to Copperhead Road or wherever you need to go and get this done. I want you in my bed."

Bolt's smile might just sustain Cameron that long as well. "No finer place to be."

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Cameron managed to find the least conspicuous booth in The Shrimp Basket and ordered supper. He had no wish to be around people. But after a day without Bolt, claustrophobia and sheer antsy-ness drove him out of the house. One more instance of nearly jumping out of his skin whenever a truck rattled by heading toward Copperhead Road and he'd be ready to call for the guys with the straightjackets. His normal solution for such feelings was a cold beer on the dock beside Copperhead Road, but his deal with Bolt made mooning around the landing a less-than-bright idea. So he opted to avoid incarceration in a mental hospital and his own cooking by heading into town.

Now if he could just stay out of sight and not have to deal with anyone, he might manage to eat something better for him than the bag of potato chips he'd had for lunch.

"Hey, Cameron." Cheery camaraderie rolled from David Schaeffer.

So much for the plan to have a peaceful supper alone. Just what Cameron didn't need, the local golden boy, acknowledged gay, and confirmed lunatic joining him. Then again, Schaeffer had the advantage of *not* growing up in Bay Mignon. As a result, the only way he knew Bolt was courtesy of everybody else, and the former detective-turned-innkeeper never struck Cameron as the type to judge on hearsay. Maybe the subject wouldn't come up.

"Heard you got chewed this morning. Evelyn clucked over it through the whole breakfast rush." David leaned against the

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edge of the booth instead of instantly seating himself, a trait Cameron found remarkably refreshing in a town full of busybodies. “Don’t see what the fuss is. The guests at the inn are generally gay and always in here. I can’t imagine none of them ever indulged in a kiss in her parking lot before.”

“Yeah, but they’re outsiders and so expected not to know how to behave.” *And they don’t go around kissing Bolt Truitt.* Cameron managed to pull up a smile. “She’s known me my whole life.” God, he was getting remarkably tired of that phrase and all the crap that went with it. “It’s more shocking when it comes from your own. Didn’t you ever run into that? I hear you’re from a small town, too.”

“Well, twenty years ago you just didn’t kiss another guy in public unless you wanted to risk losing all your teeth. Add the fact that bringing a boyfriend home would have sent my dad into cardiac arrest and my mom to her knees in permanent prayer, I kind of mitigated the shock factor.” David smiled and tipped his head back a little as if resting against someone else’s cheek. “That and I never really found anyone I wanted to bring home before now.”

Right. The famous boyfriend. The dead ghost-boyfriend. Cameron swallowed. Being pleasantly eccentric was a well-established Southern tradition, but the dead boyfriend thing was just creepy. “Right. Yeah, I can see how that could be.” Why did one of the few openly out people in Bay Mignon also have to be the town nutcase? Cameron managed not to shiver, though his gaze drifted to the side where he assumed David imagined his ghostly lover to be.

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“Actually, Evelyn’s little snit wasn’t totally about the PDA.” David’s smile faded a little and his attention refocused on Cameron. “She went on for quite awhile after Mr. Truitt left. Rather an earful.”

“I can imagine.” Cameron felt heat rising. He cursed in silence. “Don’t believe most of it.”

The tall, brown-haired man grinned, his face turning boyish and amazingly appealing. If Cameron wasn’t already so deeply in love he couldn’t think half the time, he might work up a crush. “It doesn’t matter what I believe.” The grin nearly split David’s face and sparkled in bright, sky-blue eyes. “I know you don’t believe my husband’s standing here with his arm around me. I can see it all over your face. But that’s okay. I can see him and feel his touch. Not that I care, but half the town thinks I’m a lunatic. Sort of like they think about you. ‘Stone-assed crazy for believing in someone like Bolt Truitt’ was the phrase someone used.” David held up a hand. “I’m not here to join them. Just want to pass something on for a...kindred soul. You may think the ghost is a figment of my imagination, but the murder and the fifty years of suspicion around him were real. Everyone here thought I took up a fool’s errand when I set out to clear his name. I got called a lot of things. It was all worth it. So if you really believe in your gut that your childhood friend is still there under all that outlaw vibe, if you think you can manage to work this out and be with him, then don’t you give up on him for anything.”

A broad hand descended on Cameron’s shoulder as he stared up, speechless. David’s grin turned soft. “See you



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around, Fontaine.” He moved off, starting a conversation with empty air, too soft for Cameron to understand.

Cameron could only watch the other man make his way across the diner. Crazy, sure—but a very long way from stupid. Tightness grew in Cameron’s throat, keeping pace with the sting in his eyes. Damn it! He tossed his napkin on the table and strode to the men’s room, hoping to make it before the liquid in his eyes overflowed. He headed straight for the stall farthest from the door and settled on the tank, feet on the seat. *Crap.*

He stared at the scarred powder-blue door, years of graffiti blurring as moisture drenched his cheeks. That one little bit of encouragement and he wanted to weep like a teenage girl. He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands. No one had ever said he should keep believing in Bolt before. It cut straight to his heart, sending the muscle jerking against his ribcage. Yes, damn it, he believed and he wanted the rest of the world to do the same. He wanted to walk past the courthouse square holding Bolt’s hand and kiss his lover in a parking lot without getting harassed by the sheriff for more than excessive public displays of affection. Bitter laughter soared for a moment. A guy who talked to people who weren’t really there was the only other soul on the planet who thought Bolt might be more than trash. Cameron let the tears come.

“So what sort of favor do you need from me, Rob?”

*Oh wonderful.* Cameron swiped at the tears streaming down his face. Bad enough to be the town’s most talked-about gay, he couldn’t add to it by letting anyone see him bawling

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over Bolt. It would be the subject of conversation in every filling station, diner, and Sunday school in the north end of the county before the week was out. It didn't matter that the voice belonged to the very understanding and supportive David Schaeffer. The innkeeper hadn't walked in alone.

"Well-trained law enforcement officers aren't exactly plentiful around here. I need your help. I'd like to deputize you for a raid." Rob Coons's tones were unmistakable.

"A raid? For what? Someone rustling catfish?" Cameron didn't have to see David's smile to know it glowed.

"Ha, ha. DEA has an operation going. They've uncovered a big-time drug smuggling operation. More common around here than you'd think. All these nice wide rivers and bayous leading into the bay and the Gulf. A big boat can get quite a few miles inland before they switch the dope over to smaller boats or automobiles. There's a shipment coming into Copperhead Road before dawn. Cocaine. The smugglers think it's an easy drop-off-and-switch out at Bolt Truitt's place. But DEA's going to be waiting for them. Local needs to be there, too. I could use another man, someone with a calm head on their shoulders if bullets start flying around." He chuckled after a moment. "I'll make sure you wear a vest. Just so Brian will stop freaking out."

