



Loose Id

A Romantics Novel
SURF 'N' TURF

Scott & Scott

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Loose Id^(R)
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Dedication

Surf and Turf is dedicated to the real-life Blakely Crawford and his real-life romance. This isn't really about you...really.

Inspired by Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the people, places, and things that could only happen in a gay resort town that wild and crazy.

Chapter One

Summer Break(Ups)

The pizza shop opened early on June 21. It was the first day of summer and the first day of the season for Spartacus Pizza. Garlicky steam wafted out into the crisp, bright morning, enticing the residents of Seaside to dump their Danishes and doughnuts for a fresh, hot slice dripping with cheese.

People were accustomed to stopping by Spartacus after the bars closed to grab a bite or to loiter among the throng of club boys. Maybe they'd have a brief introductory chat with the slurring tricks they'd just acquired for the night. But on the first day of summer, there was something alluring, something almost sexy, about that first slice of the season.

The stout manager propped open the door. The stud in his ear and a matching pinky ring glittered in the morning sun. The bells tied to the doorknob chimed. The cool air billowed into the shop. And the luscious scent of sauce and dough spilled into the street.

The shop crawled with gay men of every stripe. Coiffed gentlemen in frilly shirts pranced right up to the counter. Burly, leather-clad musclemen elbowed to the front.

"I will have the first slice of the summer," a tall, bejeweled man stated grandly as he placed his ringed fingers delicately on the counter.

"Not when I was here first," growled a big bear of a man with a leather cap pulled down around his bushy brows. "I'll have the first slice."

That's when things got ugly. The pizza shop divided into two distinct camps. Eyes beneath perfectly plucked, arched eyebrows glared accusingly over finery.

"Queenies!" they shouted in unison.

Leather and chains hung from the enormous shoulders of a horde of dangerous-looking men.

"Meanies!" they barked.

Spartacus Pizza became a swirl of contempt and aggression as the two groups rallied against one another. Manicured hands and rough, meaty fingers grabbed at pizza slices without the aid of the staff. It was no longer an issue of who would get the first slice of summer. This was war.

Sauce splattered and pepperoni flew. Hot, steaming, triangular projectiles whizzed through the air like mouthwatering missiles. No one seemed hungry anymore. The leather men and the lacy men faced off, lobbing pizza at one another for a solid five minutes.

When the final slice fell, tomato sauce dripped from a stained frilly cuff. A wilted slice with double pepperoni slid down a buckled leather boot. There were mushrooms in beards and sausages stuck to Italian loafers.

"All right, boys," the manager said calmly. He herded them out of his filthy shop. "Spartacus is now closed for breakfast." He didn't sound the least bit surprised or angry. "Glad that's over," he mumbled to himself as he locked the door behind them.

The groups stalked away defiantly in opposite directions, the Queenies to the west and the Meanies to the east. Bloodied with marinara, they held their heads high as if they were both the obvious victors, proud of their battle scars. There was something in their swagger and stagger that seemed to suggest they were actually pleased with the debacle of this early summer morning -- as if they'd been waiting impatiently all winter for this confrontation.

Summer in Seaside had officially begun.

* * * * *

A few hundred miles away, summer started much more silently, but with just as much tension. Sunlight slanted through the store window, casting a dim shadow of the letters painted there: DAVID AND ROBERT'S BOOKS. The bright light contrasted with the dark shelves and rows of books. It made the bookstore seem colder and quieter as the two owners went about their opening chores.

David Bigelow and Robert Gibson shuffled around the store without looking at each other, avoiding bumping together, each staying out of the other's way.

The clang of the cash register surprised Robert even though he was the one who pushed the button and opened the drawer every morning. The sound echoed in the uncomfortable silence. After thirteen years together, opening the store was their most intimate activity. At the same time, their proximity in the empty store, the absence of customers, the palpable avoidance -- it made them feel like strangers.

Robert looked down at his long, slender fingers, counting money unnecessarily, busying himself as David shelved books. He watched David's stocky back as the shorter

man reached above his head and reordered stacks of paperbacks. Robert had towered over David when they used to stand close enough to notice. Robert was tall and slender, a dedicated runner. He thought of himself as the typical, lanky, brown-haired bookstore owner -- a small step up from the stereotypical librarian.

The bookstore was their life, their baby, the thing that had kept them busy and kept them together during the ten years since they first opened their door. But now it was much like their relationship -- something to dust off and tidy up. Barely getting by.

Independent bookstores weren't doing so well in the wake of box stores and book-chain monopolies. Ten years after they started, Robert and David owned a storefront that was worth more than the store could ever make. Thirteen years after they met, the relationship felt the same way. The structure was more valuable than the content. The familiar establishment of David and Robert was a facade that didn't have a lot going on inside.

Robert knew all that. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, behind the daily routine and facts and figures, he knew. But it still came as a surprise, on that first day of summer as he reached to turn the sign in the window to OPEN, when David called out, "We're closing today."

For the briefest second, Robert thought David was being uncharacteristically romantic. He entertained the momentary fantasy that David wanted to play hooky and make love. But when was the last time David had done anything like that? When was the last time he had said, "I love you," or held Robert's hand? Where had he been last night and so many nights before?

Then Robert looked at his partner. David's stare was not romantic or mischievous. It was not even kind or pleading or sorry. He looked annoyed, as if he had read Robert's thoughts and recognized how ridiculous ideas of romance were at this point in their relationship. He just stared straight ahead.

When David said "closing," it wasn't just for today. And it wasn't just the store. That simple statement and his cold stare were the only explanations Robert was going to get for throwing away a business, a relationship, a home -- the thirteen years that constituted his entire adult life.

David turned and walked away. He headed up the stairs to their apartment as if he'd simply forgotten something.

Robert was surprised to find that he was still holding the sign, his fingers in the heat of the summer sun. He let the thin plastic card fall back into place. It swung back and forth in the window -- SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED.

The first day of summer, Robert thought, and it certainly is turning out to be the longest day of the year.

What he didn't think, or even realize in the aftershock, was that this bombshell had done more than rock his life on the solstice. In its rubble, it had left him freshly single, fairly wealthy, and completely free for the long summer ahead.

Blakely Crawford was a long way from Arkansas. That's the thought that came to mind as he made his way down the cool, damp street. On this first night of summer, it was still too cool for the trash piled against the brick buildings to reek too much. But his mood was as ugly and miserable as that garbage. He just breathed through his mouth and continued to follow the shadowy figure ahead of him, who paused and glanced back briefly before ducking into an alleyway.

Blakely was a thousand miles from that red state of homophobia, drawling rednecks, and Southern-fried everything. But a little comfort food and small-town sensibility could go a long way to improving his mood and decision-making abilities right now. He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing here.

When he'd moved north last year, a back-alley hook-up was not the kind of escape he'd pictured. Where he came from, they didn't even have back alleys. And he certainly never thought he'd be lurking, lingering, and loitering in one. But despite the weather, despite his dislike for filth and rats and unflattering sulfur streetlights, he couldn't keep from following the man deeper into the night.

As he reached the place halfway down the alley, where the shadowy man had turned into a darker alcove, Blakely hesitated. He felt a chill. But it wasn't the flash of panic that should have rushed through him when suddenly finding himself alone with a stranger in the night. It was a tremor of electricity in his gut, up his spine. He leaned against the wet brick. The coolness seeped into his shoulder blades. And the man's hot gaze ran over his body.

For once, Blakely was glad for the damnable northern weather. Clouds shrouded the moon. The only illumination came from the streetlight in front of him that cut a sharp, pie-shaped slice of yellow out of the dark ground. But he was obscured by shadows. The only place blacker was the smaller alcove beyond where the man was watching.

From the deeper dark, he couldn't possibly have seen Blakely's specific features. He just saw another well-built twenty-five-year-old in a tank top -- a promising silhouette.

"Come here often?" the voice asked. It was meant to be a joke, but the thick sound of sex choked out any hint of laughter. "I bet I can find a better place for you to come."

Blakely didn't laugh. He didn't answer or move or breathe. But the one-sided conversation continued. The man was taking Blakely's silence and steadfastness as a reassuring response.

"You are a good-looking man," the voice said slowly from the darkness, "and you have one beautiful body." The man slouched a couple steps closer. He whispered, "How about we go back to your place, and I'll show you how beautiful I think you are?"

Blakely felt a stir in his shorts. He felt the glow of being desired. He almost wanted to believe, to play along. He hadn't felt wanted like this for a long while. And that was the sad part. He *was* a good-looking man. He *did* have a beautiful body. There was no reason he should feel unwanted, undesired, unworthy of what he had come here looking for.

But he hadn't come here -- to this dank alley -- for it. He had moved a thousand miles to find it. There had to be a better way.

He stepped into the slice of light. The dirty golden shine revealed his strawberry hair, his blue-gray eyes, and the tears welling there.

"You even try to pick *me* up," Blakely choked out, "as long as you don't know it's me."

And with that, he left his boyfriend -- his *ex*-boyfriend -- there in the dark. He went back to their apartment to dead-bolt the door, pack his things, and leave his ex to find somewhere else to sleep tonight. Blakely was certain he'd have no problem with that. The problem that nagged at his worried mind, however, was where Blakely himself was going to find to sleep for the rest of the summer.

Chapter Two

Ganging Up

Seaside was a tiny fishing town at the tip of a long, thin peninsula. For centuries, no one thought to reach it any other way than by boat. Quaint pastel fishing shacks lined the narrow streets. Sand dunes and sea grass filled the space between. It was less than a mile from one shore of the peninsula to the other.

Then someone had the brilliant idea to build a road. The two-lane highway was hot and barren and endless. From Friday to Monday it was congested all along the peninsula's length, as weekend vacationers from various big cities funneled south toward the tiny town at the end of land.

Pubs sprang up, followed naturally by artists and writers and hermits. Seaside quickly became an isolated little gay community beyond prying hometown eyes. Not long after, it transformed into a bustling gay resort destination. And today, condos and straight families competed with drag queens and biker dykes for elbow room.

But it was still the kind of beautiful, protected place that made gay couples want to hold hands. The breeze was briny, and the waves reflected light, magnifying it magically along every shore. It was the perfect place to spend a summer.

Robert Gibson carried the last heavy box of books up the stairs to the condo. He placed it next to the others in the air-conditioned living room. Then he stood and surveyed the summer ahead of him. From here he could see the balcony. Red geraniums spilled from every window box. Beyond, the view was driftwood and sea spray and white sand. The entire place seemed to sigh, *Relaxation*.

And that was just what Robert needed. His entire life had been liquidated. Now he was left with stacks of leftover books from the store and a well-fed bank account from its sale. He planned on using both to get through this summer and do nothing but wait for the tension to leave his body and, hopefully, his life.

Robert had never taken the summer off before. But he imagined Seaside to be the ideal escape. It was a gay resort town full of quaint shops and restaurants, pristine beaches and dunes perfect for quiet hours of reading. He had chosen the town for its promise of beauty and solitude. The fact that it was a gay destination was a matter of cultural comfort more than anything else.

He certainly wasn't looking for dates or complications. If the situation got that desperate, there was always masturbation. After thirteen years with David, Robert had learned that. He had focused on that relationship since he was twenty years old. And now he had sworn off men for good. Now, there was only one man that mattered, and that was Robert himself.

The sliding glass door opened with a whisper at his slightest touch. When he stepped onto the large balcony, he truly believed that this place and this summer might be able to heal the hurt inside. Everything had changed in a moment. The first day of summer had turned out to be the first day of his new life. But here, on the quiet east side of Seaside, it seemed that it might just work out.

The beach and sea stretched out ahead of him. To his left, the white sand spilled onto the pavement of Market Street. Along this road that connected the east side to the west side of town, boys would walk back and forth in shorts and sandals, playfully cruising one another and shopping along the way. Muscle queens on bikes flexed their triceps and rode in slow, lazy loops all day. Market Street was a market of tan skin and hot summer glances. And Robert was content to watch the goods from afar -- his own version of widow shopping from his very own window.

But as he looked down from his balcony, he discovered a distinct trend of Market's east side. Suddenly, he found that his new summer home was in the midst of chaps -- not nice English gents, but the buttless, crotchless, leather variety.

Bearded men in leather shorts and vests crowded the sidewalk. X-shaped black leather harnesses adorned furry bare chests. Armbands and combat boots were the norm as the men made their way to a door that appeared to lead into the basement of an old Victorian house.

A discreet red neon sign identified the subterranean chamber as the ARM PIT. On the windowless black door someone had posted a sign that Robert could only imagine was a joke: OFFICIAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE MEANIES.

To each his own, Robert thought to himself. Live and let live. This crazy diversity was one of the things that made Seaside so unique. If those men wanted to sweat inside their black leather all summer, so be it. Robert wasn't going to object. But when he'd rented the condo for the season, he'd had no idea he was signing up to spend the summer on the Meanies' turf.

* * * * *

Blakely took the help-wanted ad as a sign of fate. The only other way to look at it was as his last resort. The gay newspaper he'd been using to pack his few belongings

was chock-full of personals and phone-sex hotlines. But as he wrapped his dishes, there it was in the center of his plate: *Room, Board + Minimum Wage. Summer Position at Aunt Shirley's Porch.*

Blakely had never been to Seaside. But it was south of here, and that was the right direction for him. He was leaving this miserable city, this miserable weather, and his miserable ex. He was going to head down to this sunny gay resort town and sow his Southern wild oats.

He was going to flirt and tan and do all the crazy, wild things a cute boy of twenty-five should be doing. He was going to get attention and be shameless. He was going to party away this dismal feeling of betrayal, and figure out what to do with the rest of his life only once the weather had turned cold. Until then, he was free.

After many grueling hours on a bus with a box of dishes and a laundry bag full of clothes crammed under his feet, Blakely was still cursing the weather. But now it was no longer the cold that plagued him. The rickety bus was a tin sweatbox. And it was stuck in traffic for all eternity along some of the most desolate scrubland Blakely had ever seen.

He fanned his face and consoled himself with thoughts of the summer ahead. Or perhaps it was only heat-induced delirium that made him fantasize that Aunt Shirley's Porch was some plantation-era haven. He imagined a shady spot for sweet old ladies to tea and chat and pinch his cheeks. But after speaking briefly to Aunt Shirley herself, he doubted this daydream could come true.

Shirley had been quick and efficient. No, the position was not filled. She couldn't imagine why no one had called yet. Could he start immediately? Her phone etiquette may have been gruff, but her voice was like caramel poured over warm coals or honey in a glass of bourbon. Blakely didn't know why, but he always imagined women with deep, sexy voices to be lesbians. He also imagined, given what he'd heard about Seaside, that his prejudice was probably correct in this specific case.

So he quickly revised his imagination to picture a wholly new stereotypical setting. He imagined a tranquil log cabin full of husky women talking about their dogs and children and trucks. To Blakely, this was even better than powdered old ladies. In a lesbian bar, he could be the ignored eunuch, silently clearing away dishes.

When the bus lurched to a halt in a cloud of dust and the rusted door creaked on its hinges, Blakely was almost too scared to move. His legs were cramped in a permanent huddled crouch from accommodating the pile of his belongings. But it was pure fear that froze him.

He had nowhere to go. This was it -- the end of the road, literally. And as soon as he stepped off this bus, his fate was sealed for the summer. His dreams of what could be would be washed away by the reality of his new life -- a life that he had chosen at random from a newspaper he had picked out of the recycling bin.

As he emerged from the bus, sweat dripped down his bare arms and dust clouded his eyes. He struggled with his load of clothes and junk, but then he felt suddenly weightless. When his view cleared, the wasteland of the highway was gone. He was surrounded by candy-colored buildings and sparkling waves and a refreshing sea breeze like none he had ever felt.

And boys! Boys, boys, boys everywhere!

"Moving in, handsome?" A group of tan, lean men in matching muscle shirts giggled as they passed. They gazed friendlily over the top of wildly colored sunglasses. More than one winked in Blakely's direction.

Blakely strutted down Market Street with a new spring in his step. It was contagious. Everyone here seemed to be walking on air, prancing on tiptoes, tripping the light fantastic on the balls of their gay little feet.

This paradise right here is why "gay" means happy, Blakely thought to himself.

He passed a drag queen dressed like Cher who blew him a kiss. And then he found himself directly in front of Aunt Shirley's Porch. It was white and fringed with curlicue woodwork that dripped from the wraparound porch like icing. The porch's ceiling was painted a shade of blue that perfectly matched the unflawed sky above. And again, he imagined little old ladies in lace.

"Well, my, my, my, my, my!" he heard an unseen voice exclaim. But it wasn't quite grandmotherly in its admiration. And it certainly wasn't female.

You are not in Arkansas anymore, Blakely reminded himself as he climbed the stairs. Beyond the pile of his belongings in his arms, he saw white wicker furniture draped with silk and sandals and oversize Jackie-O sunglasses. The men fanning themselves were coiffed and scented and plucked to a tee. But despite their perfect grooming and poised mannerisms, they stared openly, regarding Blakely with bitchy skepticism and predatory hunger.

"What have we here?" inquired a man with a smooth silver helmet of hair. He crossed his legs and raised an eyebrow, letting Blakely bake in the heat of scrutiny and silence.

"Blakely," he managed to utter. "Blakely Crawford."

"Do I detect a drawl, dear? Or have you already been sampling some of Aunt Shirley's iced tea?" a peroxide blond chimed in.

"My heavens, I've been dreaming about a Southern belle ever since Rhett Butler first ripped off his shirt!"

"More like a little Confederate soldier boy," said another. "I bet you're a rebel, aren't you, Blakely?"

A honeyed voice interrupted the catcalling. "I see you've met the girls," Aunt Shirley called from the doorway. "Welcome to the official headquarters of the Queenies."

* * * * *

The books were finally unpacked. They were in stacks and piles everywhere. Robert had transformed his neat, clean, modern beach condo into a mini version of the bookstore. Granite counters were lined with rows of fiction. Biographies covered the television. Humor and memoirs occupied half the love seat. There was a long summer ahead, and Robert looked forward to the solitary solace of reading.

But now he was going to get some fresh air and explore his new summer home. So he cinched the laces of his running shoes and jogged down the long wooden stairs two at a time to the courtyard below. Between his front door and the other similarly wood-shingled condos along the beach, there was a strip of crushed shells and crabgrass that served as a driveway between barbecue pits and clotheslines.

Robert had to glance twice to realize what was so odd about the scene. And then he had to step closer to convince himself he wasn't hallucinating. But strange as it seemed, it was just as it appeared. The clotheslines stretching along the buildings were draped in black leather apparel.

As he walked between the lines, he saw leather pants and shorts, armbands and collars, harnesses and hoods, and what appeared to be a leather battle skirt. Robert was so perplexed by the "laundry" that he ran straight into an occupied beach chair tucked between the lines.

Lounging there was a large man wearing what Robert could only describe as a studded leather jockstrap. His chest and beer belly were shaved down to rough stubble. His nipples were pierced. And when his lids popped open, he revealed the most unfortunate crossed eyes Robert had ever seen.

"Sorry," Robert managed, feeling that good manners and the leather scene weren't necessarily compatible. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Shit, I'm late." The man leaped from the chair and grabbed a harness from the line, pulling the straps diagonally across his chest and carefully avoiding the studs through his nipples.

"You put those in a washing machine?" Robert couldn't help but ask.

"Saddle soap and boot black," the man said as he bound and buckled. "Makes 'em shine."

"Well, you learn something new every day." Robert felt odd standing there watching what this man apparently considered "dressing." Again, he defaulted to social niceties, as odd as they seemed given his new friend's dress code. "I'm Robert. Just moved into the condo on the end for the summer."

"Welcome to the neighborhood." He squeezed Robert's hand in a meaty paw. "I'm Grizz. Like the bear."

"Not like Griselda from *The Canterbury Tales*?"

"Huh?" The bear of a man scowled his crossed eyes in confusion.

"Never mind. Nice to meet you, Grizz," Robert amended. "Don't let me keep you if you're running late."

"Gotta get to the Pit," he said, stepping in the direction of the street. "You coming?"

"Where?"

"The Arm Pit," Grizz answered, as if it were the most normal and obvious and pleasant-sounding destination. "You don't spend the summer on the east side of Seaside unless you're into leather. And you're right across the street from leather central. Come on."

"That's all you're wearing?" Robert blurted out before he could stop himself. Leather was one thing, but he'd assumed the man would at least put on some pants.

"You like it?"

"It's a little informal for me," Robert conceded. "Besides, I always found cotton to be a little less binding in warm weather."

"You could try it on, if you like," Grizz offered in what he must have thought was a sexy growl. But the thought could not have been less attractive to Robert. However, it did become graphically less attractive when the man nodded down toward his jock.

"No, thank you," Robert replied courteously.

"You're not wearing *that* to the neighborhood meeting, are you?" Grizz asked, horrified as a fashionista confronting an especially challenging makeover. "Well, you might want to change before you stop by. Come meet your neighbors. Come meet the Meanies."

And with that, he jogged off across the street, furry butt cheeks bouncing behind. It made Robert feel less like jogging himself. It made him feel more like running as fast as he could away from the scent of leather drying in the sun and the east side of Seaside.

The east side -- how the hell was Robert supposed to know it had an underground leather scene? Or not so underground, as it turned out. It was right there, hanging on the clothesline, jogging down the sidewalk, and inviting him to dark bars in the middle of the afternoon. His neighbors? The Meanies? These things had not been on the list of amenities when he'd talked to the pert little lipstick lesbian at the Realtor's office.

Robert had seen a porn video once that involved leather outfits. But the whole thing struck him as more dress-up than anything else. No matter how hot the men were, putting on a silly outfit and an exaggerated gruff attitude detracted from the sex, in Robert's humble opinion. It really wouldn't have been any different to him if they'd strapped on clown noses and big floppy shoes.

Finding himself in the midst of this game of make-believe was not exactly what he'd had in mind for the summer. But there was obviously no avoiding it. And if he was going to get past it and act like a grown-up, he was going to have to do the inevitable. Robert figured sooner was better. So after changing into what he hoped was a casually acceptable ensemble of jeans and a T-shirt, he took a deep breath and crossed the street.

As he opened the door to the Arm Pit, he wondered if he should have baked something to be more neighborly. But the humorous thought did nothing to alleviate the nervous clench of his gut. And once inside, his panic was escalated by his momentary blindness. There were no windows. He couldn't see a proper light in the entire place. So stepping from the sunny summer afternoon left his vision green and spotty and blurred.

When his eyes finally adjusted, he almost wished they hadn't. The place was about as far from a friendly neighborhood bar as he could imagine. Everything was concrete and metal and, of course, black leather. It really was a basement, with industrial beams and cracked cement walls. Red light barely spilled from under the leather-upholstered bar. And that meager light just managed to illuminate the crowd of bullies packed into the dank space.

They were the same men Robert had seen earlier strolling down the street. But here, in their element, they looked absolutely ferocious. He'd walked into the wolves' den. And he was a quivering little lamb.

"Rob!" Grizz called from the back. Before Robert could answer or remind him that, like any good homo, he went by his full name, Grizz had slapped him on the back and knocked him up against the bar in a generous expression of Meanie affection.

"What'll it be?" he asked and then immediately ordered for both of them. "Two motor oils, Fist."

Fist, Robert assumed, was the shaved-headed bartender. But when the drinks arrived, he couldn't begin to guess what a motor oil was -- unless it was the real thing and not just a cute nickname for a cocktail.

"Jäger, peppermint schnapps, cinnamon schnapps, and coconut rum," Fist offered in response to Robert's horrified expression.

"I'll have a beer," Robert managed to whisper back to the bartender.

Over that very stale beer, Robert learned some interesting things about his new neighbors. First, after being introduced to Fist, Sledge, Spit, and Grunt, Robert highly doubted anyone here needed the challenge of a two-syllable name; he was happy he hadn't been nicknamed with something more offensive than "Rob." Second, as "welcoming" as they appeared to be, this just was not his crowd, so whatever they wanted to call him during this very brief bonding session was fine by him. Nothing could have been further from his taste in clothing or men or afternoon watering holes. Why in the world were these men in a beautiful resort town if they were going to spend the summer in the basement?

Regardless, there were some fascinating tidbits sprinkled throughout the grunts and growls of conversation.

"Meanies have been here since the beginning. Seaside is our turf," someone in a vest and matching leather cap insisted.

"Sure, it might scare the tourists a bit. But we were here first," a man with a chain around his neck explained.

"And scaring them is half the fun." Another in knee-high combat boots smirked.

There was something predatory about them for sure. But Robert couldn't decide how much was an act and how much was potentially dangerous. In the darkness, his assessment kept changing. In a certain light, from a certain angle, metal and eyes would glint in a frighteningly aggressive way. And then suddenly someone would adjust a strap or suck in his gut, and Robert was convinced they were all much more concerned with their fashion and grooming than any form of actual violence.

"We're not even all here yet," a biker-gloved fat man boasted. "You just wait and see how the gang grows. And there's always a chance to find a few new recruits."

The crowd grew silent as the hint sank in. The group seemed to size Robert up like a cut of meat or a mannequin they were about to fit with any number of leather contraptions.

"Well," Robert broke the silence, "I guess I'll be heading out. Good to meet you all."

"You wear a cock ring?" someone from the back shouted.

Not exactly "Can I borrow a cup of sugar," Robert thought to himself. But neighbors were neighbors.

"You men have a nice evening," he said on his way out.

On the street, two Meanies were loitering and smoking and cursing and quite possibly flirting with each other. Robert nodded and hurried past. He couldn't remember if he'd met them in the darkness of the Arm Pit, but he didn't want to seem impolite. At that moment, a thin young Asian man came bustling down the street and nearly collided with the pair of giant leathersmen in his lilting hurry. His eyes went wide and his jaw dropped as he saw them. He let out a shriek of horror. His hands fluttered to his terrified face.

"Scram, Queenie! You're on Meanie turf," one of the men growled menacingly. "Fly back to fairyland!"

* * * * *

Aunt Shirley wrapped a thick arm around Blakely's shoulders and escorted him into the coolness of her kitchen. She was a solid woman, but not in the stereotypical lumberjack way Blakely had been imagining. She was almost maternal. The moniker "Aunt" fit her well. Her fringed pixie cut would have been sassy on some experimental bi-for-the-summer alterna college girl. But Shirley wore it better. She looked like someone who would bake you cookies and tell it to you straight, no sugar coating, no bullshit.

The first thing that struck Blakely as they walked through the swinging screen door was how beautiful Shirley's house was. The pristine place was dominated by china blue and hanging ferns and huge windows that let the pastel light from the porch spill in. It was cool and clean and just felt like home.

The second thing that struck him was a brimming glass pitcher of amber liquid and ice cubes. "Here's your first job," Aunt Shirley said, handing him the pitcher. "Go soothe the beasts. This should keep the she-bitches quiet!" She yelled it over her shoulder so everyone on the porch could hear.

Timidly, Blakely carried the dewy pitcher back onto the porch and set it too gently on the table in the crowd's center, steadying it as if it might run away from him or explode any minute. He wasn't sure if his nervousness was a result of never having waited a table in his life, or the particular crowd he'd just signed up to serve all summer. But then a ringed hand settled on top on his, and his indecision was quickly resolved. These men were horrifying. They could make a seasoned maître d' wet himself.

"Ooh, we get to keep you all summer long?" the hand's owner cooed. His black eyebrows were raised and sharply arched and most likely painted on. They contrasted too perfectly with his burnished silver pompadour. "I'm Bea. As in Queen Bea."

"As in Bea Arthur, is more like it," Aunt Shirley called from the door. "Let the poor boy go, or you'll scare him away before he's even unpacked."

"And this is Nipple," Bea said, gesturing toward his chest. Blakely was horribly worried that he was going to be introduced to an actual anatomical nipple, but there in the man's lap was a dun-colored lapdog with scowling, bulging eyes. "He likes to be tweaked. Don't worry; we have all summer to get to know one another." Bea flourished his glittering hands about. A dozen men giggled in response.

"Well, that's over," Aunt Shirley said when Blakely returned to the safety of the kitchen. She handed him his own glass of iced tea and took a hearty gulp from the one she held in her other hand. "You've met the Queenies. You'll get used to them."

"Queenies?" It might have been only the second word Blakely had spoken since his arrival. He was surprised, slightly embarrassed, and completely overwhelmed. He never could have imagined a town like this filled with men like that. He took a swig from his iced tea. It nearly knocked him on his sweet Southern ass.

"Well, maybe you won't get used to them," Aunt Shirley changed her tune. "But you'll get used to that -- Seaside iced tea. Long Island's got nothing on me. There's a bit more bourbon than tea in my particular recipe."

"This sure isn't the Southern sweet tea my mama makes," Blakely said. He was practically breathing fire.

"You might attract more flies with honey, but who the hell wants flies?" Shirley asked matter-of-factly. "You need something a lot stronger to deal with these parasites." She took a deep breath and another invigorating swallow.

"The Queenies," she began. She leaned forward to rest her arms on the butcher-block countertop and directed Blakely to a wicker-covered stool. It looked like explaining the men out there on the porch was going to take more than a quick, simple definition. "Imagine a gang that's not quite as cool as the Pink Ladies from *Grease*, but a

hell of a lot more vicious than those singing pansy boys in *West Side Story*. And don't expect these harpies to break into song."

"You don't really mean they're a gang, do you?" Blakely asked incredulously. "They look like more of a group than a gang to me." Chains and knives just didn't fit with the Queenies. The weapons would never match their outfits.

"Don't let the pancake makeup fool you. Those bitches are ferocious."

"I may be a fish out of water here," Blakely admitted, "but flirty old men and femme guys in silk shirts don't seem that threatening."

"That's not what your eyes were saying when I rescued you out there," Aunt Shirley retorted. "How long have you been off the farm?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a farm," he stammered. "A garden and some chickens is all. In Arkansas. And it's been about a year."

"I'll be." Aunt Shirley hooted. "It was just an expression, but I've got a genuine Southern farm boy on my hands. Heaven help me keep you out of the Queenies' clutches!"

Blakely took another sip to conceal his blush. He really was out of his league here. He didn't know the first thing about gay towns, gay men, or being gay himself. He'd made a complete mess of his entire attempt at coming out and starting life as a gay man. And now he had signed up to spend the summer in the gayest place he could find. He wasn't sure he was up to the task. Someone really should have checked his gay credentials at the border and promptly turned him away.

"Look," Aunt Shirley tried again, more quietly. "Seaside is a small town. And when you cram this many queens into a tiny kingdom, you're going to get a royal family one way or another."

"In the real world, we have the heteros and the homos," she continued. "It's us against the other ninety percent of the world. But here, we're in charge. So our individual, true colors really come shining through. And our gay little rainbow splits into all its varying colors. Some colors are a hell of a lot louder than others."

"So the Queenies are a gang," Blakely marveled. "Do they rumble? Have turf?"

"You're looking at it," she said, spreading her hands. "Aunt Shirley's Porch and the entire west side of Seaside is ruled by the Queenies. And they may not have knives and guns, but their weapons are much sharper -- sarcasm and attitude."

"So they're just bitches," Blakely concluded. The Seaside iced tea must have been working its magic. He wouldn't normally have used such language in front of a lady, even a lady who had used the word endlessly all afternoon.

"There's no 'just' about it," she said. "They are *the* bitches. Their insults and attacks are legendary, shot precisely at targeted individuals or tossed carelessly like a grenade into crowds of poor, unsuspecting tourists. The Queenies will ruin a vacation quicker than a hurricane. They can humiliate any little muscle boy. They can take the

romance out of any getaway. And they routinely make grown men cry. A stab wound could easily be less painful than getting cut down by the Queenies."

"Wow." Blakely's head hadn't stopped spinning since he'd arrived in Seaside. Looking in every direction at the men on parade was disorienting enough. But now the crazy details of the town's residents crowded his mind, making the whole experience even more surreal.

"You're a sweet kid," Aunt Shirley said, clapping him on the back. "And you're going to have a blast in Seaside. I'm just giving you fair warning to protect your naive little ass. Let me show you to your room."

But before they could take even two steps up the stairs, a commotion exploded out on the porch. A thin Asian man burst into the crowd of Queenies, full of panic and melodramatic gestures.

"Oh! My! God!" he shouted and fluttered. "I ran into the Meanies. I mean, I totally *ran into* them. I thought I was going to die! They were so big and filthy. And you should have seen what they were wearing!"

"The Meanies?" Blakely asked Aunt Shirley. "You've got to be kidding."

"Oh, that's just the other gang, from the east side," Aunt Shirley said dismissively, as if gang warfare were the most normal thing in a resort town. "The sight of them alone has been known to traumatize straight people from a block away."

"And these gangs actually fight?" Blakely asked timidly.

"What are they going to fight about, fashion?" she asked rhetorically. She continued up the stairs as if nothing was out of the ordinary. "Just don't get on their bad side. Come to think of it, I'm not so sure they have a good side. So just don't piss either gang off."

With that, she flung open the bedroom door. The sea blue room was small and cozy and absolutely gorgeous, tucked into the front gable of the house that overlooked Market Street and the sand and surf beyond.

"So, you have a boyfriend?" Aunt Shirley asked out of the blue.

"Not for almost two days," Blakely answered. But he blushed. The mere mention of boyfriends and gayness still seemed so private to him.

"Well, then, you'll be holding auditions," she concluded. "That's fine by me. I'm clear on the other side of the house, and I snore. So you do whatever you want in here as loudly as you like."

"I was thinking I might take the summer off from boyfriends," Blakely explained, "to explore a little. I've never been in a 'gay' town. Heck, we don't even say that word out loud in Arkansas. So I guess I'll just enjoy the freedom."

"You mean slut around," she interpreted. "I hear you. You'll want to hit the Slippery Boat."

"The Slippery Boat?"

"It's teatime, and you've already had your tea," she said, indicating his now-empty glass. "It's time for dessert."

Blakely wasn't sure what she was talking about, but he was ready to explore the town. Emboldened by Aunt Shirley's encouragement and Seaside iced tea, he headed out for the afternoon. The Queenies were thankfully distracted by two potential customers as he passed. The women were innocently examining the menu near the door of Aunt Shirley's Porch when Bea sashayed up to them.

"Sweet heart!" Bea exclaimed the endearment as two separate, horrified words. "I hope you don't give your hairdresser a Christmas gift." He paused to let the unsolicited non sequitur hang in the air. "Because whoever recommended that hair color for the summer should be stripped of his cosmetology license and banished to the suburbs."

Bea turned dramatically and walked slowly back to the Queenies' side of the porch. The women -- shocked, deflated, and speechless -- left to find a different spot for lunch or a quiet spot to cry and re-dye their hair.

"There, there, Jimmy," Bea cooed to the distressed victim of the Meanies' wrath. "Now, doesn't that make everything all better?"

Chapter Three

Tea-ing Off

Teatime in Seaside was as different from the South's version as Aunt Shirley's iced tea recipe was from Blakely's mother's. Tea dance at the Slippery Boat was a loud, crowded excuse to start drinking and dancing long before sunset. There was no tea in sight.

Blakely forced himself to enter after he saw the sign painted along the wall. Amid portholes and paddles and a quaint nautical theme, someone had painted All Hands on Dick below the club's name. Blakely couldn't decide whether it was an act of vandalism. It seemed like a fairly aggressive theme for an afternoon party.

Inside, he was even more taken aback. He was not inside at all. After passing through the door and past a long bar, he was outside again. The Slippery Boat was actually an enormous deck that stretched out over the beach and water. There was a pool in the middle and bars at every corner. The entire planked surface was crowded full of men dancing, drinking, and flirting shamelessly.

Unlike Aunt Shirley's Porch, the Slippery Boat was the realm of the tourists. These were the young, beautiful, crazy-for-the-weekend boys who couldn't afford to live in Seaside for the entire summer. They were hanging in groups, dancing shirtless, and making out in broad daylight.

Blakely grabbed a cocktail in a flimsy plastic cup and leaned against the railing to take in the scene. He had never seen anything like it. He had never even imagined anything close. Sure, he knew there were nightclubs and pick-up bars in the big cities. But he never could have guessed that this much sex and sweat could be crammed into a sunny summer day.

He felt that same sense of wonder he had experienced earlier when stepping from the bus. It was all so amazing and glorious and gay. But at the same time, Blakely was

intimidated. He was not a part of any group here. He didn't know anyone. He was not partying for the weekend. He was alone and slightly buzzed and overwhelmed by the crowd of twentysomething Adonises. Despite his best intentions to be carefree and gay, he just couldn't force himself to hold a steady gaze when another man tried to catch his eye.

Suddenly, the pulsing music stopped midbeat. Sweaty, shirtless boys awkwardly halted halfway through their sexy dance moves. A microphone crackled to life.

"Welcome to the famous Slippery Boat tea dance," the DJ's voice boomed over the loud speaker. "And welcome to our annual summer kickoff party."

There were hoots and applause, even though Blakely suspected the crowd had no more of a clue what the announcement meant than he did. They didn't need an excuse for a party. Blakely wondered if every afternoon was just as wild.

"Now, for those of you who don't know how this works, you're in for a big surprise -- or a big scare. Because on this day, Seaside royals leave their castles to mingle with the commoners. If you've got what it takes, you might win a knight in shining leather or a beautiful queen all of your own. If you don't, watch out and stay out of their way!"

With that warning, "Dancing Queen" started to play in the background. At the far end of the deck, the crowd parted in what could have been respect or fear. Blakely saw silk flutter. He saw jewels sparkle. He saw sashaying steps floating in linen trousers. Although he had just left them on Aunt Shirley's Porch, he shared the tourists' stunned reaction as he watched the gang in all its glory.