*A raid... Bolt...* Cameron's world went a little dim around the edges and he spread his hand on the cold metal wall to keep his balance. That icy touch jolted some of the fuzziness from his mind and he managed to focus on the conversation outside his three-by-five world.

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“Sure. I’ve done drug raids before. Not a problem.” Schaeffer’s voice still glowed. “I’ve always enjoyed taking down dealers and smugglers. The harder the better.”

*God, no.* Not when they were so close to... Cameron tried to speak, to make them understand Bolt wasn’t like that, to tell them his lover was trying to get out of the business, but his throat closed tight and his limbs wouldn’t move.

“Great. Let’s head back to the office and get you a gun and a badge and do a little paperwork.” Coons sounded too happy for the situation, eager for the fight to come. The door squeaked as it opened then thumped closed.

Cameron’s mouth worked but nothing came out. Two days. Bolt only needed two more days. Nausea welled up, hot and bitter. Two days they didn’t have anymore.

Cameron stumbled from the stall and gripped the edge of the sink. DEA. Federal. They’d arrest Bolt and lock him away forever. All that beauty and potential for so much that was good and wonderful withered behind gray prison walls. Lost forever. His fingers tightened on the frigid white porcelain as he fought to stay upright. His lungs refused to draw in oxygen.

Bolt. He had to get to Bolt.

He made his way through the diner, dropping enough money at his booth to pay for the food he didn’t eat, and headed for the door. He drew in great gulps of the humid night air, heart pounding. He stumbled along the side of the diner, heading for his truck. His hands shook so badly once he got inside he had to sit for a while, letting his body calm so he could get the keys in the ignition. He rested his forehead on

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the steering wheel.

*Come on, Cameron, you've got to be able to get home at least. You're a wreck. Home, yeah. Home.* He'd figure out what to do from there. It took five long deep breaths before he could see clearly and make his fingers work enough to start the truck. He backed out of the parking lot. Home. He could think at home. He just had to get there in one piece or he wouldn't be able to do anything to help Bolt.

\* \* \*

Cameron left the truck parked in his driveway and opted for walking the half mile to Bolt's house through the thick stands of pine and live oak. A plan, nebulous and weak, formed as he drove home. He just had to handle this as quietly as possible. Bolt's place was obviously being watched. Slow, easy, and careful were the criteria for tonight. As such, he couldn't risk driving down to the old house. Who knew what sort of surveillance the DEA had set up along the road. He'd sneak down to Copperhead Road just like he had as a kid and warn Bolt. Surely his lover had some sort of plan in place in case the police found out about the dealing.

Pure paranoia dictated he head into the house, turn on the light in his office, and draw the shades before slipping out the back door. The short stretch of yard between house and forest seemed wider than it ever had. Even as a teen, worried about his dad catching him, he'd never had his heart pound so hard or his palms sweat so badly.

Even so, he made it past the azaleas lining the edge of the

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property and into the woods without black-jacketed agents dropping on him from nowhere.

Crickets sounded in the mix of palmetto, dogwood, and scrub oak under the tall pines. Honeysuckle and resin scented the night and the moon shone bright enough he didn't need a flashlight. One less thing to show his progress down the hillside to the flats of the river bottom. He moved along the path, careful not to break the cricket-laced silence.

He skirted the small spring his great-grandmother used for water, hoping its soft rill and flow would further cover any sounds he made.

*You're gonna get yourself arrested, John Cameron...* Lord, his mother's voice, that use of his given name that always meant she knew whatever it was he'd done. Just lovely his subconscious decided to haul it up now. *Don't lose the solid for the shadow, you know that. Make sure you know which Bolt is.*

*Solid, Mama. I know he is. He has to be.* Cameron couldn't let go. He hadn't when they were kids and he wouldn't now. Bolt's love was real and so was his lover's wish to be free of a life sure to end in tragedy.

A dense stand of wild azalea gave way as the land flattened, magnolia and live oak joining the longleaf pines. A glow other than the moon gave warning of mankind and Cameron felt able to breathe again. The stilts of the old house rose up, as straight as the cypress around them, lights from the windows spilling out into the night. Cameron heard the screen door bang, the sound no different than it had been fifteen years

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ago.

"I'm telling you, Clax, it's perfect." Cameron could plainly make out the trim form leaning on the porch rail, backlit by the lights from the house, cell phone pressed to his ear. Bolt. Cameron had made it here before the law did. Everything would be fine as soon as he got his lover safely away. Even turned away, face looking back at the house, the sight of Bolt eased the tight confinement strapping Cameron's chest.

Bolt's voice drifted out on the humid, river-scented breeze. "Even if they're watching the house, they ain't gonna think nothing of a pile of shrimp loaded in crates ready to deliver to businesses. It was just a good day fishing is all. They don't see the stash, they can't move. I didn't spend hours on the 'Net looking up police procedure for my health, you know. Just tell 'em to stick the base in the middle of each crate and fill in around them. We'll truck it all out of here and unload way out at this little place I know a couple miles upriver."

Cameron's feet stuck to the earth, keeping him upright as the Earth tilted on its axis. No. His lover wasn't saying this. They had plans. Bolt was leaving this all behind. *I'm hearing it wrong. That's all. He's not doing a deal. He's not.*

Bolt shifted the cell to his other ear and swept his long hair out of the way, beautiful profile revealed. "Yeah. Old cabin I used to take...friends up to for a little fun. It's completely surrounded by thick woods. Even a 'copter couldn't spot us."

*No.* That space was theirs! Not much more than a hunting blind but theirs. Not for drug deals. Cameron's mind blanked, words entering, bumping against each other, impossible for

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him to capture and make sense of.

“This deal’s going to be so smooth they’ll be thrilled to make it a regular run. We do this once a month or so and we’ll have more money than we could ever spend.” Bolt’s smile blossomed bright under the porch light. “We’ll be able to buy an island in the Caribbean and live like kings.”

Whatever Claxton Ferris said next prompted a hearty snort and a different sort of smile from Bolt. “Oh, don’t you worry about Cameron. I’ll keep him so happy he won’t even blink if I go off on my own once in awhile. It’ll give him a chance to actually get some work done.”