"The Queenies!" the DJ announced. "Seaside's fairest maids and evil queens all rolled into one. For all you budding princesses out there, hold your tiaras high!"

Bea led the group with his chin pointed regally in the air. He glanced occasionally to the side, past the rims of his smoky glasses, to scrutinize the members of the audience. But he never missed a delicately placed step. Jimmy, the terrified waif from earlier, strode just behind like a lady-in-waiting, wearing a thin-strapped tank top and platform flip-flops. At least ten similarly fabulous men fanned out behind them in perfect formation.

Blakely hid his face in his drink cup as they passed, blushing and hoping they wouldn't recognize or attack him. He thought Jimmy turned to catch his eye, but in a moment they were at the other end of the deck, poised and on display along one side of the pool. As they struck their tableau, the music faded, and another song ramped up to take its place.

"Bad to the Bone" made for a harsh contrast in musical styles. But that was nothing compared to the sight the crowd found when all heads snapped away from the Queenies and back toward the entrance.

"The Meanies!" the DJ shouted. "The princes of pain and the lords of leather. If you have a mean streak in you, get your best snarl and your nipple clamps on!"

Blakely could feel the clomp of heavy boots through the floorboards. But the display of leather straps, beer bellies, and gratuitous tattoos was what almost knocked him over. Despite the array of chains and studs, leather caps and chaps, buckles and bands, there was not a lot of coverage provided. These gruff men looked half naked and fully pissed off.

As they passed, they ignored Blakely completely. He sighed in relief and downed his drink. He was not on their radar. The surly group stomped its way to the end of the pool opposite the Queenies and assumed a threatening stance.

"Now, everyone on their best behavior," warned the DJ's voice as the music faded. "Get on the dance floor, and put your best foot forward. If you make the right moves, you could become royalty too!" As he turned the dance music back up, he turned his attention to the gangs of men. "Ladies and gentlemen, let's everyone play nice. Stay out of each other's way, and don't fight over the boys...or anything else."

There were a few defiant hisses and growls. Then the music picked up, and the crowd melded back together. The infectious dance beat gave courage to the startled audience, and feet began to move. As the Queenies and Meanies dispersed and stalked through the masses, Blakely no longer had any doubt that these wild groups of men were indeed gangs.

"You must be Blakely Crawford," a fey voice called out. "I'm absolutely charmed. And I'm completely horrified that I was in such a tizzy back at the Porch that I was unable to introduce myself properly."

"No problem," Blakely said. The young man was slight and Asian, glittered to the max, and taller than Blakely -- if you counted the pink foam platforms of his flip-flops.

"I'm Jimmy," he said, "and I have wonderful news for you. You've been tapped!" He reached over and playfully rapped Blakely's bare shoulder as if anointing him with a magic wand.

"Tapped? Is that a good thing?"

"Honey, honey, honey," Jimmy reprimanded lightheartedly. "The Queenies don't just tap anyone. It is an honor of the highest order."

"Sorry. I'm still pretty new in town," Blakely apologized.

"Well, let Jimmy enlighten you." He put a slender arm around Blakely's shoulder and turned him toward the ocean. With their backs to the crowd, they looked out over the railing toward the blue horizon like a pair of senior-citizen lovebirds on a cruise ship. "Welcome to Seaside, where the Queenies reign supreme. Where a lovely young lad like yourself can be lifted from the filthy hovel of this tourist trap to the summit of Queendom."

"You mean become a Queenie?" Blakely asked, horrified.

"Tap tap," Jimmy sang out. "Only a chosen few are as lucky as you."

"I don't think I could," Blakely stammered. "I mean, that's not really why I came here this summer. I was going to..."

"To what?" Jimmy prodded. "To serve us iced tea? Scrub Aunt Shirley's dishes? Sleep your way through a summer of tourists?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I didn't even know the Queenies existed till an hour ago."

"Well, it's your lucky day," Jimmy exclaimed. He turned Blakely around to face the seething crowd of men. "Otherwise, you get this. It might look exciting on your first day, but after countless drunken afternoons and tweaked-out tourists, you'll see it for the sleazy back alley it truly is."

Blakely's heart dropped. *Back alley*. He thought of his ex. He thought of betrayal and guilt and how attraction could turn to filth so fast. He wondered if this party was just a tanned, glamorous version of all that. *Could Jimmy be right?*

"All hands on dick," he mumbled, realizing how crass things can become when they cross the line.

"Exactly," Jimmy agreed. "Disgusting. And if that wasn't bad enough, it gets a lot worse after dark and below deck. Right below these dancing feet is the infamous Penis Pier. If you want to crawl under there with the rest of the trampy tourists, that's your choice. Or you could join the ranks of Seaside's one and only ruling class."

"What about the Meanies?"

"Pshaw!" Jimmy spat, but his eyes went wide with fear, no matter how bitchy he tried to sound. "They're even worse trash! In even worse outfits! You'll have nothing to do with them." His tone left no room for argument.

Blakely watched the leathermen stalk through the crowd like wolves among sheep. He had a hard time believing that they could be so easily dismissed. He saw the careful way Bea and the other Queenies shot glances at them across the crowd. He saw the big, tough men glare back like they were hungry and repulsed at once.

Bea snapped his fingers above his silver head. Jimmy took flight. "Must dash, darling," he called back over his bony shoulder. "But don't forget, you're a qualifying Queenie!"

Blakely watched Jimmy flip-flop into the crowd. He was nice, if a bit sparkly and opinionated. Blakely had no intention of joining any gang, let alone one as unorthodox and cruel as the Queenies. But Jimmy had a point. It would be nice to belong, to have friends and a place where he could start over.

Blakely watched as the seas of attitude and anger parted, as the gang members separated again, drifting almost naturally to opposite sides of the busy dance floor. Then he saw something he didn't expect. He saw someone who didn't fit neatly into the messy demographics of Queenies and Meanies and partying tourist boys.

The man stood at the edge of the Meanies crowd. But he didn't appear to scowl or growl or wear leather. He was dressed simply in jeans and a T-shirt. And suddenly, he was the only thing Blakely could focus on in the blur of the tea dance.

He was tall and lean. The white shirt fit snugly over his wide shoulders and long arms. The jeans sat low at the taper of his waist. His brown hair hung softly across his broad brow, highlighting his deep brown eyes and solid jaw. There was nothing gelled or plucked or pierced or pretentious. He was simply handsome in a way many gay men had forgotten how to be.

Blakely couldn't stop staring. It was as if his shyness had melted away along with the noise and bustle of the crowd he no longer heard or saw. There were no longer any pumped-up boys in tank tops, no fearsome leather thugs, no cackling men in makeup. There was only this captivating stranger who had stolen Blakely's attention unknowingly. Tall, dark, and handsome, without the hero's swagger. He was Blakely's very image of manhood -- honest, reliable, tender, and strong.

And then -- improbably, impossibly -- the man looked up and met Blakely's gaze. Their eyes locked as if they'd been searching for one another for a long time.

The last thing in the world Robert Gibson had wanted was to accompany the Meanies on their annual recruitment trip to the Slippery Boat. He had no interest in the Meanies or the tourists. And dancing was the furthest thing from his mind this summer. But as he had tried to leave the Arm Pit, the entire gang had spilled out of the bar and caught him up in its leathery midst. Men in buckled harnesses rarely take no for an answer. And as the Meanies swept him along in their wave of gruff excitement and insistence, Robert decided this would be his final demonstration of neighborly good manners -- as if he'd had a choice.

But now his mood had shifted. His leather hosts were distracted by the possibilities in the dancing crowd. The summer sun throbbed with a beat all its own. And Robert found himself staring into blue-gray eyes that reached out to him from the backdrop of the blue-gray sea.

The young man was beautiful in his innocence. He certainly didn't seem to fit in here. Despite the youth in his face and the muscles in his arms, there was a fresh wonder in those eyes that wasn't clouded by the reckless arrogance of the tourists. He seemed to be the only other person here who wasn't a part of this game.

His strawberry hair was neither blond nor red; it was more like molten gold. His lightly freckled shoulders were creamy; they hadn't yet seen much of the sun. And Robert was convinced, without even a word of conversation, that this beauty with the ocean eyes hadn't seen much of the world.

Against every bit of reason in his head, Robert stepped toward that gaze. He knew how cruel the world could be. He knew how things could fall apart. He knew he could not offer a word of reassurance to this hopeful young man. But nothing could stop his feet from following the undeniable pull of attraction.

Just a name, Robert thought to himself. If I can just hear his name, I will believe that there are some pure, good things left in this world. I will leave him untouched and

untainted, and I will take that name away with me -- a sound to remember beauty always.

"Leather and Lace Dance!" the loudspeaker boomed. The music kicked in louder.

"Leather!" half the crowd shouted.

"Lace!" the other half countered.

The mass of bodies rushed together, covering the deck in frantic motion and severing the line of sight between the two men. For the first time in several long minutes, their gaze was broken, and they lost each other in the commotion.

Queenies plucked chosen men from the crop of tourists, escorting them like beauty queens. Meanies grabbed their recruits, manhandling them like kidnapping victims. Other members brought out piles of clothing. They carried them reverently like ceremonial garb among the shouts and mayhem.

Lace shawls were draped over the heads of the Queenies' picks like virginal veils or old ladies' doilies atop lampshades. Leather vests were handed out like badges to the toughs chosen by the Meanies. Their arms were shoved roughly into the new uniforms.

Blakely was spun around by manicured hands, adorned with a lacy cover, and his vision was obscured by the delicate pattern. He peered through tiny holes and flowery cutouts, searching for the stranger who had transfixed him, but the mottled shadows that fell on his face made the world gauzy and faces indistinguishable.

Robert was just distracted enough in his search that he allowed his arms to be forced into leather sleeves. Furry forearms shoved him forward into a line of similarly clad men who looked much prouder than Robert to be wearing their new vests. However, the man Robert sought was not among these happily scowling recruits.

The costumed men were lined up, facing off against the other side like highly stylized linemen in the world's craziest game of football. It was as if these lines of men in disguise were lines of demarcation in Seaside, forever and symbolically separating east from west, Meanies from Queenies.

The lines began to move with the music. They shifted in opposite directions so that each man in leather faced a new man in lace with each sideways step, at every beat of the music. They were not dancing together, but dancing against one another. Tension clouded the air. The opposing dancers created friction between them. In the contentious standoff, each man that faced another became a faceless, angry enemy.

Then the world stopped. The lines had moved so that Blakely and Robert were paired off facing each other. Blakely pulled the lace shawl from his head, letting it fall around his shoulders. He stared openly at the stranger who now wore the leather vest of the Meanies.

Robert was breathless as the face before him was revealed, but he found sufficient air to ask, "What's your name?"

"Blakely."

Grunts and squeals of protest rumbled through the lines of men as Blakely and Robert stood transfixed before one another. Their singular focus had stopped the confrontational standoff of the dance. Neither noticed. The two of them were oblivious to the antagonistic ceremony they had halted.

"Blakely," Robert repeated slowly, cherishing the feeling of the name on his tongue.

Hearing his name spoken so softly and sweetly, Blakely couldn't wait for proper introductions. As the fury built around them, he seized the moment, leaning forward on tiptoes and placing a gentle kiss on the lips that had just caressed his name.

And then the entire deck of the Slippery Boat seemed to explode. That kiss across the clearly drawn lines of the Queenies and the Meanies was the spark that ignited the mounting tension.

Blakely and Robert were dragged away from each other. The dance floor became a stampede of shrieks and hollers. Penny loafers and combat boots stomped and fled. Swirls of leather and lace spiraled throughout the crowd like oil and water, mixing together turbulently and ultimately separating to their own sides.

The riot lasted only moments as the sun made its way toward the sea, as if to hide itself beneath the waves from this horror. But the moments were wild and rushing and disorienting. Tattooed shoulders and bony elbows were thrown, and the DJ quickly put on Donna Summer's "Last Dance." As Blakely was pulled to the back exit of the deck, the loudspeaker announced, "Tea dance is over!"

"That's a first ever!" Jimmy exclaimed dramatically, pulling Blakely down the steep wooden steps to the beach below. "Tea dance never ends before sunset. Never!"

"Who is he?" Blakely asked desperately. He clung to the railing for dear life and pointed across the crowd. He resisted being pulled to the sand and losing that last glimpse. On the other side of the deck, the handsome stranger was being bullied out the front entrance to the Slippery Boat.

"That..." Jimmy paused emphatically. "...is your enemy. That is the Meanies' newest recruit."

"What's his name?"

"I heard someone call him Robert."

"Robert," Blakely repeated. Surrendering his last bit of strength with that name, he allowed the tiny man to drag him to the wet sand, leading him through the pilings of the pier and all the way back to Aunt Shirley's Porch.

Chapter Four

Where 4 Art

"You caused quite an uproar, missy," Bea lectured Blakely over the rim of his glass. "But now that you've had your scene, you're going to be a queen. It's been decided."

After serving several pitchers of Seaside iced tea to Bea, Gigi, Leela, Zsa (only one Zsa and no Gabor, but just as bleach blond), and the rest of the Queenies, and after listening to as many hours of nonstop haranguing about fraternizing with the "unwashed, uncouth, undressed underlings," Blakely was more than ready for quitting time. In fact, his exact words were something more along the line of, "I'll be damned if I'm going to wear seersucker and bat my eyes all summer from behind a lacy fan. Y'all can find another Southern belle to ding-a-ling."

As he stomped off into the night, the Queenies took his outburst as a sure sign that he was coming along nicely and developing a keen talent for their trademark bitchery. Rejection was just another form of alluring bickering, mere foreplay in their world. His temper tantrum only encouraged them further as they crowded the lanterned porch with their newly expanded numbers. The freshly crowned queens tittered along as if they'd been monarchs all their lives.

* * * * *

Robert wasted no time returning his new vest. As soon as the crowd from the tea dance had dispersed, he crumpled the leather garment beneath his arm and trudged angrily all the way to the Arm Pit. He opened the door, propped it with his foot, and let the last of the evening's soft summer sunlight spill into the dark hole. He tossed the vest onto the bar.

"I think you've mistaken me for a show pony," he said with only the slightest hint of joking in his voice. "I don't need to be saddled with any leather products. And I don't need to be stabled in your barn for the summer."

The Meanies were speechless, or perhaps just blinded by the unexpected light and forwardness. However, unlike the Queenies, they did not take rejection well. They did not take it as a joke. They took it as a challenge. Robert hadn't just thrown down a vest; he'd thrown down the gauntlet. He'd declared war.

A few hours later, Robert managed to calm himself down. He had jogged, showered, and poured a glass of red wine. He sat on the balcony with his feet kicked up on the railing and his wet hair drying in the sea air. He tried desperately to regain that sense of hope and relaxation that he'd had just that morning. But this day had only added to his worries.

On the very first day, his summer plan had gone awry in countless ways. He'd rented a place on the wrong side of town. He'd been too neighborly with neighbors he never should have met. He'd been to a dance club, kissed a stranger, and seemingly started a drunken brawl. He hadn't been to the beach or read a single line of a single book. He had not relaxed. And worst of all, he couldn't get Blakely out of his head. The name echoed there like a song he didn't want to get unstuck.

He had told himself that a name was enough. And the last thing he wanted was complications and more man trouble. But perhaps it was the kiss. Maybe that unasked-for touch had been the tipping point. Perhaps it had been so long since someone had reached out to him in passion -- real passion -- that the brush of lips had branded him more than the promise of a name ever could.

"Blakely," he said into the night. And the sensation of that name on his lips felt like a kiss itself. Robert wasn't sure the kiss and the name were separable at all.

"Blakely, Blakely, Blakely," he repeated, growing bolder and louder and more enamored of that sound with each syllable.

He could allow himself to be silly and romantic and immature just tonight, he concluded. This one night. That was it. He was a grown man. He had a lifetime of baggage behind him and a new life to repair ahead. Lusting after beautiful young men was surely just a symptom of his crisis. But for tonight, he could whisper that name until he fell asleep.

"Robert."

The sound was soft enough to mistake for the waves or the echo of his own voice. But its unexpected presence in the night jolted Robert from his chair. Wine splashed down his leg as he stood. He peered futilely into darkness.

"Who's there?" he demanded. Were the Meanies watching him? Had someone heard his romantic blabbering? Were they making fun of him? And who knew his name?

"Robert?" This time it was a question, laced with hopeful disbelief.

Blakely had wandered into the east side aimlessly, or so he told himself. He would not let himself acknowledge the secret reason he had strayed into Meanie territory. Seaside was a small town, but he had no real belief that he could possibly run into Robert in the dark by pure chance or even purer luck. He had no real reason, yet buried in the back of his mind and somewhere much closer to his heart, he did have hope.

As he stepped from the street and into the sandy strip between buildings and the sea, Blakely was immobilized by the sight of light breaking over the railing of a balcony. He was as stunned by the sight of the man there as he would have been if he'd seen dawn at night. And then he'd heard his own name, called so tenderly on the breeze, he thought he must be dreaming. He had to speak to make the moment real.

"Robert?"

Blakely stepped into the square of light that fell from Robert's balcony. As their eyes locked, they recreated that frozen moment from across the dance floor. It was almost recognition -- a recognition of something each of them had been searching for, whether he knew it or not. Blakely stared up at Robert's form framed in light. His dark hair hung damp on his forehead. His long runner's legs flashed through the slats of the railing. His handsome simplicity was what stunned Blakely. It made him want to trust this man.

"I could listen to you say my name all night," Blakely called up to him.

"And I could say it," Robert answered without thinking. Then he glanced toward the Arm Pit. "But what if the Meanies find you here? They're right across the street."

"Let them find me. Let them hear me call your name." Blakely raised his arms in youthful defiance, clenching his fists above his head. He stared up at Robert with gleaming blue eyes. "What are they going to do about it?"

"I don't really want to think about that," Robert admitted. He didn't know how much of the Meanies' bark had bite behind it. He didn't know how much was for show and how much was for real.

"What can leather and combat boots do to come between us, to keep us from speaking the truth?" Blakely was really on a roll. His feet were in the sand, but his head was in the clouds. He was staring up at Robert with hope and passion. He hadn't expected to have this second chance, to stumble upon Robert in the dark. This summer was about taking chances, and he wasn't about to waste this one. "What do I care about the Queenies and the Meanies? They're just silly names. And what power does a name have? How can they have more power than the sound of 'Robert' and 'Blakely' called into the night?"

"All right, Romeo," Robert called down to him quietly to temper the raised voice. "Enough with the poetry. Why don't you come inside? And don't even think about climbing the trellis; I'll unlock the door."

He disappeared from the balcony. After sliding back the chain and opening the door, but before Blakely could enter, Robert warned, "We're just going to talk, right?"

We're just going to have the conversation that we didn't have the chance to have this afternoon. Proper introductions."

Blakely didn't have a chance to agree. From the street, deep, angry voices suddenly erupted from out of nowhere, from out of ominous darkness.

"I don't know who the hell he thinks he is," one voice hollered.

"No one's too good for the Meanies," another barked. "Hell, no one's too bad, either."

"Disrespect is what it is." The voices escalated. "Can you believe he was sucking face with that little Queenie? If I ever --"

"We'll bring him around," the other interrupted, "even if we have to drag him around. And as for that trouble-making little queen, if we ever see him, we won't be nearly so nice."

Robert seized Blakely by the shoulder and yanked him roughly into the condo. His intention had been protective, but as he slammed the door, momentum took over. Blakely collided with him, wrapping his arms around Robert as they toppled to the carpeted floor.

"Damn right," a voice on the street continued, obviously oblivious to Blakely and Robert's presence and the dramatic scene they had just played out. "The Meanies are mean, and they mean it!"

On top of Robert, Blakely took advantage of his second second chance this evening. He kissed him for the second time that day. Conversation could wait. And although Robert mumbled something into Blakely's lips, it was only a second before his arms flew around Blakely's freckled shoulders and their kiss become a flurry of rolling bodies and panting breath.

Shirts came off. Blakely explored the smooth, pale torso with his face. He exhaled hot breath against white skin and kissed the taut lines of muscles and ribs. Robert ran long white fingers up Blakely's muscled chest. He caressed soft skin and firm flesh.

"We don't have to do this," Robert said. But the fears he was trying to calm were all his own. It was not the older, wiser, learned advice he wanted it to be. It was the panic of having been with no one but his ex for over a decade. It was the terror of feeling this incredible passion long after he'd thought that chance had passed.

"Yes, we do," Blakely whispered. And he silenced further discussion with a deep kiss.

Something secretive heightened the ecstasy of the moment. It was as if they were hiding here behind Robert's slammed door, rolling on his carpet as the entire town of Seaside and all its meddlesome residents tried to keep them apart. The Meanies bellowing on the streets and the Queenies cackling on the porch couldn't stop this fire that was burning between these two men.

Blakely let out a moan that was a bit too loud in the blurred heat of the moment. Suddenly the sound of boots on the street outside rushed closer.

"Did you hear that?" one of the pissed-off Meanie voices asked.

"What the hell is going on in there?" the other barked. The voices were now immediately outside Robert's front window.

The shade was open, and the light was on. The Meanies would be able to look straight into Robert's living room. However, Blakely and Robert were conveniently on the floor. They occupied the few feet of space below the windowsill that were not visible to the Meanies as they looked into the window.

Robert held his hand gently over Blakely's mouth. There was even something erotic about that, the tickle of lips against his palm. And the feeling of their hearts pounding against one another was almost stronger than their fear. They worried the Meanies might actually hear those kettledrum heartbeats.

"There's no one in there," one voice concluded. He sounded disappointed that he'd missed the chance for a good fight.

"Lucky for him," the other piped in.

When the sound of boots on pavement had receded, Robert removed his hand from Blakely's mouth. They both laughed softly at their near miss. Then their kisses stopped their laughter, and they picked up where they had left off.

On Robert's bed, Blakely kissed his way down that long chest and stomach, nuzzling at the thin trail of brown hair beneath the navel as he pulled down Robert's shorts. Blakely could feel the insistent hardness pressing up against his breastbone. And when he revealed Robert's erection, he swallowed him hungrily, tasting salt and sun and fresh soap and the warm flavor of passion.

Robert arched into Blakely's hot young mouth. He pressed his head back into the pillow and wondered for just a moment how he could allow this to happen. But reason was overcome by sensation as Blakely worked his lips and tongue along Robert's shaft. Robert looked down and met sea blue eyes looking back at him. That locked gaze intensified the feeling of pleasure.

Robert took Blakely's face in his hands and pulled him upward. He kissed warm lips and felt the heat his own penis had left inside that mouth. He pulled Blakely higher, grasping a tan nipple gently between his teeth, holding tightly to that wide back and solid chest above him. He explored lower, kissing the amber hair of Blakely's treasure trail and unbuttoning his fly.

Robert pulled down the loosened shorts and held the bare concavities of Blakely's hips as he gazed at the solid, erect cock bobbing before him. Blakely's erection was as thick and sturdy as his frame. His pubic hair was a darker, honeyed shade of his strawberry blond. Robert grabbed the fat head in his mouth, savoring it slowly before he pushed his way down to the dense base and rooted his nose in the musky, tawny pubes. He guided Blakely's hips in and out, feeding himself that beautiful cock until Blakely took over the thrusting himself.

Blakely placed a hand against the headboard to steady himself, creating leverage to pull himself out of Robert's mouth, rubbing his wet head on the man's lips before

sliding his cock back into his throat. When he finally pulled free, they were both panting. He kissed Robert, and their mouths were hot with friction. Their saliva-soaked erections rubbed against one another, and Robert reached down to grasp both rock-hard shafts in his hand as they continued to kiss. He worked his fingers over the slick erections, squeezing them together from bases to tips. Their breath came fast into each other's mouths, and their cocks throbbed, waves of sheer pleasure undulating together, coursing against hard flesh. They shot dual ropes of semen onto tensed torsos and collapsed against each other in an exhausted, wet embrace.

"Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract to-night."

Robert read from the leather-bound book in his lap.

*"It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden;
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be,
Ere one can say, it lightens. Sweet, good night!
This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
Good night, good night! as sweet repose and rest
Come to thy heart, as that within my breast!"*

They sat in the flicker of the gas fireplace that Robert had never thought he'd use this summer. Blakely leaned against Robert's shoulder as Robert recited the first words he'd read during what was supposed to be a relaxing, solitary season of literature.

"It's *Romeo and Juliet*," he explained. "The balcony scene. I thought it was appropriate."

"How romantic," Blakely said sleepily. "But isn't that a tragedy?"

"Well, they do die," Robert admitted. "But it is quite romantic up until that point."

"It's nice to know we have a couple scenes left," Blakely joked.

The mention of a possible future together, no matter how humorous, caused a strained moment of silence. They'd already given each other the summarized versions of their stories as if it was no big deal: newly single; in town for the summer; never expected this to be such a crazy place. It was clear neither was looking or ready for a relationship.

"Well, Seaside is not exactly Verona," Robert said. "And the Queenies and the Meanies are not the Montagues and the Capulets. For one thing, they don't wear tights."

"Don't give the Queenies any ideas," Blakely laughed. "I've got to face them first thing in the morning."

"Won't you spend the night?"

"I can't," he answered softly. "Someone's got to be there to pour the mimosas. And I don't need to give Aunt Shirley any more reason to kick me out."

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," Robert called out as Blakely slipped into his shorts and tank.

"More Shakespeare?" he asked, buttoning and tucking.

"I can't help it," Robert said. "I'm a regular old bookworm."

"It seemed a lot bigger than a worm to me." Blakely smirked. He reached over and caressed the bulge in Robert's pants. He left his hand there, feeling the blood surge beneath his palm. They kissed. Tongues explored mouths deeply. They pressed their bodies together and rested foreheads against one another. "But I really do have to go. Or else I'm going to beg you to take me right here. A good Southern boy shouldn't do such things."

"I'm just fine with a bad Southern boy."

"I don't know what came over me," Blakely insisted. "I completely lost my manners tonight."

"Well, feel free to come back and look for them any time."

"Perhaps." He bit Robert's lip tenderly. "Now it's time to sneak home and hope I don't run into any Meanies on the way." He put his hand on the doorknob gingerly. They'd already closed all the blinds. "Good night, sweet prince."

"That's a different play," Robert said. "But, Blakely, this really isn't any kind of Shakespearean tragedy. We don't have to be part of their play. We don't have to play by their rules."

"That's why you're picking me up for lunch tomorrow." Blakely winked over his shoulder on his way out. "Just don't wear any leather. Not on my side of town."

Chapter Five

Talk of the Town

Although Robert was casually attired, the Queenies actually hissed when he stopped by Aunt Shirley's Porch early the following afternoon. Even Nipple the lapdog managed a faint, feline sound of disapproval.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" Robert asked from the bottom of the stairs.

"Hissss!" came their reply.

"Perhaps a bit warm," he corrected himself. "You're absolutely right."

Despite his brave sarcasm, Robert dared not venture up the steps and onto the porch. Walking into the west side was encroaching on Queenie territory enough. He wasn't about to walk into their lair. As open and airy and daintily pretty as the porch was, it sounded like getting any closer would result in getting scratched.

"What do I have, a bunch of pussies out here?" Aunt Shirley bellowed as she pushed through the screen door. "Put the claws away, girls, or I'll have you neutered! Welcome to the Porch," she said in a markedly sweeter tone to Robert. "Can I get you anything?"

"You wouldn't happen to have a bodyguard, would you?"

"I'll see what I can dig up." She turned back toward the house. "Blakely! Get your sweet ass down here before this poor man is pulled limb from limb!"

"Sorry," Blakely stammered as he skittered onto the porch, tying a sweatshirt around his waist. "The dishes are done, and the bourbon is restocked. Hi, Robert." He smiled as he caught the gaze of the man at the bottom of the stairs.

"Just get the hell out of here alive while you still can," Aunt Shirley dismissed him.

"Robert," Bea slurred suspiciously from his white wicker throne, "I can't believe those thugs let you off your leash so soon."

"Maybe he ran away from the kennel," the fat little queen Leela speculated.

"Yes, I don't see his studded collar," bony and bitchy Gigi noted. "I think he's a stray."

"I'm not much for leather," Robert said, "or being anyone's pet."

"Oh, it suits you just fine," Bea corrected. "Those animals have a scent for their own kind." And with that, he put his ringed hand delicately to his nose as if to block out the most rancid of aromas.

"Let's go, Robert," Blakely said as he hurried down the stairs.

"Blakely," Bea called out after him, "make sure he's had his shots. I wouldn't want you catching anything and spreading it to the entire population of Seaside." The gang tittered and snorted in agreement.

"Charming clientele," Robert whispered to Blakely as they walked away. "And I thought I lived in a rough part of town."

In answer, Blakely just reached over and laced his fingers into Robert's while he knew they were still well within sight of the Queenies up in their perch.

* * * * *

Lunch was beautiful. Like most days in Seaside, the weather was perfect. Neither Robert nor Blakely had had much of a chance to explore the town beyond his own niche of complications and disasters.

They ordered grilled-shrimp caesar salads and crisp white wine at a rooftop café overlooking Market Street. Quaint shops were tucked side by side in a rainbow's array of pastel paints. Throngs of tourists packed the street, essentially shutting the narrow way to anything but foot traffic. Gay men held hands. Lesbians had their arms around one another. Straight boys clung desperately to their girlfriends as if conversion or contagion was just around the next block of art galleries.

"It really is relaxing here," Robert said, exhaling into the summer air as if it were the first chance he'd had to breathe in a long time.

"It can be," Blakely agreed, "as long as certain people aren't around."

"True," Robert said. "But it can be even more beautiful if certain other people are around." He reached beneath their table and placed a hand on Blakely's bare knee. He ran his thumb back and forth through the strawberry down that gave Blakely's legs a golden aura.

"Why, Robert," Blakely exclaimed, "you're enough to make a boy blush." And he placed his own hand on top of Robert's as his face turned a shade similar to his hair.

But at that moment, as if it had been timed to destroy any perfect mood that might arise, growls erupted from the nearby tiki bar.

"Make it rare. I want to see it bleeding," said a man wearing leather boots, leather shorts, and a shaved scalp that looked just as leathery.

"Hell, I want to see it walk out here on its own and moo before it even starts bleeding," bellowed the other, stouter, bearded, but similarly attired gentleman.

"Two burgers coming right up." The androgynous little waiter didn't seem the least bit fazed by his patrons' display of vulgar machismo.

"To go!" the big one bellowed, so loud that it managed to echo through the open space of the roof.

"Who are *they*?" Blakely whispered to Robert. "And what in tarnation are they doing here?"

"I think that's Fist and Sledge, but it's hard to tell them all apart," Robert answered. "And they're...my neighbors, I suppose."

Fist's and Sledge's outfits perfectly matched the leather tops of the barstools, as if they'd dressed specifically for the occasion and location. However, the gratuitous display of butt cheeks made it far too obvious that there were going to be adhesion issues when they peeled themselves free from their seats.

The inevitable sound was somewhere between a *thwack* and a *slurp*. Fortunately, Blakely and Robert didn't have to see the pink, creased cheeks of their buttocks. Unfortunately, that was because Fist and Sledge were headed straight toward their table.

"Rob, you old dog," one called out. His tone was almost friendly, as if he were surprised to find his neighbor lunching here.

"Hmm, shrimp," the shorter one scoffed.

"I would have expected you to pick something a bit more substantial," the other said. But they never looked down at the shrimp salad on the table. They stared straight at Blakely.

"Fortunately," Robert replied without a blink of the eye, "I have a taste for the healthier things in life. It's extremely satisfying."

"I'm not so sure it's good for you," the bearded one growled. He scratched himself through his leather and belched to make sure everyone noticed. "On second thought, I think we'll stay and enjoy our meal right here." As they settled in at Blakely and Robert's umbrella-covered table, several nearby groups of tourists decided to ask for their checks.

Luckily, Blakely and Robert were just about finished with their salads -- even though their meals weren't settling very well.

* * * * *

After several days of bumping into the Queenies and Meanies everywhere, Blakely and Robert started to feel that Seaside was just too small. They would run into a

gaggle of Queenies at the farmers' market. They would suddenly find themselves in the midst of a pack of Meanies at the sandwich shop. An entire table of Queenies would somehow have a reservation directly next to them at a romantic restaurant for dinner. A row of sweating, heckling, sunbathing Meanies would be lined up in front of Robert's condo. And, of course, the Queenies guarded the Porch ferociously, barring entrance to Blakely's room.

They couldn't have a proper date. They could barely have a proper conversation. No matter how nice the other seemed, no matter how handsome he was, no matter how their eyes locked instinctively from across the room, Blakely and Robert just couldn't explore the possibility of a relationship seriously with this constant interference and confrontation.

Neither of them had come to Seaside with romance in mind. And the added complication of aggressive gay gangs really made it seem impossible. They both secretly knew that rebounding this soon after relationship disasters was a bad idea anyway. But the Queenies and Meanies wouldn't even let them think it through.

So after Aunt Shirley had dismissed Blakely early on a warm weekday afternoon, he and Robert met clandestinely on a back street far from the town center. It took them nearly an hour to cross a marshy sandbar at low tide and climb over embankments of granite slabs that broke the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. They were hiking out to the farthest, most secluded beach on the peninsula.

The warm wind was invigorating. They scampered over rocks like little kids, giving each other a helping hand and passing the picnic basket back and forth as they climbed. After a trek through whipping sea grass and rolling dunes, they came to a long, empty strip of sea and sand. There was a lighthouse perched on the far horizon that seemed to stand there for the sole purpose of giving watercolorists something to paint and sell to the tourists.

Blakely and Robert spread a blanket and nestled into a hollow in the beach where the wind and waves had carved a shallow furrow in the sand. Here they were sheltered and snug. Tall, dry blades of grass waved and slapped the sand, leaving delicate imprints like fossils.

"So what are you planning to do after the summer?" Robert asked as he eased the cork out of a chilled bottle of rosé. "Back to Arkansas?"

"Heavens, no!" Blakely exclaimed. "It took me nearly a quarter of a century to get out of there." He paused as if he had never thought of this summer's end himself, as if he'd never asked himself this frightening and inevitable question. He sipped pink wine and ran his fingers through the sand. The fine grains were nearly as pink, like time slipping uncontrollably by. "I know it sounds stupid to say 'I don't know,' that I haven't thought of it. But I've spent so much time just trying to get a start. Get away from the South. Then get away from the North. I just can't seem to find the right place."

"It doesn't sound stupid," Robert said softly in a voice that was the closest to complete understanding Blakely had ever heard. "It just sounds young. Younger than I

ever remember being. And asking a question that thoughtless and trivial just proves what an old man I am."

"You're not that much older than I am," Blakely insisted. His blond-red hair blew in the sea breeze, and his blue-gray eyes filled with oceans of admiration for this man who knew so much more of the world.

"No, I suppose I'm not." Robert's dark eyes darkened more as he looked off at the horizon seriously. "But when I was your age, I was running a business. I was in a relationship. I thought I knew exactly the way the rest of my life was going to go. And I was so wrong. That's what makes me feel old. You're better off living your life day by day, figuring it out along the way."

"You're sweet," Blakely said. He leaned across the picnic basket to place a soft, lingering kiss on Robert's lips. They tasted like tart strawberries from the wine and sunshine. "Sometimes I just hope it all works out, that everything fits together," Blakely said, finally formulating a response. "I don't mean that it magically happens, and I certainly can't fix it all. But I feel like the parts of my life could fit together better."

"That would sure be nice," Robert agreed with a smile, as if he knew better than to dream like that. "But things rarely work out that well, even in books."

"I don't mean happily ever after." Blakely blushed. "But just think about where I've lived. For all its Southern hospitality, the South won't have me. And for all its acceptance, the North sure is full of assholes."

"You seem to have a lot more figured out than most twenty-five-year-olds."

"Well, I wish I could work it out." Blakely smiled. "A little Southern food and hospitality could do wonders up here: barbecue that doesn't come out of a bottle; biscuits that don't taste like hockey pucks; and how about a 'howdy' or 'please and thank you'? A little Southern charm could go a long way."

"I'm certainly enjoying it."

"I know things can't be perfect," Blakely reasserted.

"They can be pretty close."

Robert pressed Blakely back against the slope of sand and stopped his worrying speech with a kiss. Blakely reached up under Robert's shirt, holding his chest, his fingers brushing the soft brown hair under his arm, and his thumb pressed against the point of Robert's nipple. Their warm tongues moved together slowly as their mouths barely moved.

Passion was palpable as the heat of their bodies seeped through their clothing. Blakely wrapped his legs around Robert's waist, pulling him close and feeling his erection growing against him.

And then, like a barge with sails out of control, Bea crested the dune in all his flapping glory. He wore a large-brimmed straw hat festooned with countless yards of gauzy taupe material. The taffeta and tulle blew about uncontrollably. The only thing

keeping it in check was Jimmy, who followed like an overworked maid of honor, grabbing at billowing trails of stray fabric in the wind.

"The trash that washes up on these shores nowadays!" Bea exclaimed. He stopped abruptly, glaring down at them.

Blakely and Robert sprang up in surprise. Their solitary paradise had been invaded. Their secret rendezvous had been uncovered and busted apart.

"What the heck?" Blakely drawled. He was more horrified than angered. *Is there no way to escape these people?*

"And to think, Jimmy," Bea continued, "these beaches were once pristine. Ah, but alas, so once was Blakely's ass. It's hard to believe, I know."