Cameron’s heart screamed, even though his voice couldn’t manage it. Mind finally connecting to his body, he spun, stumbling back into the woods, making it into the dense undergrowth before his legs collapsed, sending him crashing to the ground. He sat where he landed, his mind numb to anything but the pain of shattered dreams and splintered trust.

“He lied.” The words squeezed out on a whisper of air. “He lied to me.”

Never, not for the briefest heartbeat had he thought Bolt would deliberately lie. Not to him. To the law, to the town, to everyone else. Cameron had been stupid enough to believe he fell into a unique category. He feared circumstances would make it difficult for Bolt to break free, that pressure from the criminals he dealt with, the need to make his own way however he could, and the certainty life held nothing more would trap Bolt. But never had Cameron imagined his lover had no intention of walking away from the drug running. That

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Bolt wouldn't even try...

Betrayal lanced Cameron's chest, an agony so sharp he doubled over, forehead touching the leaf debris.

*"Yours. With all my heart."*

*"I want to wake up with you and fall asleep with you every day for the rest of my life. Let me get this all taken care of and I'll do just that."*

And Bolt would. While sneaking off now and again to traffic in hard drugs. All the right pretty words Cameron had longed for over the years, and all a lie.

What little he'd eaten surged up and splattered on the foliage-strewn ground. Dry heaves exhausted him long after his stomach emptied. His sinuses burned, but no more than his heart. The sour taste in his mouth couldn't compare to the sharp bitter tang in his soul. His eyes stung as he gasped for breath, hands clenched in the loam. Every illusion of a happy future, secure with the man he loved, lay vomited out on the pine needles and leaves. Tears dropped onto the detritus of his life, the foul scent of spoiled hope and ruined faith scorched his nostrils. He hung his head, unable to force activity from his drained limbs.

Cameron finally managed to move away from the mess and the smell, leaning his head on the cool trunk of an oak tree, gut muscles burning and mouth seared. He wiped his lips with the hem of his T-shirt and tried to find elusive normal breathing.

He let the old oak cradle him, great upthrust roots sheltering him from the world while agony blanked his mind



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and he gave over to it, sobs shaking him and tears flowing free.

Cameron didn't care how long he lay on the mat of leaves, the night's damp heat wrapping him in a humid blanket. The moon shifted, dappled light moving across the ground. Mosquitoes buzzed, wanting to get at him, but he didn't feel their bite. Only the pain burning him out from the inside registered. Dark fire swept through him, blackening the edges of every memory with suspicion and doubt. He no longer knew what could be truth or if it all were lies. The murky flames took everything, wiping bright colors away, leaving only soot and ashes. It burned away the hours of the night.

When nothing remained but a hollow shell, Cameron sat up.

The faintest change in the color of the sky hinted at coming dawn. Daylight that would bring the DEA raid and the end of Bolt's freedom. Maybe the end of his life if he was stupid or frightened enough to try to run or fight back. No more Bolt to worry about.

And all Cameron had to do was nothing. He could sit here, or walk back up to his house. He didn't have to do one damn thing at all. Bolt would get what he deserved.

Cameron squeezed his eyes tight against a vision of a casket. No. Bolt didn't deserve that. He was a stupid idiot and a liar, but he didn't deserve to die. And Cameron couldn't live through knowing Bolt moldered away in prison when Cameron could stop it. So maybe not completely empty of all feeling just yet.

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He pushed to his feet. He'd always looked out for Bolt and stood by him and he'd do so one last time. He knew he'd never be able to trust Bolt and build a life with him, but the love in Cameron's soul hadn't died. It just bled misery.

The screen of brush and vines protecting him from Copperhead Road parted, letting him through without hindrance. The house rose from the land on high stilts. A faint light still gleamed in the back room, Bolt's bedroom even when they were kids. Cameron still remembered slipping down here in the middle of the night to stare at that window and long for the courage to sneak in and love Bolt the way they wanted to. He could see the window latch remained broken after all these years. A tiny pebble flicked from his fingertips would let Bolt know someone was nearby.

*Take my warning and just go, love. Please. Just leave and let me mourn in peace.* Cameron ran his fingers over the ground and found a small stone. He braced himself against the wide knee of a cypress tree and set his aim.

The cold pressure of steel against the back of his neck froze more than his skin and a quiet voice rasped over his ears. "That's far enough, Romeo. Get your ass in that back door before I slit your throat and leave you under the house for the flies and the crows."

Cameron let the bit of gravel fall. The back door would work. He wanted to see Bolt anyway.

## CHAPTER 5

“Cameron? What the hell...” Bolt’s eyes went wide, his face paling. If Cameron was capable of feeling anything, sorrow for his ex-lover’s distress might surface. As it was, just seeing Bolt deepened the emptiness inside him. Everything he thought he wanted all bound up in that pretty face and body, now lost and gone forever. “What are you doing here?” A quick glance raked the group of individuals in the room. “I told you I had plans tonight.”

“I know.” Even Cameron’s voice sounded empty. He tried to ignore the others, not see them. They represented everything he didn’t want to know about, the reason the whole world felt transparent. Funny thought, that. If he reached out

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would his hand go through them? Of course not. They were the reality and everything he'd believed was the illusion. He tried to focus only on Bolt. "I need to talk to you."

Claxton snorted, ugly derision in the sound. It washed over Cameron's shoulder, trying to stain him with its mockery. "I'll bet. We ain't exactly got time for you to catch a piece of ass right now, Bolt. And you said Pretty Boy here wouldn't get in the way. Looks to me like he's smack in the middle of the road." A rather large, menacing pistol rose up into Cameron's face as Claxton shifted. "You got one shot at telling me why I don't waste him right here."

Bolt stepped between Claxton's gun and Cameron. "How about you so much as ruffle his hair and you'll be the one swallowing that pistol? I told you Cameron's off-limits. I meant that."

Clax shifted a bit so the gun covered Cameron again. If Cameron's gut wasn't already numb he might feel a little fear. Quite frankly, at this point he didn't much care if Claxton killed him. *Just wait until I can warn Bolt about the raid. Then I really don't give a shit.*

Bolt snarled. "I swear I'll feed that .45 to you, Clax."

"Enough. Settle this! We have business and no time for"—a dark-haired, brown-skinned man with an accent wrinkled his nose in distaste—"your friend's drama. Put him somewhere and let us complete our transaction."

"I intend to do just that." Bolt grasped Cameron's upper arm and pulled him into a bedroom. Bolt's old room. Cameron stared at the window, the one he had started to lob a rock at

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before Claxton appeared.

Bolt's fingers bit into his arm so hard Cameron almost felt it. Maybe it would leave bruises and he'd have a physical reminder of Bolt for a few days.

"Give me a good reason not to strap your ass to that bedframe and blister you scarlet for barging in here. I asked you for two more freaking days."

"You don't have two days." How could Bolt still be so beautiful and so perfect when Cameron knew something was missing inside him? "You don't even have two hours. You have to run. Now." He drew in a long breath even though the act hurt his chest. Maybe he'd give up breathing after Bolt left. It just hurt too damned much. "The DEA knows about this...sale. They're gonna raid this place any second." He let the remainder of the breath flow away. Message delivered. Done. Over. Now he just needed to curl up somewhere and wish he could die for a while.

Bolt's face went utterly still. "You...you came down here to warn me about a raid?"

Cameron's teeth locked, jaw so tight he could feel it all the way back of his ears. Well, that was something at least. A different sort of discomfort. Maybe he wasn't completely dead to everything but pain after all. "Yeah. I did." And heard the world end doing it. Every word roiled through his mind in a continual loop. "So now you take your drug money and go find that damned island you want." Rage boiled over. *Liar!* Just like everybody else said after all. "Use that blood money to buy it! And, by God, I hope..." *You're as miserable as I*

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*am?* “I hope you’ll be all right.” One last thing. He had to say it. For his own sanity. “Goodbye, Bolt.” Over. Finished. The numbness seared through him again, wiping out every other sensation.

Those silvery eyes closed tight, a very real flinch shaking Bolt’s lean form. If Cameron didn’t know better he’d swear his lover actually hurt over his words. “Do me one last favor, okay? Just one. It’s not for me, it’s to get you out of here alive.”

Cameron couldn’t really work up a whole lot of concern over that but he nodded, focusing on the pearlsnaps of Bolt’s western shirt. Looking into those beautiful, lying eyes only made Cameron feel further divorced from the world. “What is it?”

Bolt pulled a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket, shrugging at the look Cameron gave him. “They’ve come in handy now and again. Just sit tight until we leave.” Long slender fingers indicated the headboard. “They’ll check on you but I swear I won’t let anyone hurt you. I’m going to leave the key in the pocket of your T-shirt. Don’t screw with it until you’re absolutely sure we’re gone.”

Cameron looked from the cuffs to Bolt. “You lied to me. I never once thought that was possible. I can’t believe you about the drugs anymore.” The pain overcame the numbness for a second and he nearly doubled over again, empty bile rising up. One look in those concerned eyes though and he faded back to the relief of feeling nothing. “But I know you still love me.” The one thing that wasn’t a lie. He held out his wrists. “Do it.”

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He watched a muscle in Bolt's jaw twitch as the cold cuff closed over Cameron's wrist, then clanked against the metal rail of the headboard. Bolt seemed to be fighting tears and Cameron couldn't imagine why. Then those elegant fingers threaded into his hair and Bolt pressed a hard, almost feverish kiss to Cameron's lips, plundering with his tongue. Giving all he could never promise. Cameron moaned in spite of himself, his heart crying out in need for just this. He let Bolt take. One last time.

The pain surged up, eviscerating Cameron all over again. "Go. Get out of here before you get arrested and this was all for nothing."

Bolt nodded against his lips. "I really hope someday you can forgive me for all this." And he walked out the door.

Cameron leaned his head on the cool steel and let tears wash his soul blessedly numb once more.

\* \* \*

The voices barely penetrated the agony wrapping Cameron. He didn't even try to listen. Spanish wasn't his forte anyway and it hurt to hear Bolt's liquid tones. Only when their tenor became belligerent and harsh did he turn part of his mind to them.

"I'm telling you, your boyfriend could have brought anything down on us. I don't like him just walking up on us. Who knows who followed him." Claxton's whine set Cameron's teeth on edge. It occurred to him he'd never cared for the other man, even when they were kids.

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"I'm not saying it again, Clax. You leave Cameron out of this." Bolt's tone turned softer and a chuckle escaped. "Besides, he's been sneaking down that hill for twenty years now. He knows how to not get caught. And even if he did manage to alert the sheriff or anybody else, these woods are full of birds and critters. You know that. The DEA couldn't keep this quiet for more than ten minutes. They'd have spooked a covey of quail by now." The faintest crackle of plastic, then a pause. "Oh, this is great stuff. We'll make a king's ransom on this."

That cut deep, or would have if Cameron had anything left to cut out and toss away. Maybe it would distract Claxton. *I hope the money ends up being worth it, Bolt. I can't give you an island, but you could have had an easy life with me.*

"Oh yeah. We're all gonna come out good with this. *Señor*, I told you this was the best setup ever." Why couldn't Bolt have been that assured and confident about something that didn't destroy lives?

"It is. We will have a most lucrative arrangement. The cocaine we bring in will make us all very wealthy." The Mexican accent made the horror exotic.

"Well then, let's get it on the truck and get our asses out of here." Claxton grunted, apparently from the bulk of a crate. "I got a weird feeling about this place and your piece of ass-candy back there. I just don't like it."

Bright white light lanced through the uncurtained window, stabbing into Cameron's eyes. "Everyone freeze, Drug Enforcement officers! Do not move. We will shoot! On the



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boat! Don't move."

*No! Not so soon!* Bolt still lingered in the other room.

A harsh curse broke through the pandemonium of cries and movement outside. "I knew it! Damn it, Truitt, this is all your boyfriend's doing!" Heavy boot-steps moved closer.

"Stop where you are!" A shot rang out, a precursor to hell rising up and breaking loose around the old house. Shouting and gunfire assaulted Cameron's ears, men's screams unnaturally high in the blinding white light.

"You! This is your fault!" Claxton's shout rang louder than the rest. "You and that faggot boyfriend of yours!" Something metal banged against something else. "There's cops all over out there. Damn you!" A new shot sounded and Cameron's heart skipped. *Bolt!*

The bedroom door slammed opened and Claxton's enraged gaze fixed on Cameron. "I'm gonna kill you. Sweetest deal of my life and you fucked it up."

*Where's Bolt? Where?* Something as useless and ugly as Claxton Ferris couldn't end a precious jewel like Bolt. God couldn't be that cruel.

Claxton's wild eyes swept over Cameron's manacled wrists. "Yeah. Just the way I like it. I'll kill you but good." He raised the gun. Cameron felt his lips curve, welcoming the shot. His would-be assassin's eyes widened.

A dark blur shot from the door and Claxton went down hard, breath *humphing* from him, the gun spinning under the bed at Cameron's feet. Bolt flipped the other man over, straddling him, and delivered a hard blow to Claxton's jaw.