Jimmy snickered along good-heartedly -- the obedient peanut gallery -- as if all of this was a grand old time. He only paused his giggling to jump up and rescue bits of Bea's aberrant veil.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" Blakely asked, marveling that they could have made the trek in their finery and platform sandals.

"And dressed like a beekeeper, no less?" Robert added bitterly.

"We're on safari." Bea tipped his hat. "And the beasts we're finding are just hideous. It's unfortunate that I've forgotten my gun."

"Then you could put yourself out of your misery," Robert suggested. "Can't anyone get a little privacy in this town?"

"On a public beach?" Bea shot back. "Don't you think that's a little crass? I'd call it exhibitionism and public indecency, but who am I to judge?"

"That's an excellent question," Robert challenged. "Who are you to judge *anyone*?" The anger and frustration was apparent on his face, darkening his brow like storm clouds on the horizon. He was not used to being harassed and stalked. The only one who had ever treated him this poorly was David. And Robert wasn't planning on letting anyone resume that role.

Bea simply ignored him. "Shouldn't you be at the Porch, Blakely, instead of gallivanting around like a harlot? Shouldn't you be doing your job instead of *giving* jobs?"

"Aunt Shirley gave me the afternoon off," was all Blakely could manage for his defense. "And why aren't you there?"

"Yes, Bea, my dear," Robert said sarcastically. "How *ever* are the other old ladies getting along without you?"

As if in answer, a gaggle of Queenies spilled over the dune like so many drunken geese. Nipple brought up the rear, panting and frazzled. Upon arrival, he promptly raised a tiny leg and peed a steady stream onto the edge of the beach blanket. Then he trotted into the generous shadow of his looming master.

"My goodness gracious!"

"Heavens almighty!"

"Holy fucking shit!"

"Ruff!"

The cackling entourage huddled around the clueless mother goose. As soon as they'd caught their collective breath, the motley assemblage of flamboyant little birds started cooing and tittering at the sight before them.

"Is this a beach or a cheap motel?"

"I didn't realize pigs had a mating season."

"There's such a thing as nature lovers, but this is quite repulsive."

It was obvious that the infestation was not going to disappear. The quiet miles of beach had been polluted with bitchery and too many bejeweled, sequined frocks. Every word Blakely and Robert said was used against them, and their silence was answered with even more obnoxious chatter.

They hastily grabbed their things, stuffing them all into the picnic basket at random. They reasoned that they could hike back over the rocks faster than the Queenies could prance behind them.

By the time they reached the main road, however, they were greeted by Meanies on motorcycles, who raced by them over and over, popping wheelies, peeling out, and shouting as Blakely and Robert made the long walk back to town without exchanging another word.

* * * * *

Blakely and Robert had learned a valuable lesson. It was useless to try to escape the wrath of Seaside's gangs. Running and hiding just made them chase you down. It was much easier to endure the passing comments in the street and the bellowing laughter from across the bar. They did not want to find themselves stranded in another dangerously remote locale with these lunatics. Maybe the presence of tourists would keep the gangs tame or distract them just a little.

The Queenies had mean blisters the following day. They pouted and whined and cooled the bottoms of their swollen feet with their frosty glasses in between sips. When Blakely left them on the porch, he was pretty sure they wouldn't hobble after him. Regardless, he had no intention of trying to outrun anyone.

"Good evening," Robert said when he met up in the crowd of Market Street.

"Howdy," Blakely answered, taking his hand.

The orange evening light still had a long way to go before it left them in the cover of soft summer darkness. And like the tourists, they were just enjoying walking along the shops and ocean, reveling in the simplicity of being together in a place where they were accepted. In fact, people looked at them and smiled as if this tall, dark man and little strawberry-blond were the cutest couple in town.

Inspired by the sun and the weather and the encouraging glances, Robert smiled naughtily at Blakely and tugged him into a sleek little store of black and chrome. In a town this accepting, Cupid's Erotica was about as mainstream as sex shops got. There were no dark curtains or blacked-out windows. Mannequins in bondage gear smiled out at the passing crowds. Rows and rows of vibrators, whips, and handcuffs adorned the walls. Shelves of lubricants in every color and flavor were stacked to the ceiling.

"Piña colada, water-based lube?" Robert suggested.

"Do I look like a cabana boy?"

"How about passion fruit?"

"That might even be too fruity for me," Blakely joked. "Look at this, they even have leather lube."

"For slippery leather?"

"I think it tastes like it," Blakely guessed. "Or smells like it."

"Nothing should taste or smell like leather except leather," Robert concluded. "And frankly, I could deal with a lot less of that."

Right on cue, two Meanies stepped from behind the racks of leatherwear, but they seemed to ignore Robert's comment. One held an enormous black rubber dildo in his hand and looked thoughtfully at the other as if weighing the merits of such a purchase. Despite the fact that they were wearing leather and chains while standing in a sex shop and waving a dildo at one other, they could have been evaluating a toaster oven.

"I don't know, Grunt. I'm not sure it will fit him."

"You're right," Grunt said broodingly. "It may be too small."

Suddenly, in unison, like two burly, overdressed synchronized swimmers, they turned toward the couple and stared at Blakely. "You look about his size. Would you mind trying it on?"

Blakely was beyond the point where these men could make him blush.

"Sure," he surprised them by answering. He surprised them even more by grabbing the long rubber dildo from them. But he didn't try it on. Instead, he started smacking them upside the arms and torsos with the ribbed weapon.

Robert grabbed Blakely by the waist and dragged him away quickly. If the Meanies hadn't been so taken off guard -- if they hadn't perhaps enjoyed this show of aggression -- Blakely and Robert might not have had time to make their escape.

This physical confrontation in the middle of town made them feel defeated. It's hard to misbehave in a sex-toy store, but his pent-up frustration had allowed Blakely to do just that. It took a lot to make a polite Southern boy lose his charm. And the gangs of Seaside had finally managed to make it happen.

After that scene, they needed to lie low. And Blakely owed Robert one for saving his life. So while the Queenies made endless fun of him -- since they had, of course, already heard about the "dildo assault" and were congratulating themselves on having

trained him so well -- Blakely took it upon himself to spill an entire pitcher of Aunt Shirley's Seaside iced tea all over the porch.

The Queenies would never cry over spilled milk, but bourbon was another story altogether. And although such a faux pas could be expected of a dildo-wielding man on the edge of a nervous meltdown, it didn't prevent the group of queens from sending up a howl as if they were mourning the death of an ordained saint. Blakely's life was only spared again because they were too busy pouring tears into the puddle of booze and sopping it up with their lace hankies. Even Nipple was hastily lapping at the spill as it seeped through the floorboards. Fortunately, they were also all distracted enough to allow Robert to run across the yard and slip through the back door unnoticed.

"I think I should go to bed now," Blakely said numbly. But the Queenies never even looked up from the floor.

Chapter Six

All Is Unfair in Love and War

The little round window was propped open in the gable's peak that was Blakely's bedroom. The dawn was crisp, and the clear sky matched the color of his walls. He and Robert woke slowly to the sound of waves and birds. Market Street was still sleepy and deserted, allowing the natural sounds of morning to drift in and rouse the two lovers.

They had slept like rocks. Day after day of exhausting encounters with the gangs had left them completely drained. The simple act of being able to fall asleep together was an amazing reward. And the sex had certainly helped exhaust them further.

Feeling Robert's long, lean arms wrapped around him, Blakely smiled before he even opened his eyes. He snuggled closer, and Robert tightened his embrace.

"I wish every morning could be like this," Blakely said softly. His voice was hoarse from sleep or emotion or both.

"There's no reason it can't be," Robert whispered into his ear. He bit it lightly for good measure.

"I can think of about a dozen reasons," Blakely countered, waking fully as anger crept back into him. "There's Bea and Gigi and Zsa. Then there's Fist and Sledge and Grizz and whatever the heck their names are. There seem to be more and more of them every day."

"That's ridiculous," Robert insisted. "They're just silly men playing their silly games. They can't ruin our entire summer."

He said "summer," but what neither of them would say aloud was that they had begun to suspect that a lot more than a vacation might be at stake. However, they hadn't had time enough together to figure out if there was really anything more. They had to keep stealing secret moments. They couldn't talk, get to know one another, or walk down the street unmolested. They could hardly pursue a real relationship.

"In the South, they say a barking dog can ruin an entire neighborhood, and a single mosquito can ruin an entire night." Blakely let the bit of Southern wisdom sink in as Robert's body cradled him. "But that's why God invented shotguns and flyswatters."

"Don't tempt me," Robert said a bit too seriously. And then, after a pause, he suggested, "Perhaps we should just leave town. I know it seems extreme, absurd really. But if they want to win, maybe we should just let them. Just leave them to rule over their stupid little town."

"We can't, Robert," Blakely said, nestling into his shoulder. "Not now. It's only been a couple weeks. And I owe Aunt Shirley. She's done so much for me, and she hardly asks me to work at all."

"How many more weeks can you stand this?"

"It's not just Aunt Shirley, or the Queenies and Meanies." Blakely kissed Robert's collarbone. "Seaside is the first place I've ever felt I belong. It's magical. Holding your hand in the street. Kissing on the beach. The ocean and the sunlight and the air. The only people who bother us are bitchy gay queens and grumpy gay bullies. They're not homophobes. They're not going to bash us. In their own way, they're just enjoying themselves."

"Well, I'd enjoy things a lot more without them enjoying themselves so much." Robert propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at Blakely. "You're a gentleman and a saint deep down, Mr. Crawford. I want to get to know everything about you -- more than I can with their interference. I want to let you know me in ways I haven't been able to."

"Well, Mr. Gibson, we have all summer."

"It might take longer than that."

Neither was sure whether these words were an extended proposition or another complaint about summer in Seaside. Robert leaned over and took a copper-colored nipple in his lips. He reached under the sheet to hold Blakely's penis as it responded.

"Promise you'll come away with me," Robert said with his mouth still on Blakely's chest.

"I promise." Blakely gasped softly as he arched up into Robert's hand and mouth.

"Promise you'll come away with me soon," Robert amended.

"As soon as I can," Blakely said. "But right this moment, you have to make love to me."

Blakely had never felt anything so gentle. When Robert entered him, Blakely was touched all the way to his Southern roots. After the necessary condom and lube and soft kisses along his spine, Robert held Blakely tenderly by the hips and slowly pulled their bodies together until his entire length was buried inside and the sharpness of his hip bones pressed into the creamy flesh of Blakely's ass.

He held Blakely there without moving for several moments, simply marveling at the unbelievable sensation of being joined together. And when he started to shift ever

so slightly, every nerve triggered individually. The pleasure they exchanged was more intense than any fast, rough, hard-core porn scene.

Robert was gentle and genteel. Perhaps this incredible feeling really did harken back to Blakely's old-fashioned upbringing. No lover he had ever been with had understood his need for this slow, tender affection. The rushed, needy passion of the young had always left Blakely unsatisfied and empty.

But Robert gave this perfection without instruction, with his eyes closed and his tall, trim torso towering over Blakely's bent form. When he finally collapsed onto Blakely's back in long, lingering pulsations, Blakely's own climax seemed to be an echo of the sensation inside him. Together, they exhaled soft breaths in what could have been a long-held sigh.

Robert held Blakely in silence in the morning light. He kissed his shoulders so softly that each touch of his lips sent shivers into the base of Blakely's spine. Robert moved his mouth ever so slightly before kissing again in a new spot just millimeters from the last.

"What are you doing?" Blakely asked, smiling into his pillow.

"I'm kissing every freckle."

And then the door flew open. They didn't even have time to react. Before they could snap their heads around to confront the intruder, a hurried speech was being delivered in a raspy, hushed voice.

"Christ almighty, enough of that, boys!" Aunt Shirley said. "Holy shit, I've been standing there listening at the door and waiting for you two to finish *forever*."

"Aunt Shirley, it's only --" Blakely began.

"I know what time it is, and that's why I'm scared shitless." She looked over her shoulder suspiciously. "They're here. And they're smiling."

"I'm sorry," Robert said, pulling the sheets a little higher around his stomach, "but who and what are you talking about?"

"The Queenies."

All three sets of eyes in that tiny bedroom went as wide as any drugged-out club kid's. Fear, shock, and confusion were reflected in them. Of course, this was the Queenies' hangout. They were here every single summer day. But now? At this hour of the morning? *Smiling*?

"It's not even seven o'clock!" Blakely gasped in a horrified stage whisper.

"Exactamundo!" Aunt Shirley stabbed her index finger in their direction to emphasize her point. "When was the last time Bea and the girls got all blow-dried and dragged their sagging asses over here before ten in the morning?"

"I don't know."

"Never. That's when," she answered her own question. "I know them. And they don't swarm all over the porch with evil little smiles on their faces first thing in the morning. They haven't had coffee yet, let alone booze."

"What in the world are we going to do about them?" Blakely wondered.

"And how the hell am I going to get out of here?" Robert added.

"Blakely, you'd better get down there and prepare for the worst," she said. "Just put on a smile and do what I say. We're going to have to give them the attention they want so your friend here can hightail it back to Meanie-town."

"If they don't already know I'm here," Robert speculated.

"Exactly," Aunt Shirley said. "You two have certainly gotten yourselves into an inconvenient association here."

Blakely and Robert hurriedly kissed good-bye as they pulled on their pants. It was a shockingly abrupt end to their perfect night. Already the sound of birds and waves was being obscured by the footsteps of breakfast-goers and the cackles of the Queenies rising from the porch.

"You're adorable, boys, really," Shirley urged them along. "But hurry the fuck up. I've got a plan."

* * * * *

Robert leaped over a row of rosebushes behind Aunt Shirley's place. He might have been a runner, but hurdles were far in his high-school past. He grazed both knees and a shin, leaving fine red scratches running up and down his legs. They perfectly matched the roses he'd just trampled. He cursed himself for wearing shorts.

Blakely was a bit nervous, but he was sure that nothing could ruin his mood this morning. He could smell the biscuits browning golden in the oven, and he could still feel where Robert had been inside him. The Queenies might have been bitches, but they had a soft spot for his Southern buttermilk biscuits. Of course, real buttermilk was a scarcity here, but a little lemon juice in the cream worked just fine. Sometimes you needed to add a little sourness to the sweet.

He started to carry the tray toward the porch, but Aunt Shirley blocked the door. "Lose the shirt," she commanded.

"What?!"

"Don't argue. I've got it all planned out."

"*This* is your plan?" he asked in disbelief. But he set aside the tray and peeled off his shirt without further argument.

"Perfect." Shirley nodded in approval. "*That* ought to keep them occupied."

Her brilliant plan worked perfectly. The hoots and hollers and bulging eyes when Blakely carried his steaming tray of biscuits onto the porch created more than enough commotion for Robert to perform his feats of athleticism undetected behind the house and mutter a few swear words as he jogged away.

"Those are some fresh biscuits!" Zsa exclaimed beneath his platinum bouffant.

"Hot and golden!" Jimmy and the crowd of younger Queenies chimed in.

"Buttery and delicious!" Leela speculated. The plump little princess was practically drooling.

They weren't looking at the contents of the tray, however. Their eyes focused instead on Blakely's exposed torso. He was tan and toned and flushed from the incredible scene he and Robert had just played out upstairs. His nipples stood pert and sensitive from Robert's kisses. His chest heaved slightly from nervousness and residual excitement.

"So sorry for the delay." Blakely laid his sweet Southern accent on thick like icing. "But you caught me off guard, obviously. What are y'all doing up so bright and early?"

He placed the tray of biscuits on the glass-top table and stepped back quickly lest any hungry hands "accidentally" grab his flesh instead of a biscuit. Aunt Shirley rushed out with double-fisted pitchers, one mimosas and one Bloody Marys. Both were so diluted by booze that you could practically see straight through the glass containers.

But no one touched a thing. They were like starving dogs waiting to pounce, who were being held back by a strict master's command. Blakely couldn't tell whether they were salivating over the food, the booze, or him. He darted back inside and grabbed a flannel shirt from the coatrack, buttoning it halfway as he returned to the dozen or so ravenous men on the porch.

"It's a little brisk this early in the morning," he said to break the silence.

"Yes, I do feel a chill," Bea said ominously. "Perhaps we should have a little something to warm us up while we break the fast and read the morning news. Hot from the oven and hot off the press."

He whipped a newspaper from his fringed, purselike satchel. Jimmy poured two glasses in front of every Queenie -- one mimosa and one Bloody Mary each. However, despite the proximity of so much alcohol, all eyes were glued to the folded paper Bea had produced so dramatically.

"What's so friggin' newsworthy now, Bea?" Aunt Shirley asked. "More topless celebrities exposed? Maybe a messy public outing involving tranny hookers? Don't tell me pink is the new black this season."

"I'd like to propose a toast," Bea said, indiscriminately grabbing one of the drinks before him, "to Robert and David!"

He drained an entire spicy Bloody Mary in one dainty gulp with his pinky finger extended and without batting an eye. With the other hand, he flipped open the newspaper so that the front page was revealed for all to see. There was a collective gasp and a celebratory clinking of glasses.

The newspaper was a small gay press called *Rainbow Bay*, but it wasn't from Seaside. It was published in the gay neighborhood of a city just a few hours inland, and it mostly contained news and updates that would only be of interest to people who lived there: the hair salon had redecorated; the lesbian mothers' group had elected a new treasurer; the cruising grounds in the park were getting security lighting. But there

was one article featured on the front page that was of particular interest to the Queenies and Blakely.

"Sorry it's so out-of-date, but news takes a while to make it all the way to Seaside," Bea apologized. "This issue is almost a full week old."

The headline read: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS IN BUSINESS AND IN LOVE, and the picture beneath was undeniably of Robert. He was standing with his arm around a shorter man, and they stood in front of a window painted with the words DAVID AND ROBERT'S BOOKS.

Blakely was stunned. But he knew enough about the Queenies by now to be skeptical before he was completely defeated. He looked at the date closely. He looked at the rest of the paper, the masthead, the ads, the staples that held it together. Unfortunately, it all looked real. Too real. There was only one fact that remained on Blakely's side.

"Robert was here last week," he said, tossing the paper back down, "with me."

"Quite true," Bea conceded. "But newspapers don't print themselves overnight, dear boy. Where was he the week before, or two weeks before?"

Blakely didn't know. He knew that Robert had been in a long-term relationship. He knew that he had owned a bookstore. But he had assumed that it was farther in the past than last week's edition of the local paper.

"I know it's hard to remember," Bea said in a condescendingly consoling tone. "Time has a way of getting away from pretty young things like you when they spend the summer in Seaside. Reality melts a bit in the summer sun, along with their brains. But you've only known this man for a couple weeks. And you may not really know him at all."

"They broke up," Blakely said, but his voice was not as confident as he wanted it to be.

"Possibly," Bea allowed. "But if they did, it wasn't long ago. And they have a business, a life together. Over ten years, Blakely. That's more than a week of summer loving. This is just vacation."