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The drug dealer went limp, sprawling on the worn gray cypress floor.

“Get out of those damn cuffs now!” Bolt aimed his gun back into the hallway just as a bright golden glow lit up the dimmed room. A *whoosh* preceding a brighter glow stirred strands of ebony hair, setting it dancing about Bolt’s face. “Shit! Those idiots!” His eyes blazed at Cameron over a tightly hunched shoulder. “Get out of those cuffs and get Clax’s gun. We’re getting out of here before they blow the whole place up. I’d help you but I’ve got to cover the doorway so we don’t both get our asses shot.”

Cameron twisted so he could stick his hand in the pocket of his T-shirt and reach the key. “They set the house on fire? To get rid of the evidence?” He managed to pull it out and fit it in the slot, twisting it until one cuff popped open. “I’m loose.” He pushed to his feet. “How’re we getting out?”

“Get down, will you? God, love...” Bolt blew out his breath, the corner of his mouth quirking in spite of the situation. “Don’t they teach college boys a little common sense? We’re going out my old escape hatch.”

“Right.” Youthful memory surfaced and Cameron pushed a ragged trunk to one side. A hole gaped in the floor, the edges worn smooth from a childhood’s worth of nocturnal use. He stuck his head down for a quick check. “No one’s under the house.”

“Smart boy.” Bolt grinned at Cameron as Claxton groaned and clutched his jaw. Bolt grabbed a handful of the other man’s shirt, pulling him half up. “They set the house on fire.

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We got to get out. Come on. Let's go." Bolt belly-crawled across the floor, ducking his head as a wall of flame ripped in through the doorway. "Shit. Somebody's gonna pay for this. Mama's house..." Regret and shocked loss crumpled Bolt's face.

"You should have thought of that before you used it to run drugs." Cameron couldn't work up sympathy for the other man right now. Maybe not ever again. His own hurt ran too deep. He slid down through the hole, letting the cool soft riverbank soil cushion his fall. He rolled to one side and onto his feet.

"Cameron... Never mind. It'll have to wait." Bolt dropped beside him as soon as Cameron shifted to the side. "Get up the hill and lock yourself in your house. I'll come for you as soon as I can."

Coveys of black-clad figures with huge weapons rushed from the woods toward house and river while others moved past, fanning out into the swamp beyond the shack. Other men, mostly in jeans and T-shirts, ran or cowered on the ground, hands over their heads. Screams, curses, and pleas in Spanish or English split the air, individual shots and the staccato hum of automatic rifles sent ice through Cameron.

Bolt scanned the chaos of men moving about in the floodlamps and gray dawn light. "If you run into any sort of lawman, do exactly what he tells you. Exactly. Don't question him, just do it." He glanced up. "Claxton! Get down here. Moron. Hell. Well, he's awake enough to get down here on his own." Embers danced on the morning breeze as Bolt pushed

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his hair out of his face. “Go. Don’t wait on anything, love. Just get to safety.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” Cameron crawled up through the old hollow they’d dug out under the chicken wire and shimmied his hips to get free. *This was a hell of a lot easier at sixteen.* A quick glance to make sure no one had him in a gun-sight and Cameron lunged up the hill, heading for a large oak trunk to duck behind long enough to get a lungful of oxygen.

The pandemonium surrounding the flaming house set a new rush of adrenaline through him. The noise of the fire and the throbbing beat of helicopter blades battered him.

“Cameron!” He spun at Bolt’s shout. The seconds slowed to crawling minutes. Cameron watched in horror as a flame burst from the muzzle of Claxton’s gun and Bolt stepped straight into the path of the bullet, an arm thrust out to push Cameron away.

The force of the bullet slammed Bolt backward into the trunk of a pine tree. He tumbled forward, black hair fanning out around him, head just missing a buried stump poking out of the ground. His body bounced on the thick carpet of russet pine needles, sliding a bit down the hill between them. His hair floated down, settling across his shoulders and the pine needles.

Claxton leveled the pistol again. A steel-rimmed black hole tunneled in Cameron’s vision and the roar of a gunshot stole his hearing. Funny...no muzzle flash this time...

Claxton’s face blanked as a red flower blossomed on his

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chest. Dark eyes fixed on Cameron, and the gun slipped from the drug dealer's fingers, falling to the woodland mat seconds before he joined it.

David Schaeffer stood at Cameron's side, assault weapon in hand, his black T-shirt emblazoned with the letters PD. "Fontaine! Jesus Christ! Get down. Now! You're going to end up shot."

Shot... *Bolt!* Cameron found his voice, a cry for his fallen lover. It took far too long for his body to move, to go to Bolt.

A hard arm caught him about the middle. "Dammit! I said get down." Schaeffer's weight bore him down to the springy mat of needles and leaves.

Cameron fought to free himself, to reach Bolt. He'd compromised his morals, slipped through the woods like a criminal, borne the pain of seeing his lover when trust no long existed, all to keep this very horror from happening. He dug his hands into the slippery pine needles, trying to pull his body from Schaeffer.

"Brian! Help me." New hands joined, gripping his shoulders as he tried to scramble and reach his love. "Stay down. DEA can't tell you're not a smuggler."

More words flowed, but it didn't matter. Cameron could hear nothing but the race of his heart and the echo of the shot that hit Bolt.

"Bolt." Not a scream now, barely a whisper. Still his lover lay unmoving, glorious hair draped across his shoulders and back, flowing down onto the pine needles. Cameron struggled, arms outstretched now, desperate to reach Bolt. *Dear God,*

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*please.* He'd do anything, give anything for Bolt to move.  
*Please!*

"Trust them." Two small words over Cameron's ear that couldn't possibly have come from David, since the former detective had scrambled down the hill toward Bolt. A considerable weight stayed on Cameron, keeping him from following. But he saw no shadow, no dark slash of clothing in his peripheral vision. Just dawn-lit foliage in the now silent woods.

*Huh? Guess Schaeffer wasn't off his rocker after all.* If Cameron weren't scared out of his wits for his lover he might be surprised. Or slightly freaked. Maybe he would be later, if Bolt would just move so there could be a later. If he didn't... Cameron's mind blanked. Nothing would exist if Bolt didn't move.

"Agent Truitt, you okay?" David poked at the too-still form with a gentle touch.

*Agent?*

"Ow." Bolt stirred at last, a slow tightening of his muscles, fingers curling into the loam. "Cam..."

*God, yes! Thank you! Not dead. Alive!* And enough so to speak Cameron's name. The world began to move again, the slow rotation bringing the return of sound and scent and sensation. Distant calls replaced the earlier shouts. No drum roll of gunfire shattered the air. Pine and earth filled Cameron's nostrils. The pop and crackle of the fire and the slush of the river reached his ears. A weight—warm, heavy, and man shaped—rested on the small of his back, a broad

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hand pressed between his shoulder blades.

"Please, let me go to him. Please." Cameron never begged, but he would for this, voicing his plea to whoever held him down.

David listened to his radio for a moment before he waved a hand. "It's okay, Brian. We're clear. Coons and the Feds have everyone else down at the dock."

The pressure on his back eased and Cameron glanced back. Nothing separated him from the edges of the forest. No black-garbed man, no soft-voiced stranger. He swallowed and breathed a faint "thank you" to the nothingness before he spun back, scrambling through the pine needles, skidding to his knees at his lover's side. "Bolt." His hands fluttered over the crisp blue of Bolt's shirt, needing to touch but afraid to do so and maybe cause more injury.

"God, I hate these things. Feel like I'm in a cast-iron straight-jacket." Bolt groaned and pushed up a bit, long hair obscuring his face. "Cam, you okay?"

"Me?" Cameron's arm went about Bolt, supporting him, cradling him close. "I'm fine. Thanks to Mr. Schaeffer." He swept the clinging jet tendrils from Bolt's face, marveling anew at its beauty. The terror of just how close he'd come to losing Bolt clawed at his insides. "You were shot!" His fingers found the dry hole in Bolt's shirt, directly over his lover's heart. No wet scarlet flower as there'd been on Claxton's chest.

"And far from the first time. Can't I send you on an operation and have you manage to dodge the bullets, Agent

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Truitt? Or do you own stock in Kevlar now?" A new voice, all husky silk, washed over them. Cameron looked up into a grinning craggy face. The smile sat well in place on an imposing figure dressed in black with a DEA cap on his head. "Never had an agent who goes through vests like you do. Nice work anyway."

"Thanks, Frank. I love Kevlar. Even if I feel like I've been run over by a semi." Bolt's accent...lightened. The soft, slurred drawl still existed but a new brightness, a crispness tempered it. "Can you hold whatever you're needing to say for about two minutes?" His hand closed over Cameron's without waiting for the answer. Slim fingers squeezed tight. "I'm all right. I'm wearing a bulletproof vest. I'll have a bruise the size of Texas and maybe a cracked rib, but I'm okay. Really okay. Nothing more for you to worry about." His eyes carried a soft glow. "You see, I'm not dealing drugs, baby. Well, not without government sanction. That's what I called to tell you about ten years ago. I finally found my path. Thanks to Frank."

A smile, bright as the sun just cresting the trees, appeared. "It's a long story and I'll tell you every bit of it, but right now I want you to know I'm so sorry for everything that's happened. But I couldn't tell you the truth because I was working deep under cover. I'm DEA."

"You're a DEA agent?" Cameron's brain wouldn't unknot his stomach just yet. His body shook, terror not yet ready to let go. The tremors made it hard to think, but he forced his exhausted, overloaded brain to try. "You mean...everything I



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heard you telling Claxton...a lie to him? Not to me? You haven't been lying to me about wanting to come..." He couldn't say it, not with so many other people around, but "home" almost slipped out. "Back?" The shaking threatened to take over, his breath shivering in and out.

Bolt's brows gathered in a frown for a long moment. Then a grin spread those full lips, managing to outshine the floodlamps and the rising sun combined. "So that's what had you so pissed off. You heard something you weren't supposed to. Lord, you had me scared! I didn't know what I'd done to set you off." He relaxed in Cameron's hold. "Glad that's settled. Means I can do this right. God, I've fantasized about doing this forever." The grin softened. He looked from Cameron to the tall lean man gazing down at them with so quizzical an expression. "Frank? I'd like you to meet Cameron Fontaine, my fiancé. Cameron, this is Frank White, the one other person on this planet who's always believed in me and the closest thing I have to a real father."

"Well, now I see why he always rattled off 'John Cameron Fontaine the Fifth' without so much as a touch of a sneer. You actually live up to a name that long and imposing." Frank held out a powerful, sinewy hand. "Good to meet you, son. I can't say as it's ideal surroundings, but you just got a whole face full of what your fiancé's made of himself over the last decade. He's one of my best, even if he tends to get himself beat up in the process."

Bolt winced as he shifted in Cameron's hold. "Yeah. And I'm starting to think I'm too old to get this beat up this often.

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Help me up.”

Cameron still couldn't quite make it all click. Just too much in too short a time. “You're a DEA agent?”

David Schaeffer snorted and grinned. “Oh yeah. Any other law enforcement agency would make him cut that hair and lose the diamonds.” He settled beside Bolt, muscular arm about the other man's waist. “Go easy.”

Bolt nodded and held his hand out to Cameron. “Come on, love. We'll both get a stiff drink while they clean up the mess. Which reminds me...” A dark brow raised at Frank. “Did you have to burn down my mama's house while you were at it?”

“That wasn't me. It started from the inside. I'm betting the smugglers were trying to destroy the evidence.” Frank scanned Bolt. “After that drink I want you to see a doctor and make sure you didn't break anything.” Genuine worry sat on the craggy, imposing face. “Could you try to ease up with the bullets? Those vests don't stop everything and they don't cover that much of your body.”

“Better me than Cameron. And it's a good thing I kept the insurance up on this place.” Bolt's grin flashed again. “Though I may not need it now, eh, love?”

Cameron managed to get to his feet, but kept his gaze on Bolt. His brain still struggled through several feet of river mud to get from what he'd thought to what really was. “You're a DEA agent.”

Bolt's grin grew as his fingers squeezed Cameron's tight. “You need that drink more than I do. Come on, babe.”

## EPILOGUE

Cameron sat on his couch and sipped his whiskey, uncaring the clock on his mantel read eleven in the morning. Whoever said drinking before noon wasn't allowed had never had the sort of night and morning he'd had. At this point, he didn't give a shit about manners, customs, or political correctness. He really only cared that Bolt lay stretched out with his head in Cameron's lap, proclaimed fit by a waiting EMT and Doc Ouellette. No lasting damage, nothing worse than a vividly bruised ribcage. Doc had never voiced more beautiful words. The hug Cameron gave her left her wide-eyed and shocked. He didn't care about that either.

Like Bolt, Cameron would take no lasting damage from

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the night. His lover had proved not only trustworthy but far more than Cameron had ever dreamed. A DEA agent. Cameron grinned at his glass. The ultimate act of rebellion against Quillar. Bolt had lived up to all those oaths made to become the exact opposite of his notorious father.