"And that's his ex," Blakely insisted, pointing at the offending front page.

"Barely," Bea dismissed the technicality. "That's the man he's spent his life with. You're just a refresher course, a summer excursion, a midlife crisis."

"Midlife crisis!?" Blakely practically screamed. "He's only thirty-three!"

"Honey, thirty is the new forty."

"And bitch is the same old bitch," Aunt Shirley jumped in to add her two cents. "And she just keeps getting older." Aunt Shirley wrapped her arm around Blakely's shoulder and escorted him into the kitchen. "I think the breakfast shift has been long enough today."

"I may not be the nicest," Bea called after them, "but neither is the truth. I'm just spreading the news like Blakely's spreading his legs."

* * * * *

Even later that afternoon, Robert was still euphoric. Against his better judgment, he was feeling very optimistic. He knew it was probably nothing more than the afterglow of amazing sex. However, he couldn't help but feel wonderful about life in general as he walked along Market Street with a paperback novel tucked under his arm.

Not even the Queenies and Meanies could upset him. Not even the thorn scratches running along his lower legs could hurt him. In fact, all these things simply served to distract him from the pain he had left behind him with his old life. All these things and, most of all, Blakely.

Blakely was right about Seaside, Robert thought to himself. It was a magical place. Despite its absurdities, in its own way, it was doing exactly what Robert had come here for. It might not have been as relaxing as he had hoped, but all this craziness was covering up the wounds David had caused.

And although Robert had solemnly sworn off men, Blakely seemed to be good for him. Maybe their slow, secretive courtship was exactly what he needed. Blakely was sweet, and he appealed to Robert's literary romantic side. Robert didn't know what exactly would come of it or what exactly he himself wanted from it in the end.

But he didn't care. Maybe he didn't need to be single forever. But maybe he didn't need to whisk Blakely away from Seaside either. Maybe he didn't need to explain everything to Blakely and understand everything about him. Maybe he didn't need to steer and control every detail. Maybe this sweet summer romance would follow its own course like the seasons -- warming up or cooling off naturally.

A sudden blistering heat swept over Robert like a sweltering desert wind. From a block down the street, he caught sight of Blakely standing in front of Spartacus Pizza. He was chewing a greasy slice of cheese pizza and nodding his head absently at the throng of boys who constantly loitered there. The unexpected sight of Blakely derailed Robert's logical train of thought. He was so caught off guard by this beautiful boy and his own intense reaction that he stopped right there on the sidewalk, leaning against a lamppost and watching from afar.

"Shopping the sidewalk sale?"

Robert jumped. Grizz was standing right behind him, casually dressed in tight black leather shorts and a matching cap.

"I was just considering a slice of pizza," Robert lied unconvincingly.

"Come on, Rob, my man, there's a lot hotter stuff for sale over there." His crossed eyes pointed approximately in Blakely's direction. "I hear you should order the 'Southern Special.'"

"The only thing they're selling over there is cholesterol," Robert tried to joke. "I'll save the heart attack for later."

"Come on, man," Grizz challenged. "You've had a piece of that little Southern strawberry shortcake, and we all know it. Don't you worry; there's plenty to go around. Or so I hear."

Robert watched as a couple of cute young tourist boys surrounded Blakely. They smiled and laughed and reached out to caress his exposed arms. They asked him something that Robert couldn't hear, and Blakely nodded his head and patted their sunburned shoulders almost tenderly. Robert could swear that Blakely let his hand linger there. He seemed to lean into the strangers' friendly touches.

"Not that I know personally," Grizz said as if he truly did know, "but I hear he's making quite a name for himself down under Penis Pier. He's becoming a must-see tourist attraction."

Robert pretended not to be listening. He kept an unaffected expression on his face and a watchful eye on Blakely's interaction with the tourists. What in the world were they talking about? It could have been harmless. Who doesn't like a little attention? But the longer Robert watched the gratuitous touching, the more gratuitous it seemed.

He realized he had never actually seen Blakely with other people. They had been running around and hiding from the gangs so much that they had isolated themselves from everyone else, too. Robert had no idea how Blakely acted with others. He had no idea what Blakely did when he wasn't around. He did know that Blakely kissed a total stranger at tea dance on his first day in Seaside, but Robert had hoped his experience was an exception to Blakely's rule.

"I hear," Grizz continued, "that they're thinking about officially changing the saying 'going down' to 'going south' in his honor."

Robert knew not to listen to a single word that passed the lips of any gang member, Queenie *or* Meanie. But watching Blakely now, Robert could almost believe the nasty rumors. They were like a nagging voice in his head he didn't want to hear. Why else would a handsome young man like Blakely come to Seaside for the summer all alone? The answer was obvious. It was staring Robert right in the face. And he felt stupid that he'd assumed his involvement could have altered Blakely's summer plans.

"Thanks for keeping me up on the gossip, Grizz," Robert said, setting off determinedly in the other direction.

"No such thing as gossip in Seaside, Rob," Grizz insisted. "A town this small, the truth moves too fast to become lies. News spreads faster than venereal diseases. And that kid's been passed around this town quicker than a case of crabs."

Robert didn't turn around to acknowledge the comment. But he had a sudden creepy-crawly itch in his shorts that he wouldn't allow himself to scratch.

* * * * *

Blakely was drowning his sorrows in grease. Three slices of cheese pizza later, he didn't feel much better. The melted cheese congealed into a solid mass inside his stomach.

Although the bingeing didn't seem to help, the friendly tourist boys were trying their damndest to console him. Blakely just kept a smile on his face and tried not to belch up mozzarella.

"You're staying here all summer?" one marveled. "You are sooo lucky."

"And I don't know how you stay in such amazing shape," another cooed, reaching out to squeeze Blakely's arm. "With all the partying and pizza, I would be an absolute cow!"

After the revelations of this morning, Blakely wasn't opposed to a little positive attention. There was nothing wrong with some therapeutic flirtation. It wasn't as if he owed Robert any kind of loyalty.

"Well," Blakely said, "I don't usually pig out like this. Honestly, I'm usually working and running myself ragged. You can't play all summer."

"Well, it sounds good to me," the first said.

"And looks even better," his friend finished.

"This is our last day here," the one on the left lamented, "and we really wanted to make it special." He put his hand on Blakely's left shoulder.

"Yeah," the other on the right agreed. "If you have any suggestions, we'd really appreciate it. And we'd be more than totally thrilled if you'd come along." He placed his hand on Blakely's right shoulder.

Blakely was not nearly as naive as he had been when he first arrived in Seaside. He'd seen enough bitchiness and bawdiness to open his innocent Southern eyes. He knew exactly what was going on here. These two guys were practically holding him in a mutual embrace right there on the street in front of Spartacus Pizza.

Although there was something pornographically hot about having a threesome with a horny vacationing couple, Blakely just wasn't in the mood. It really wasn't his thing. And quite honestly, he'd just had great sex that very morning -- although he now almost regretted it. It wasn't that he wanted to save his energies for random, meaningless sex. But he just wished that he hadn't attributed quite so much meaning to what had happened between him and Robert.

At that moment, Blakely spied Jimmy sashaying by in a glittery top. Blakely was almost relieved to see a familiar face, even if it did belong to a Queenie. Besides, Jimmy was certainly the least offensive of the lot.

"Sorry, y'all," Blakely said to the two hopeful tourists, "but I promised my friend we'd do something. Hey, Jimmy!"

Fortunately, Jimmy turned delicately to save Blakely and validate his impromptu lie. The couple removed their hands from his shoulders, and their naughty smiles

turned sour. Immediately, they began scanning the crowd for the next potential vacation souvenir.

"Hey, girlfriend!" Jimmy screamed. He crossed the street with long, exaggerated steps in his green platform flip-flops as if he were auditioning for a turn on a catwalk in the latest summer fashion show. "I've been looking for you everywhere. I've been meaning to catch up."

"I don't know if I like the sound of that," Blakely admitted warily. He hadn't spoken to Jimmy alone since the disastrous Leather and Lace Dance at the Slippery Boat. He seemed a little nicer than the rest of the Queenies, but after the past weeks of constant harassment, Blakely knew that no gang member could be trusted.

"Darling," Jimmy continued on unfazed, "don't forget, you're a Queenie."

"I am not," Blakely insisted.

"Well, you're Queenie material." Jimmy batted his almond-shaped eyes, and Blakely saw that he had green glitter on his lashes that perfectly matched his snug little shirt. "And a queen needs to act like one."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Blakely was growing increasingly suspicious of Jimmy's intentions. And now that the touristy vultures had departed, he didn't need the excuse for escape. He really just wanted to go to bed and nurse his sorrows and aching belly full of pizza.

"Royalty doesn't just give up the throne so easily," Jimmy explained. "Just because someone attacks you doesn't mean you have to surrender."

"Jimmy, I'm really not in the mood for riddles and so-called Queenie wisdom. What're you trying to say?"

"Bea's news broadcast this morning," Jimmy said plainly. "Are you just going to accept it and stuff your face full of pizza?"

"I'm not doing anything of the sort," Blakely snapped.

"Then you might want to wipe that grease off your face." Jimmy produced a lace hanky and dabbed at the corner of Blakely's mouth. "You should at least find out if it's true."

Blakely grabbed the lacy square of fabric and cleaned the orange oil from his lips. "Are you saying that he lied to me? Aren't you on his side or what?"

"I'm not saying anything, except that you shouldn't give up so easily. A Queenie never would."

Just as Blakely was about to protest, yet again, that he was not and would never be a Queenie, Jimmy opened his green mesh beach bag and pulled out the offending newspaper article. "You just come with Jimmy, and we'll get to the bottom of this story like a couple of real investigative reporters. We're going to make Lois Lane proud!"

Before Blakely could say no, he was being pulled toward the east side by a surprisingly strong wisp of a thing in platform flip-flops.

Those heels must give him leverage, Blakely thought as he struggled to keep up. He let himself be dragged along, feeling a little embarrassed and surprised that for once *someone* was on his side.

Jimmy waved the newspaper above his head and tugged Blakely onward with all his might. They made quite a sight barreling up Market Street. But no one in Seaside seemed to regard them as anything out of the ordinary.

* * * * *

It was barbecue day on the east side. Large smoking steel barrels had been set up over fire pits among the crushed shells and clotheslines near Robert's condo complex. The smell of charred meat and greasy smoke permeated the place and overwhelmed the fresh scent of sea breeze. Leatherwear glistened just as greasily where it hung from the lines and adorned the furry bodies of the Meanies gathered there.

Somehow Grizz had convinced Robert to attend this event. Despite the bad news Grizz had broadcast earlier, Robert still had a soft spot for the first person he had run into in Seaside. There was something endearing about those crossed eyes. And after the scene at Spartacus Pizza and the doubts that were growing in his mind, Robert needed the distraction. He figured a summer barbecue was harmless enough, even for the Meanies. He had been wrong.

The Meanies were treating the picnic like some primitive feast. It was as if they had just hunted a mastodon and dragged it home for the tribe. The leather-clad men were gnawing bones and smearing sauce. Combined with their outfits, this was one of the least appetizing experiences of Robert's life.

To top it all off, they were attracting a crowd. The Meanies were not a rare sight around town. But twenty-odd men in leather jockstraps all gathered in one open space gorging themselves on burned flesh and belching loudly was a spectacle the tourists took note of. A crowd had conglomerated along Market Street at a safe distance from the seemingly pagan picnic.

"All ready for the big announcement?" Fist asked. Robert had no idea what he was talking about, but it must have been a big deal if Fist wasn't behind the bar at the Arm Pit during prime drinking time.

"After this, I'm ready for anything," Robert said. He carefully picked up what he hoped was a simple chicken drumstick. When he took a bite, he found it stringy and cold. The gray skin lodged inconveniently between his teeth.

"It's not every day we announce a new Main Meanie," Fist explained. Robert was busy trying to free the poultry from his left incisor.

The Meanies began hooting in unison like wild animals. Glancing at the gathering of non-Meanies at the edge of the street, Robert wondered how many people were witnessing him as part of this crazy scene and how badly his reputation could be

damaged. He thanked the good Lord that he didn't really know anyone in town. Luckily, he didn't yet have a reputation.

Then Robert saw Blakely. He was near the back of the crowd with one of the Queenies. They were hand in hand, working their way forward. There was something odd about how they pushed so insistently toward the front. And why in the world were they holding hands? Robert was so distracted by his racing thoughts that he completely ignored the bellowing Meanies and whatever strange ritual they were performing. Their noise level continued to rise, but Robert just kept staring back at Blakely, who seemed oblivious to him. Blakely and that little queen were focused intently on the Meanies' show.

And then the Queenie wrapped an arm around Blakely tightly. Blakely laid his head down on that bony shoulder, turning his face away from the crowd. The Queenie glanced at a piece of paper in his hand briefly before embracing Blakely fully.

Robert could not believe it. Right before his eyes, right in front of his own condo, Blakely was confirming all the nasty rumors that had been flying around Seaside. Is this really what he wanted? Did he want Robert to know just how insignificant their whole experience had been? Did he want it so badly that he would flaunt his new trick in Robert's front yard?

Robert was astounded. He was in complete shock. And then he turned around, and he was shocked even more.

"Announcing the new Main Meanie!" someone hollered. "Big-D!"

And there -- standing on a picnic table, wearing leather chaps, a studded belt, and a matching dog collar -- was his ex-lover David.

Chapter Seven

If You Can't Beat Them

"I think it's time I told you a little secret," Jimmy said as he led Blakely away from the Meanies' barbecue bash.

"Jimmy, I can't handle any more surprises today." Blakely was beat. He no longer needed Jimmy to support him physically. But he walked slowly, and his face was hollowed. A certain spark was gone from his sea blue eyes.

When he had woken this morning, everything had seemed bright and promising. Now, despite the beautiful summer day in Seaside, it was as if a permanent storm cloud had obscured all light. Seaside had a deceptive appearance. No matter how perfect the weather, no matter how warm the breeze, there was always some dark, cold reality hidden beneath the sunshine.

"This secret might just help," Jimmy insisted. He led Blakely to a bench overlooking the ocean. It sat on an outcropping on the rocky shore, where they could see someone coming from several blocks away. The light, constant sea breeze carried the soft scent of salt, and it further served to cover their conversation.

"The first thing I need to tell you," Jimmy began once they were seated, "is that Bea sent me to find you today."

"What?" Blakely was instantly angry again.

"The newspaper wasn't enough for him." Jimmy placed a comforting hand on Blakely's thigh to hold him there long enough to hear his explanation. "He must have known that Robert's ex was in town. I didn't. I just thought the truth would be better than wondering and torturing yourself. I didn't know the truth would be so painful. I didn't expect that look on your face. I didn't know Bea had sent me to do that to you."

"So now it's done," Blakely said bitterly. "Is that all you wanted to tell me? How is that secret supposed to help me?"

"It's not," Jimmy said softly, lowering his voice. He looked around suspiciously to make sure no one was coming. There was nothing but a beautiful day surrounding them. "I have another idea. I have another secret I've never told anyone. But I'm telling you so you will trust me."

"I'm not so sure I want to hear it."

"I'm not a Queenie." Jimmy looked around quickly, as if he'd just cursed in church.

"The hell you're not!" Blakely yelled. "Don't think for a minute that I'm going to buy that lie. If anyone's a Queenie, it's you."

"Well, thank you," Jimmy said and batted his glittered eyelids. "I do fit in quite well, if I do say so myself. And it can be quite entertaining. But that's not why I came here this summer."

"Join the club."

"That's exactly what I did. I joined the Queenies, even if they didn't know my true reasons. And it's served me better than resisting them has served you."

"So, why *did* you come here this summer?" Blakely squinted his eyes skeptically, trying to detect any hint of untruth from this harmless-looking man in his crazy Queenie costume.

"Anthropology."

"Anthropology?"

"I'm writing my master's thesis. I was on my way to school when I discovered Seaside," Jimmy confessed. "Just don't tell my parents that I'm not at the university."

"Tell your parents?" Blakely said incredulously. "Anthropology? Master's thesis? What in the world does this have to do with anything? And why should I care if you're playing hooky all summer?"

"Those courses aren't cheap, you know," Jimmy explained to a bewildered Blakely. "My parents would *not* want to know they're bankrolling a summer vacation with the Queenies. But they'd never understand. I'm getting an anthropological opportunity unlike any other. Have you seen these guys?"

"Jimmy," Blakely said, "are you going to make a point anytime soon? I'm sure your thesis is incredibly interesting to anthropologists, but I'm really not in the mood for a lecture today."

But despite Blakely's insistence, Jimmy was just getting started. Now that he had confessed his secret, he was determined to finish. He launched into an explanation so thorough that he left no doubt in Blakely's mind that he was telling the absolute truth.

"It's called 'Role versus Reality,'" he began grandly, gesturing in the air as if he were introducing some dramatic production. "I am deconstructing how identities morph in different settings and situations."

"Huh?"

"It's very complex," he continued, hushing Blakely's interruption with an upheld finger. "There are many different levels of changing identities. A mean boss can be a loving, submissive husband at home. A dorky kid at school can be an absolute stud when he goes away to theater camp. Just look at how Danny Zuko in *Grease* was so sweet to Sandy on summer vacation and then turned into a jerk when he returned to the greasers at school."

"Okay, musicals I understand," Blakely said, beginning to follow Jimmy's explanation.

"But that's just behavior and perception," Jimmy continued. "Then you have outright lying: con artists, spies, people living double lives. Finally, there is role-playing. More important is when it isn't playing anymore. Sometimes the players forget it's a game. That's when the role becomes the reality. And that's the phenomenon I want to explore."

"You've lost me," Blakely admitted. And although he still didn't see how any of this related to the mess that his summer was becoming, he let Jimmy finish detailing his theory.

"It's the Queenies and the Meanies."

"What does all this have to do with them?"

"See, they have you fooled too," Jimmy exclaimed, as if he'd just made some huge point or scientific discovery. "They've tricked the entire town. Seaside is the ultimate example of roles and reality. This entire place is make-believe. Everyone believes the game. And the Queenies and the Meanies believe it most of all. But who do you think they really are? What happens when summer ends?"

"That's easy," Blakely said. "The Meanies hibernate in their bear caves, and the Queenies crawl back into their coffins." But despite his attempt at joking, there was something interesting to Jimmy's academic take on the town.

"Or they return to reality. That's what I'm here to figure out."

"So you're making believe too?" Blakely asked.

"I'm a conscientious observer."

"You mean a liar."

"You say tom-ay-to; I say tom-ah-to."

"As long as you don't get sucked into the Queenies' game," Blakely pointed out. No matter how scientific Jimmy tried to be about it, he was still a Queenie, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Blakely wasn't sure that a thesis was going to change that. It would just make him a Queenie with a master's degree.