The fire trucks rushing down Copperhead Road to extinguish the flaming house, and the ambulances waiting outside his own front gate to tend anyone injured in the raid, brought home the reality of Bolt's accomplishments finally. Cameron's fingers smoothed the silken jet at Bolt's temples as his love held a cell phone to one ear, adding no more than the occasional wordless affirmation to the conversation, spending the time in between kissing Cameron's fingers.

Bolt finally signed off and closed the phone, the faintest curve at the corners of his mouth. The satisfaction the almost-there smile didn't convey shone from the light in his eyes. "It looks good down there. We got all the drugs, all the individuals involved, no agents or LE down, and looks like our friend Schaeffer won't even have to worry about a shooting investigation much. Claxton's going to make it."

"You going to arrest me if I say 'damn shame' and mean it?" Cameron took another sip. The liquor burned the back of his throat and added to the pleasant, warm, lethargy conquering his limbs. "He tried to kill me twice and would have killed you except for that vest. I'm not really hauling up a whole lot of charity at the moment." Still, Schaeffer didn't deserve any grief for saving a life. Especially since that life belonged to Cameron.

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"I'm with you, but I think killing's too good for him, you see. Dead men get off easy." Bolt's smile had a twist, the remnant of a bitterness that Quillar's suicide prevented any chance for closure or questions. They'd spoken often of how cowardly an act it had been. Bolt chuckled. "Claxton'll hate prison."

"True." That triggered a question. "So, did you ever go to prison for real, or was it all part of the fake background for this undercover thing?"

"Oh, I was in juvenile prison for real. You knew that, though. God, I hated sending you letters with that return address, knowing they were read before they were mailed and yours were read before I got them. Made me sick to my stomach. I guess that's why I wrote less and less."

A sigh moved that impressively sculpted chest. "But I have to bless that place. It's where I met Frank." The bitterness eased away from his eyes. "They had a program to match up kids like me with law enforcement officers in a sort of big brother thing. Frank...cared. When I got out and things got bad and I saw I was heading down a road I didn't want to be on, I called him." The light in Bolt's pale eyes calmed Cameron far more than the liquor. "He took me into his own house, Cameron. Treated me like I might be worth something. He made me believe I could actually be all those things you thought I could."

"Sounds like a man I'd care to take to dinner before he heads back to wherever. I owe him a lot." The final knots cinching Cameron's insides started to loosen and he could

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draw a full breath again. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Bolt's lips. Satin soft and cinnamon spicy. The terror that he'd never taste them again made it all the sweeter and more precious. "I'm glad you found him. So what now? You're still assigned to a unit, right? How can you tell me you'll be in my bed every night if you're still in L.A.? Or was that part of the cover?"

Long fingers threaded through Cameron's hair, holding him for another kiss before Bolt let him straighten. "That was no lie, babe. Nothing I said in here was a lie. I just left out big parts of what was going on down at Copperhead Road. I had to. It's part of being an agent. There will always be things I can't tell, but I'll do my damndest never to lie to you. But I wasn't joking when I said I'm getting too old to get beat up as much as I do." He rubbed his chest and winced. "And I'm pushing the Kevlar lottery. Hard. The next bullet will likely be Teflon or hit me in a place the Kevlar doesn't cover."

Another sigh stirred that beautiful, bruised chest. "This sting was pretty high profile. It'll be hard for me to go under again. Too many people saw me and will have questions if I'm walking around free. I knew this was pretty much my last big undercover when I accepted it. So no regrets there. Or at least no big ones." Bolt smiled up at the ceiling. "I called Frank after I found out you still wanted me and told him to find me a way to transfer to Mobile or Pensacola. To do whatever it took and call in every favor I'm owed. It shouldn't be an issue. After a bust this good, I have a little bit of clout. I might as well use it to get a posting here."

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“God, tell me it’s a job behind the lines. I don’t think I could handle you in a firefight or whatever you call it again.” Cameron twined his fingers with Bolt’s, staring at them for sweet moments. It just looked so right. He grinned and shifted a little. “Let me up for a minute? I have something I’ve been saving for you.”

Bolt sat up more than a bit gingerly, accepting help without protest. He hadn’t lied about the bruise the size of Texas, but he’d forgotten to mention the violent purples, blues, and magenta it came in. It scared Cameron all over again whenever he saw it. Cameron helped ease Bolt into a comfortable position, pillow in place at the small of his lover’s back before going to the huge old desk in the corner and unlocking the broad safe on one side. Cameron dug behind his insurance papers, his grandfather’s purple heart, the deed to the house, and his mama’s good jewelry to find what he wanted. He pulled out the little pine box and turned to show it to Bolt.

“Good Lord, is that what I think it is?” Bolt started to get up, but groaned and sank back onto the sofa. “Maybe you better come back over here, babe. I ain’t gonna be chasing you ’round the bed tonight.”

“No, tonight you get cuddled and pampered. No chasing.” Cameron sat back down beside his love. “You made this for me the Christmas before you left for California.” The little box had been the best Bolt could do, Quillar not being big on giving his son money the addict would rather spend on dope. Still it meant something to Cameron. Especially the heart

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carved inside the lid, holding the initials BT and JCF. Pure teenage mush, but he'd nearly cried when he first saw it. Hell of a declaration at sixteen. But then being in love never seemed to frighten Bolt. If anything, he drew strength from it and fed that resolve back to Cameron, so sure they could face whatever came as long as they were together.

Bolt took the wooden box and held it with careful hands, running his fingers over the lid. "I felt like such a jerk, giving you something this crudely made and wrapped up in the Sunday comics I got from your mama. Until you opened it. You nearly suffocated me with kisses. I didn't even feel the cold up at the camp that day." Memory gentled his eyes.

"I love it. Did then and still do now." Cameron reached across to open it and pull out a tiny velvet-covered box. "I put this in here just before I turned eighteen. Saved up every dime of allowance, odd job, and present money I could." He put the deep blue case in Bolt's palm. "I meant to give it to you when you came home. But you just took your own sweet time getting back here."

Silvery gray eyes stared up at him, full lips trembling a bit. "Cameron...I said yes way back when. You still asking the question?"

"Just wanted you to know it's waiting for you, if you're still saying yes. I can have us tickets for a vacation in Massachusetts or Connecticut whenever you say." Cameron pulled the plain gold band from its cushion. "Alabama law may not recognize it, but I want to stand in front of God and a preacher and say my vows to you."



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"I never go back on a promise." Bolt's smile lit the room and all the little dark places in Cameron's heart. "You let me heal up so I can enjoy the honeymoon, too, and we're there." He held up his right hand. "Can I wear it until then? I'll get you one just as soon as I can walk without screaming. God, bed sounds good about now. I was up all night."

"So was I." Cameron slipped the ring on Bolt's finger. "Keep it here until I find that preacher." He leaned into kiss his lover. "Come on. Let me help you to bed." He pulled Bolt to his feet and helped him up the stairs.

The bruise chilled him anew as he helped Bolt into a pair of cotton sleep pants. But it warmed him, too. That miles-deep love, enough to make Bolt step in front of a bullet to save Cameron, not even sure the vest would stop it. He kissed the violently colored mark with gentle care as he eased Bolt back on the pillows. He donned another set of the sleep pants and settled beside Bolt.

The hum of the ceiling fan matched the hum of contentment deep inside. He kissed the dragon climbing Bolt's arm. "Maybe you don't need to wait to completely heal up for a little taste of that honeymoon." Cameron's hands drifted over that precious wound. "I can show you how good a husband I can be."

A languid smile appeared, lazy interest in eyes soft as warm, faded denim. "Yeah? I'm afraid you'll be doing most of the work, babe."

"That's the plan." Cameron's kisses wandered the length of the dragon and back up to the rose. "I'm not normally into

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tats, but God! This one makes me love every drop of ink ever made. It had to hurt.” He traced the letters of his name, permanent on his lover's skin.

“Not as bad as a bullet hitting you square in the vest, but it went on a whole lot longer.” Bolt smiled up at the ceiling. “It was worth it. I wanted something that said I loved you and that no one could take away. Frank wanted me to get it lasered off, since agents try to steer away from easily identifiable markings. I wouldn’t. Graduating top of my class at college and later acing all the DEA entrance exams helped. If you’re really good at what you do, sometimes they cut you a little slack.”

“College?” Cameron’s lifted his head to stare. “You have a degree?”

Laughter flowed from his lover. “Ow! Don’t make me do that. I have Masters in Criminal Justice. I’m thinking about my doctorate, since I won’t be undercover.”

Cameron took up the abandoned laughter. “Oh, that’s great. I can’t wait to see a few of the faces around town.” He leaned to kiss smiling lips. “I always knew you could be anything you wanted.”

Lean fingers threaded through his hair. “Yeah, you always did.” A slow, open-mouthed kiss filled Cameron's senses with cinnamon and security. A gently exploring tongue set an ember glowing deep inside him. “You never gave up on me.”

“Never.” Cameron’s tongue waltzed with Bolt’s, bodies pressing close. “Not until I had what I thought was proof out of your own mouth.”

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“Oh, babe. I’m so sorry you heard that. I didn’t want you hurt by any of this.” Bolt’s hands skimmed Cameron’s shoulders, down his arms. “God, you’re beautiful. I dreamed of you all the time.” A smile gleamed against golden copper skin. “You’re better than my imagination.” Another kiss sent gentle heat through Cameron, every vein and artery pulsing with Bolt’s love.

Words faded away, no longer needed. Not when they could touch and kiss, caress with hands and mouths. Clothing eased away, nudity no longer a rushed and forbidden thing. Cameron finally had the time to explore all of this man he adored. He feathered the gentlest of kisses over bruised ribs, firmer ones over hard abdominals. He pressed his lips tight to the ultra delicate skin beside silky-coarse hair, glorying in the breathy “oh” that eased, river-current slow, from Bolt’s lips. Desire stirred and made itself known beside Cameron’s cheek.

He chuckled and took the hardening length of his lover into his mouth, drawing on it. Smoothest, softest silk over steel. He pulled away enough to kiss the tip. “Love you. Always have. Always will.”

Bolt gave a soft cry, hips lifting for Cameron’s touch, begging for his kiss. Slender fingers brushed through his hair. “God, I love you, too. Forever.” Loving fingertips stroked Cameron’s cheek.

Deep warmth, the sort that could never be taken from him, cradled Cameron’s heart. He drew on Bolt again, expressing all the feelings he had for his lover with each caress of his tongue, with each kiss, with tender touches. He poured slow,

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mellow love onto Bolt, their hands locked, fingers twined. Every quiet gasp, each smooth undulation of Bolt's hips evoked greater peace in Cameron's soul.

"Cam!" A dulcet sob slipped from Bolt as the salt-sea taste of yearning fulfilled flooded over Cameron's tongue. He took it all in, swallowing the essence of his lover as he soothed with lips and fingertips. Sweet completion drifted into sweeter afterglow.

He stretched out beside Bolt, indulging in a lingering honeyed kiss until his lover's breathing slowed.

Bolt folded his arms about Cameron. "What about you, babe?"

Cameron nuzzled against the soft ebony hair tousled over his lover's shoulders, teasing his own skin with feathery tendrils. "I have what I want. When you've slept, you can decide if you feel up to more than that. Right now I just want to lie here in your arms and sleep for about a week."

Bolt's eyes drifted closed, sooty lashes sweeping down over those silvery eyes. "Damn. How can just lying here holding you feel so good?"

Cameron's fingers traced the line of Bolt's finely chiseled jaw. "Because we've waited over fifteen years for this. Hell, longer. I've wanted this since we were fifteen."

"A home of our own, going to sleep and waking up together." The drowsy tone in Bolt's voice added new comfort. Cameron'd dreamed of watching his love drift off like this, gentle and soft as they lay together.

"Sleep, love." Cameron laid his head on the pillow with

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Bolt. "We'll just hold on to each other while we dream."

"Sounds perfect." Bolt's voice eased away, sleep already overtaking him. "I can dream of you."

"Same here." For the first time, Cameron wouldn't mind waking up. Not when the reality might just be better than the dream.

## **T. D. McKINNEY & TERRY WYLIS**

Growing up on the American Gulf Coast, T. D. McKinney gained a great appreciation for all things Southern and a fascination with what the community around her. There is very little she doesn't find interesting whether it's art, music, history, vampires, web design, or forensic science. Everything is there to be explored, investigated, and attempted at least once. This trait often carries over into her writing. She loves exploring characters that are not afraid to take a risk or step outside the constraints of society or family. And if the character doesn't want to take that chance, she likes creating situations that require they do so.

T. D. lives in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of north Texas with her husband and young daughter. In her spare time, she studies criminal profiling and shares her husband's interest in vampires, the internet, science fiction, collecting swords, and all things Japanese.

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