"That's why you're here. That's why I'm telling you all this," Jimmy explained. "You're my connection to reality. And as luck would have it, you're also my connection to the Meanies."

"What?" Blakely exclaimed. "They hate me."

"But they love your boyfriend. And I need the other side's perspective to understand this dynamic."

"He's not my boyfriend," Blakely said, ignoring the rest of the implications that Jimmy's theory was getting him into.

"Right! And you're supposed to be keeping *me* in reality?" Jimmy laughed and looked out over the blue sea. "Finding out the truth could have implications for more than just my thesis. Remember, Blakely, nothing in Seaside is as it seems."

* * * * *

Robert had not entered the Arm Pit since his first day in Seaside. He had never intended to see the interior of that dungeon of a place again. However, suddenly everything had changed in a single day -- again. Just as his entire life had changed on the first day of summer when David demolished their world, today everything Robert had tried to rebuild had crumbled around him. He couldn't even begin to process what had happened.

The glimmer of a new relationship that had seemed so bright this morning had gone dead. Blakely had thoroughly proven himself to be the cheap little slut everyone claimed he was. He had cuddled and flaunted his affections publicly right in front of Robert. *And Robert's ex*. Even though Robert knew that Blakely couldn't have a clue who David was, somehow hugging that Queenie in David's sight made it even worse.

Then there was the added complication of David himself -- or Big-D, as all the Meanies insisted on calling him. Somehow, while Robert had been distracted by Blakely's "Southern charms," David had come to Seaside and established himself as the Main Meanie right under Robert's nose. But Robert couldn't imagine why. The whole thing seemed surreal.

It didn't really seem any odder that Robert found himself pushing open the black, windowless door and stepping into the darkness of the Arm Pit. The Meanies had retired there for refreshments as soon as they'd gnawed the last of the meat off all the barbecued bones. Robert hadn't even had a chance to catch David's eye in the craziness. The stampede of Meanies had barreled past him and entered the subterranean lair before Robert had recovered from the double whammy of Blakely and David. He'd just stood there in the yard with his mouth agape.

But now, he was going to get to the bottom of it all. He was tired of being caught off guard and taken advantage of. He stepped boldly into the black-and-blue light of the place and looked around in the darkness.

"Rob!" a random Meanie called out as if they'd been expecting him all along. And Robert was sure they had. He didn't know why David was here or what the Meanies had up their sleeves, but he wouldn't believe it was a coincidence.

Within moments, Grizz and Sledge and Grunt and the gang had gathered around Robert as if he were the prodigal son returning to the homestead. Robert scanned the

red-underlit bar and concrete walls. He looked out across the darkness and found what he was looking for.

David was seated in a large chair set on a raised platform, like an oversize throne. He had always been fairly nondescript, a typical bookstore owner like Robert himself. However, where Robert was tall and lean, with soft, handsome eyes, David was short, with sandy, almost colorless hair and squinty eyes due to his refusal to wear glasses. Robert had always considered them an understated literary pair. But David took his height and paunch to heart, considering Robert unjustly more attractive. Somehow David's higher opinion of Robert's appearance had always seemed an attack instead of a compliment.

But now David had accessorized his appearance with leather pants and a studded choker more suited to a bulldog. Under the silvery blue light, he presided over two men arm wrestling, as if he were a judge or a king or whatever the hell a Main Meanie was. Robert walked straight toward the stage. He ignored the bulging tattoos on the men arm wrestling under his ex's gaze.

"Davi--" Robert started, but David cut him off.

"It's Big-D," he said in a husky bark. "You should know that. All the Meanies call me that."

"I'm not exactly a Meanie, Dav... I mean, Big-D." Robert tried to sound sarcastic and defiant, but the surprises of the day had worn him down too much to be that strong.

"Well, you should be," his ex said. "And you need a better name too. 'Rob' is not going to cut it here."

"It's 'Robert,' remember?" Robert sighed. The detail made his entire prior life seem so meaningless. "It always was."

He was facing the man he had spent more than a decade of his life with, but there was nothing familiar about him. It wasn't just the silly outfit. His eyes were cold and unrecognizable. He was playing his part of the Main Meanie flawlessly. It was as if they had no past together whatsoever. It was as if David really was Big-D now.

"How about 'Gibs'?" Big-D asked, ignoring Robert's plea. "You know, like 'Gibson' but cooler."

"Gibs!" voices called in agreement from the darkness of the bar.

"Why didn't you tell me about all this?" Big-D challenged, indicating the Meanies' world beyond the arm-wrestling match that was still at a stalemate. "This is the best scene I've ever been in."

"It's not as if we were speaking that much," Robert said bitterly. "It's not as if I were keeping it a secret from you. It's not as if I had anywhere else to go after..."

"No hard feelings!" Big-D laughed and slapped the table as one of the arm wrestlers finally forced his opponent's fist down. There was a rumble of cheers. The new Main Meanie held the victor's hand high. Although the men departed the stage,

Big-D remained in his little throne, looming over Robert as if he were a humble peasant begging forgiveness from his liege.

"Gibs," Big-D began anew, presuming the nickname had already stuck. "I don't even have any hard feelings about how you've been spending your summer."

He leered down at Robert with a knowing smirk on his face. The roomful of Meanies pretended that they weren't listening to the exchange even though Big-D hadn't lowered his voice one bit.

"My summer?" Robert tried to be challenging. "I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter."

"I'm sure you could have found other offers," his ex said in his Main Meanie voice. "But *he* was the *easiest* choice."

And Robert blushed. He couldn't help it. He couldn't help being embarrassed that he'd run right out and hopped into bed with some young kid. Not that his ex didn't deserve it, but it was even worse that the young kid had turned out to be a typical hot-for-the-summer sex tourist. Robert should have felt more flattered that he'd been chosen as one of Blakely's many conquests. It had been a long time since Robert had been used as a sex toy. But somehow, he didn't feel very flattered right this minute.

Big-D took Robert's silence as defeat. The blush was barely detectable in the dark, bruised light of the bar, but he knew Robert better than anyone else there.

"Like I said, Gibs," Big-D kept right at it, "no hard feelings. Even though you had better choices right here in Seaside. You could have had all this." He opened both arms, indicating the Arm Pit like a king surveying his domain.

Other Meanies took to the stage for the arm-wrestling match. The rest of the crowd drew close, ostensibly to wait their turn or watch the competition. But their real focus was not on the two men with their fists locked in battle. There was much more tension between the two other men who were not even touching one another.

"All this?" Robert couldn't believe it. "What is this? What's so wonderful about it?"

"Have you ever seen such great guys?" Big-D said it as if it were obvious the Meanies were the best friends a man could have. "Friendly, accepting, and a hell of a good time. Why don't you show a little enthusiasm and join the fun? That's what I did. They said I took to the Meanies better than anyone in years. That's how I got voted Main Meanie."

"Congratulations," Robert said flatly. "But how is *this* better than what we had before?"

"Same old Robert," his ex said, using Robert's real name for the first time all summer. "Why do you have to be so negative? So difficult? Why are you fighting these guys who just want to be your friends?"

"With friends like these, who needs enemies?"

"Come on, give it a try." For a moment, he sounded almost like the old David, the real David. "Shake things up a little. Break the routine. Enjoy life. Maybe that's all we ever needed. That's why *I* came here."

Arm wrestlers grunted softly in the strain of their contest, but otherwise there was silence in the Arm Pit's depths. Even those engaged in wrestling looked over their shoulders. The object of everyone's attention was Robert's quiet indecision.

Robert frowned skeptically. He couldn't decide why David had really come to Seaside. Or why he had joined the Meanies. Had David followed him here secretly, out of spite? Or could he want to get back together? And did any of that still matter to Robert?

He had never entertained the possibility that he could have David back. After years of trying to fix a broken relationship, Robert was dumbstruck by the veiled offer. Could this be what Robert had wanted all along? Could it be why he had run away to Seaside and started an affair with a younger man? To try and win back his ex?

He tried to listen to his heart, but it only spoke nonsense. What he really wanted was that feeling of locking eyes from across a room. A gentle touch. Someone staring at him in unexplained wonder.

Had David *ever* been like that? Was Robert just dreaming that those couple of weeks with Blakely had been that wonderful? Had any of it been real? Was everything in Seaside just as make-believe as the Queenies and Meanies themselves?

The heat of the summer sun and the seduction of the sea could make a man lose his sense of judgment. For many, vacation romance was no more serious than tanning or going blond for the summer. It faded away. Perhaps Robert had exaggerated what was really happening in his own state of shock and delirium.

But no matter what was real, no matter how his heart betrayed the reasoning of his mind, why was he torturing himself? Why was he fighting against everyone and everything around him? Blakely was having his fun and lots of it. Robert's ex had even joined the games. Robert alone was waging some empty, private battle amid all the celebration and good times.

This had been the hardest summer of his life. His whole world had been turned upside down. But was he just making it all harder? Was he just battling his own hurt feelings and broken heart? Was he just fighting himself? And was he the only one who was going to get beaten in his solitary game of war?

Big-D was right. Robert looked up at his ex-partner in his costume in the dim light of the bar. He didn't know what he was really looking at, how much of all this was real at all. But he did know what he was going to do.

* * * * *

Blakely was trying to muster the courage to step out onto the porch. Jimmy had prepared him as well as he could for the inevitable onslaught about Robert and his

leather-clad ex. But despite their best planning, the golden light that fell from the gas lamps and pooled on the whitewashed floorboards still looked as ominous as moonlight in a horror movie. So Blakely huddled in the snug kitchen to avoid the monsters.

"Honey," Aunt Shirley said, and Blakely jumped a foot in the air.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm just a little shaken up today."

"So I heard." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked him straight in the eye. "Listen, those asswipes out there may not know how to say it nicely, but at least you got your summer breakup out of the way. Boys around here break their hearts every day. Falling in and out of love is an official part of tourism. Just look at the brochures."

"But, Aunt Shirley, that's not why I came to Seaside," Blakely insisted. "I wasn't even looking for it."

"That's how come it snuck up on you." She clapped him on the back heartily. "But now you know better. This is vacation. Have fun. And don't take any shit."

"That's going to be pretty hard to avoid," he said, looking out the small squares of glass along the door frame.

"Blakely Crawford, you sweet Southern boy." She batted her lashes sarcastically. "You need to get over all that fucking sugar-and-spice bullshit. Get out there and show them that you can be as big of a bitch as any of them. Didn't Scarlett O'Hara teach you a damn thing?"

Blakely's eyes widened. "You think I can do it?"

"Hell, yes!"

"All right," Blakely agreed. "And I won't, frankly, give a damn!" He bounded forward and grabbed the brass doorknob before he had a chance to lose his inspiration.

As usual, the Seaside summer night was soft and beautiful. The sounds of rigging against boat masts bobbing in the harbor were like slow, lazy cowbells in an Arkansas field. But Blakely didn't expect any Southern hospitality here.

"Well, if it isn't --" one of the Queenies on the porch began, but Blakely headed off their prerecorded bitchery.

"Good evening, y'all," he said as he walked directly into their midst. He assumed a prominent position in one of the large wicker wingback chairs. He'd never sat down with them before, but he leaned back and crossed his legs as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to fit right in. He plastered on a thick, toothy smile. "Beautiful night. The low lighting does wonders for all y'all."

"And how was your day?" Jimmy prompted him before the others could pounce.

"Long and hot," Blakely answered, fanning himself delicately. "It's not nearly as sexy as it sounds, though. It's enough to make a boy lose his manners."

"Thank God," Gigi praised.

"Finally," Leela exclaimed.

"How's David?" Bea asked coolly. He wanted to make sure his plan had succeeded, and he wasn't buying any phony, Southern-fried transformation. He stroked his little rat of a dog. Nipple himself narrowed his bulging eyes into a bitchy sneer.

"Poorly attired," Blakely said, nearly yawning from the bore of the challenge. "Punk rock really ruined dog collars for everyone else. Right, Nipple? A middle-aged man shouldn't try to pull it off."

"And what about Robert?" Zsa chimed in.

"It's really a shame." Blakely shook his head. His tone was sublime, unconcerned. "He's got his hands full trying to give David a makeover."

"I heard they're calling him Big-D now," Leela added.

"For 'Disaster'?" Blakely suggested.

"So you've returned Robert to his rightful owner?" Bea cut straight to the chase.

"It's not like I stole him," Blakely corrected. "It was just a test drive. I returned that car to the lot. As my granddaddy used to say, 'A used car is not a bad starter for a spin around town, but there are newer models out there.'"

"Some say there's nothing like a classic," Gigi said, touching his bony little features as if he were a prime example.

"I'll let you know when I'm done comparison shopping," Blakely said.

"That's quite frugal of you," Bea commended, "but don't you feel a tad guilty indulging in the fruits of another's relationship?"

"If you leave it sitting out on the counter unattended, sooner or later someone is going to taste it," Blakely defended himself. "Besides, as my mama used to say, 'Sometimes leftovers are better the second time around, but eventually you'll get sick of it, and you sure can't live on it forever.'"

"For a minute there, I thought you were going to share." Leela giggled like a fat little girl.

"I may be Southern, but hospitality only goes so far. I'm not about to fight over morsels."

"Your granddaddy says this. Your mama says that," Zsa said, confused. His blond was not natural, but his bitchiness was 100-percent genuine. "Southern wisdom is all good and fine, but are we talking about cars or leftover food here?"

"I thought we were talking about a ménage à trois," Gigi said, trilling the French for authenticity.

"Threesomes were never my style," Blakely concluded casually, as if he had a clue what he was talking about or had ever been closer to a threesome than today in front of Spartacus Pizza. "A girl just doesn't get enough individual attention that way."

"Brava!" Bea agreed wholeheartedly. "A queen deserves respect, and a Queenie deserves flat-out worship." He gave Blakely a bold look of fresh appraisal. All the others held their breath. Even Blakely felt his gut clench. Bea sipped from his iced tea, savoring the moment. Then he delivered his verdict. "So what, you're a bit of a tramp?"

Nothing wrong with using your assets, Blakely Belle. We won't hold it against you. There are plenty of boys out there to hold themselves against you."

The whole group laughed and tittered. Jimmy cheered. Long into the night, the Queenies knocked back Seaside iced teas with Blakely as if he'd always been part of the gang -- as if they hadn't tortured him into submission.

If the Queenies wanted a slutty Southern belle, that was exactly what Blakely was going to give them. Jimmy sat across the porch, hiding his smile in shadows and an embroidered hanky. He'd been right about Blakely. And he'd been right about all this. This was easier than it looked. It was almost fun.

If the smiles and witty comebacks weren't simply a cover for the stabbing pain in Blakely's chest, he might have enjoyed it more too. However, if his will and hopes had not been worn down to the rawest nerve, he knew that he would never have had the guts -- or the desperation -- to perform this magical transformation.

He felt like Cinderella. But instead of a princess, he had turned into a queen -- a Queenie. Somehow it didn't seem much of an improvement over the humble, happy servant he had been that morning. But if he was ever going to get through this summer's masquerade, it was the costume he was going to have to wear -- ball gown, tiara, and all.

* * * * *

In that dark, silent moment, the air in the Arm Pit seemed to sit still. All those men in leather and chains held their breath in anticipation of Robert's next move. But they never could have expected he would take such a dramatic step.

Without further hesitation -- without thinking more about all the unknowns that crowded his mind -- Robert jumped up onto the small stage. He walked right past Big-D and straight up to a giant Meanie sitting alone at one of the small card tables. He pulled up a stool. He sat down. He assumed the arm-wrestling position.

Although the burly Meanie was surprised, the man flexed reflexively against the challenge. Robert hardly noticed. He slammed the larger man's hand down in one decisive move.

"That's my Gibbs!" Big-D shouted. "Welcome to the Meanies! Welcome home!"

Shouts and hollers went up throughout the darkness like a bunch of wild beasts howling at the moon. "Gibs! Gibs! Gibs!" The chant went on all night.

Chapter Eight

If You Can't Join Them

Bench presses in the yard among clotheslines held little satisfaction for Robert. He was through with it after about eight reps. Two weeks of this nonsense was overkill. This wasn't muscle beach. This wasn't a prison yard. This was the quaint little courtyard outside his condo on what was supposed to be summer vacation.

"Two more, Gibbs." Sledge grunted as he stood over the barbell. "You can do it!"

"I think that's enough," Robert said, racking the meager weight he'd been forced to press. "I don't want to get too busty up top."

He grabbed his paperback and found a quiet seat on the ground with his back against a clothesline pole where he could look out over the ocean. The other Meanies continued to huff and strain in their leather as they did their exercises within plain view of the tourists passing by. Many stopped to watch, as if the Meanies were animals at a zoo. Although the gang members occasionally barked at the gawkers and sent them scurrying, Robert was certain that being on display was the entire point of their lifting. Everything was a spectator sport for the Meanies.

Robert, on the other hand, had always been a private person. A nice, long jog along the beach was his idea of a good time. A long novel was even better. Prancing around town in leather for all the world to see and frightening innocent bystanders was not exactly his cup of tea.

"Time to make the rounds," Big-D yelled. The Meanies gathered like anxious children on picture day, adjusting their straps and chains. As usual, Robert reluctantly brought up the rear. He was the last to join the group at the edge of the road, and he was also the least impressively -- or offensively -- dressed. He thought the black jeans alone were horrifying enough. He couldn't remember how many decades ago they had

actually been fashionably acceptable. In addition, the Meanies had insisted that he put his new-recruit leather vest on over his white T-shirt.

"Come on, Gibs, show some attitude," Big-D called out.

Robert gave a thumbs-up, but that couldn't begin to compete with the growls and hoots than issued from the rest of the Meanies. He was trying to be a good sport. And it was a relief not to be constantly running from the gangs or in confrontation with them.

He actually didn't mind the camaraderie. He didn't mind the group walks through the town and along the beaches. He didn't even mind kicking back and relaxing in the Arm Pit now that he didn't feel he could be torn limb from limb at any moment. But he wasn't so sure that he was truly Meanie material. And he could have done without the elaborate, uncomfortable outfits and the scowling intimidation.

But he was giving it a shot. He was being positive. It just felt odd to put on such a glowering expression to demonstrate optimism. Regardless, he knitted his brow together, lodged his paperback under his arm, and followed the pack of Meanies into the thick of tourists along Market Street at noon.

It didn't take long. The locals and regular visitors didn't even glance sideways at the Meanies. But Seaside had a fresh crop of newbie tourists almost daily. They came for the beach and the watercolor seascapes, clueless about what kind of vacation they were actually walking into. Once they realized, it was too late. Their wide eyes and hushed exclamations and frightened cowering identified them immediately. That's exactly what the Meanies were looking for.

They lurked around souvenir shops and ice-cream stands. They glared at skinny little gay men in their new beachwear. They puffed up their exposed chests and paraded in front of families. Robert hung toward the back of the pack, hoping he looked like some random fellow along the street who just happened to be sporting a leather vest.

"Whoa! Dad, look at that!" a boy of about nine shouted. He pointed at the Meanies, nearly dropping his double scoop of chocolate from its cone. "Cool!"

"Now, Mikey, it's not polite to point." His pearl-wearing mother swatted hurriedly at his outstretched index finger.

"That's right, son. Listen to your mother," his father barely stammered. He had ice cream on his upper lip and argyle dress socks stuffed into new sandals. He was horrified. This wasn't exactly what a father wanted to hear -- his nine-year-old son thought a group of muscled gay men in S&M gear was "cool."

"Why don't you ever wear anything that awesome, Dad?" the boy continued, ignoring his parents' pleas.

The Meanies stepped forward to better display their wares. Grizz put his hands on his hips, his nipple rings swaying with his movement. Fist reached up to buff his shiny scalp. Sledge stroked his beard and rattled his chains. Big-D crossed his arms, simultaneously pushing up his biceps and pecs beyond their true size.

"Yeah, Dad?" Big-D asked. "There's a leather store right down the street. We could have you hooded, leashed, and pierced in no time."

"No, no, thank you." The man averted his eyes. "Let's go, kids."

"You have the legs to pull it off," Grizz offered helpfully.

Dad blushed. He was speechless. But his lanky daughter was having none of it. The beanpole couldn't have been more than eleven, but her left eyebrow had been raised skeptically since the Meanies first approached.

"Your necklace doesn't really match," she said to Big-D, indicating the spiked leather choker around his throat.

"It's a collar," Big-D tried to growl.

"Huh?" she said, but she didn't sound the least bit impressed. Robert noticed that the girl was absolutely right. Today Big-D had abandoned the matching belt for a chain slung low around the hips of his black suede chaps.

"Is that a stick-on tattoo?" the girl asked Sledge, peering closer. "It looks like the ones we used in *Pirates of Penzance* for the school musical last year."

The family dragged the daughter away before she could start a rumble to defend her father's honor. Big-D and the boys strutted slowly away as if they'd just reigned victorious instead of being emasculated by a preteen girl.

That girl is going to grow up to be a super bitch, Robert thought. Good for her.

Having gotten their fill of startled looks along Market Street, the Meanies made their way back to the east side. Once tucked snugly inside the Arm Pit, they indulged in their early-afternoon shots of Fist's famous motor oil and told war stories of that afternoon's "rounds."

"Did you see the look on that guy's face?" Big-D asked. And all the Meanies joined in the cruel laughter.

Robert didn't mind this part of the day either. Although they were shut away from all sunlight, it signaled a break in the ongoing harassment of Seaside. And the viscous, nearly noxious fluid in his shot glass assured that he would neither overindulge nor have a hangover.

For the rest of the afternoon, the Meanies arm wrestled, played pinball, and shot pool. But mostly they just shot the shit, reliving their exploits and planning future mayhem.

"Just wait till tomorrow. We'll hit the beach and give all those bathing beauties some real men to look at."

"Pizza tonight?"

"Sure thing. One a.m. at Spartacus, when the tourist boys are drunk enough to come to the dark side. At least for a couple of hours."

Then they all laughed and scratched themselves and prepared for the night's mischief. This was about the time that Robert was allowed to excuse himself.

"Later, men," he said, lowering his voice an octave or two. "Just not enough light in here to read by." And with that, he hurried out the door with his book before anyone could object.

Now he could try to enjoy the rest of the day's sunlight. He could ditch the leather vest and sit on the couch, opening the sliding glass door to let in the salty breeze. He could wander out onto the balcony or the beach and focus on what mattered.

They really weren't bad guys, the Meanies. They meant well, at least to each other. And no one could say they didn't do their damndest to have a good time. Even if their idea of fun was scaring small children and middle-aged straight men.

As Robert settled into his couch and his afternoon, he reminded himself that the Meanies were actually good for him. They were better for him than fighting against everyone all summer. They were better than being used and made a fool of by some young kid. They were probably even better than being all alone, left with nothing but his tortured thoughts and twice-wounded heart.

More than anything else, they kept his mind off Blakely.

Robert cursed himself for letting the memory escape and derail his train of thought. But it was true. The whole gang of Meanies was hardly a substitute for one special person who could share the beauty of Seaside with him. Even relaxed solitude paled in comparison. But he refused to allow himself to have such silly, romantic notions. He had plenty of distractions around him.

"Big-D" David, for example. He was another story altogether. He treated Robert like just another one of the Meanies, just another person to make him feel better about himself as he flexed and shouted. Any hint that he wanted Robert back was obscured by his Main Meanie act.

This bravado was getting old -- older than it had been in the old days. His swagger now had the alter ego of Big-D to amplify it to ridiculous new levels. In a sense, he truly did seem to want Robert back. But he wanted him in the way he wanted a new leather harness or new legions of Meanie followers.

Robert felt more like a conquest or a possession. The more time he spent in the presence of the Meanies, the less Robert believed that this game was going to improve their relationship. He wasn't sure David would ever be able to leave Big-D behind. He wouldn't let Robert call him by his real name. He wouldn't even talk to Robert in anything but that ridiculous growling voice he had adopted. He was more married to Big-D than he ever had been to Robert.

Robert wondered how many of these Meanies had whole other lives, whole other identities they had abandoned for the gang. Had they all surrendered the real world and willingly stranded themselves here on this surreal strip of sand?

The ridiculous transformation from David to Big-D was made all the more transparent in contrast with the very genuine existence of Blakely. Blakely was everything that David was not, had never been. He was gentle and kind and sweet and

innocent. Just the way he had touched Robert confirmed all those qualities. No one could fake something that real.

Again, Robert cursed himself. No matter how hard he tried, he kept coming back to wistful thoughts of Blakely. And with every thought, it was getting harder and harder for Robert to believe the rumors about Blakely. No doubt Blakely had heard rumors of his own since Big-D appeared and Robert had started frequenting the Arm Pit.

They hadn't spoken to each other in two weeks. The scratches on Robert's legs from the rosebushes had healed, but there was another pain from that morning he couldn't get rid of.

Robert again tried to banish these dreamy thoughts. No matter what, the last thing he needed to do was complicate Blakely's life with all his baggage. Whether Blakely was sleeping around or not, whether David had any good intentions or not, whether everything returned to normal or continued to spiral into insanity, Robert was determined not to complicate things further.

He tried not to think about what it would have been like if he and David had stayed together. Or if he'd gone anywhere other than Seaside this summer. Most of all, he tried not to think about what it would have been like if he and Blakely had gotten to have the summer all to themselves.

Robert took out a folded newspaper clipping from the back of his book. He'd found it crumpled in the courtyard that evening after winning the arm-wrestling match in the Arm Pit. The picture on the front page was from earlier that spring, but it could have been a hundred years in the past.

Neither he nor David looked a thing like their current selves as they posed in front of the old bookstore. David's rumpled sweater looked comical compared to his new Meanie wardrobe. And Robert just looked tired and meek in the photo. Maybe it was the grainy newspaper printing, but when he looked at himself in the mirror, he seemed changed. Despite the traumatic summer events, he seemed to have acquired more spark along with his tan -- a little piss and vinegar.

Robert leaned forward and tossed the newspaper into the fireplace. It wasn't on, and it didn't need kindling since it ran on gas. But when Robert pushed the discreetly hidden ignition button along the mantle, the paper burst into a brilliant flame that burned blindingly bright for just a second before going out.

Just like everything else, Robert thought to himself.

* * * * *

The Queenies were playing their favorite new game with their favorite new inductee. They called it "Blakely Bait."

"Excuse me, young sir," Zsa said, approaching the tourist boy who was busy chatting with Blakely outside the Market Street Coffee Shoppe. "I hope you're asking

for directions. Because you can't seriously be considering that this sweet thing here has any interest whatsoever in speaking with you further."

The tourist boy was stunned speechless. He stood wide-eyed in his sporty red tank top that hung loosely from his sunburned shoulders. Gold ringlets of hair covered the exposed portion of his pink chest.

Bea appeared out of nowhere to deliver the crowning blow. "Seriously," he said, "you look like a cocker spaniel in desperate need of a grooming. I don't think Blakely wants to spend time tying little red bows in your fur."

The tourist looked down at his own furry torso as if he had never noticed it before. His unfortunate blond complexion turned a humiliated shade of red that matched his tank top.

"Come to think of it," Bea added nonchalantly, "I don't even think Nipple would date you." As if on cue, the little rodent of a dog scuttled forward and started yipping. "I don't even think he'd give you the courtesy of humping your leg."

The Queenies found endless pleasure in using Blakely as bait to lure in tourist boys and then disgrace them. Although he almost enjoyed the flirting, the moment the Queenies pounced was painful. Blakely felt a stab of shame as exquisite as the tourist's embarrassment, though for completely different reasons.

Regardless, Blakely had to smile and bat his eyes and play along. He was a Queenie now. And whether he liked it or not, this was his role.

"I'm sorry," Blakely said to the boy, but by this time everything sounded like sarcasm. "It's not nearly that bad. I'm sure some guys really like it."

"Neanderthal guys," Bea suggested. "Blind Neanderthal guys."

"With bad fashion sense and extremely low standards," Leela added.

The poor tourist boy looked absolutely deflated. And nothing Blakely could say was going to improve that. It would take lots of pink drinks and making out with several strangers at tea dance to rehabilitate him. The tourist hurried off.

"Perhaps you should try a crewneck shirt," Zsa called after him.

"Or a turtleneck," Bea concluded.

Blakely himself had changed his wardrobe over the past weeks. He hadn't quite adopted the frills and lace of the Queenies. But he had taken to wearing tank tops with thin straps that emphasized his shoulders and darted hems that called out his thin waist and the bulge of his ass. He'd allowed the sun to lighten his hair so that the golden strawberry was now streaked with lemony highlights. The overall strawberry-lemon effect was a bit fruity, but he looked hot.

His outer glow, however, was misleading. He sashayed down Market Street with the other Queenies and did his best to be the cute little Southern bitch they so wanted. But the cruelty did not come naturally to him. He didn't mind giving it back to Bea and the other Queenies when they deserved it. But making fun of middle-aged women and

insecure club kids was not his style. So he let them use him to bait the urban gay tourists and tried his best not to blush while the Queenies tortured them.

The flush and embarrassment, the attitude and summery glow also obscured something much less rosy. Because inside, Blakely was still that shy Southern boy who didn't know where he belonged. He was still that hurt little boy who'd been left alone in the cold North. He was still that hopeful kid who had come to Seaside to forget it all and instead had stumbled into a disastrous relationship with Robert. That wound was the freshest.

The thought that he had been used again stabbed at Blakely. Robert and David had reunited, if they had ever really split up. He could see that now. What he couldn't begin to understand was why Robert had pretended their time together had been anything more than a midlife-crisis hook-up. Blakely had just been another bump in the road that led over the hill for Robert. He had been a shiny toy to boost Robert's ego and make David jealous -- like a speedy little convertible. The couple probably played this sick game to kick-start their relationship *every* summer vacation.

Blakely tried to push that hurt deep inside, under all the bitchery and finery. He hadn't even seen Robert in weeks anyway. It seemed that the gangs never bothered with one another when they didn't have Blakely and Robert to fight over. They were polar opposites ignoring each other's existence. Even in the tiny town of Seaside, they operated in different worlds, from opposite ends of town.

Blakely tried to ignore thoughts of Robert as much as the gangs seemed to ignore each other. He smiled despite himself as the Queenies made their way up the wide steps to Aunt Shirley's Porch. After a morning of inflicting humiliation, they were always in need of rest and refreshment.

Blakely was glad to retire to the kitchen and leave the squawking hens out on the porch for a while. He grabbed the tin that he had filled with his own premixed muffin recipe. He added eggs and oil, milk and berries. Then he threw them in the oven and turned his attention to a fresh batch of his extra-special, extra-spicy Southern Bloody Mary mix.

"Well, aren't you just the little domestic diva?" Aunt Shirley commented as she entered the kitchen. "Last time I baked, it involved a water bong and some hippie chicks."

"I try my best," Blakely said. "I just feel bad that I haven't been helping out more around here."

"Are you shitting me?" she hooted. "You're the biggest help I've ever had. I hardly know they're around now that they have you to play with. You just keep them out of my hair, and I'll just keep on swiping their credit cards as they slurp up the booze."

"It's a deal," Blakely said. He smiled at Aunt Shirley's gruff affection. She boxed him playfully on the shoulder and headed out the front door.

On the porch, she boomed at the Queenies, "You lazy bitches. Do you ever get off your worn-out old asses?"

"Sweetheart," Bea cooed, "try and tame that inner she-beast. We have already terrorized half of Seaside before you even emerged from your lair."

"Well, that leaves half for me," she shot back. "I'm off to spend your money."

By the time the Queenies had finished their first Bloody Marys, Blakely appeared with a tray of steaming blueberry and corn muffins. "My granny always said that if you feed a man well at breakfast, he'll be eating you by dinnertime."

Blakely made up his Southern witticisms as he went. It hardly mattered that his grandmother had died before he was born. And no one seemed to question that an old Southern lady would bandy about cunnilingus sayings with her gay grandson. The Queenies believed what they wanted. Jimmy was right.

"Oh, Blakely Belle, I just love to eat your muff..." Gigi giggled to himself as he grabbed a hot muffin. The others joined him in his bawdy laughter and his muffin feast.

"Watching my girlish figure," Jimmy said as he waved away the muffin tray. "But I'll help you clean up in the kitchen." And with that, he grabbed Blakely by the elbow and steered him forcefully back into the kitchen. He obviously had something to talk about.

"You're doing a great job," he said in a hushed voice. "But we need to get some reciprocal perspective."

"That sounds dirty," Blakely joked as he put the muffin pan into the sink. "Is that like sixty-nine? Wait, don't tell me. I don't think I even want to know what it means."

"We need to see how the other side lives," Jimmy whispered. "We need to see what the Meanies are up to."

"No way," Blakely yelled. Fortunately, the running water in the sink covered his adamant refusal.

"Shhh. Don't you want to know what's happening with Robert?"

"No," Blakely said bitterly. "Robert's with David...Big-D. Whatever. He's not with me."

"Blakely, you do not know that."

"I saw it with my own eyes," Blakely said with hurt in his voice and his sea blue eyes. "You saw it too, Jimmy."

"Seeing is not believing in Seaside."

"Well, what is, then?" Blakely asked sharply. "This isn't an anthropology class, Jimmy. It's simpler than that. Ever since that day when I saw whatever you're saying I shouldn't be believing now, Robert hasn't spoken to me. He hasn't come to see me. He hasn't called."

"Have you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why should he?" Jimmy asked. "God knows what they've said about you. Don't you think the Meanies are giving him the same reality-warping treatment the Queenies gave you?"

"I have no idea." But this time Blakely didn't sound quite as bitter. As usual, Jimmy had a point and a better grasp on reality than anyone else in this town.

"There's only one way to find out," he told Blakely.

Jimmy pulled out a carefully folded flyer and handed it to Blakely secretly, like a note passed in junior high. Once Blakely had deconstructed the intricate square of origami, he gazed down at the smudged photocopy skeptically.

"Leather Ball?" he asked. "Is that like what they use in rugby?"

"No such luck. It's the Meanies' midsummer masquerade."

"Like a costume ball?" Blakely asked in disbelief. "Isn't that a little too fairy tale for the Meanies?"

"This whole thing is a fairy tale, remember?" Jimmy reminded him. "And besides, are you kidding me? It's just an excuse for the Meanies to wear even wilder costumes. So we're going shopping!" He pulled out a shiny platinum credit card.

"Oh, no!" Blakely protested.

"I'll just tell Mom and Dad I had to buy more textbooks," Jimmy said, as if that made everything completely logical.

"There is no way I'm walking into the Meanies' end of town ever again," Blakely insisted, "let alone to a costume ball."

"Why do you think they hang flyers?" Jimmy challenged him. "It's an open invitation. The midsummer Leather Ball is infamous. People come to Seaside just for this one party. All the tourists -- everyone -- dresses up this one night. And behind the leather and masks, it's strictly 'Don't ask, don't tell.'"

"Now you're really frightening me."

"Wait until you see my outfit!"

Chapter Nine

Having a Ball

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the most ridiculous-looking idiot of them all?" Robert asked his reflection. "Yup, it's me."

He was wearing his standard black jeans and his Meanies leather vest. But for tonight, he had put on the vest without a T-shirt underneath and added a black bandanna tied over his head in do-rag fashion -- if you could call it fashion at all. He'd even left a day's growth of beard on his face to toughen up his look. He didn't think any of it worked. He just couldn't pull it off. He looked like a bigger fraud than the other Meanies.

For the last few days, he had heard nothing but talk of the wild Leather Ball. The Meanies gossiped about their outfits like a bunch of high-school girls getting ready for the prom. And Robert knew from their discussions that there were going to be countless costumes a hell of a lot crazier than his. In fact, what he was wearing was tame even for day-to-day Meanie wardrobes.

However, that didn't stop Robert from feeling like an absolute ass. Or at the very least, like a washed-up motorcycle loser clinging desperately to the seventies. He hoped that he could just get through the night without much notice. If what the rest of the Meanies said was true, Robert figured he could go undetected among the frighteningly overdressed crowd. Hopefully, he could also slip out early once the Meanies were distracted by their little party.

But he couldn't get away with skipping the event altogether. He'd already been warned by each and every Meanie that his presence at this hallowed celebration was strictly required. Grizz had threatened to drag him there by his nut sac if he didn't show up.

Supposedly, the Leather Ball was such a spectacular and momentous occasion that it would, once and for all, convince Robert that he was one of the Meanies deep down. On this one night, they claimed, everyone became a Meanie and the entire town was transformed and overrun in leather. Grizz promised that Robert would never be the same -- he would be transformed into a Meanie too. It sounded like a nightmare. But the Meanies said the Leather Ball was a preview of what it would be like when they finally took over all of Seaside and reigned supreme. Robert highly doubted they had the ambition for that. It would entail getting out of the Arm Pit every once in a while.

Robert waited as long as he dared without endangering his nut sac. Then he shut off all the lights in his condo before opening the front door. He did not want any illumination to frame his silly outfit when he stepped out into the night. Quietly, he opened the latch and turned the doorknob.

No matter how prepared he thought he was for this celebration, when he entered the dark summer street, he was in complete shock. No matter how outlandish his getup felt, compared to everyone else, he looked more like a conservatively dressed little old lady who had donned her best strand of pearls for a trip straight into the fiery pits of hell.

* * * * *

"These are just not breathable," Blakely complained, tugging at the seam where the new leather pants gave him an attractive but uncomfortable wedgie.

He and Jimmy were taking a circuitous route down a dark back street on purpose. Their new outfits would not have gone over very well on the Queenie-dominated west side. Blakely still couldn't believe Jimmy had talked him into this getup.

Against his better judgment, he had squeezed into tight black leather pants. And that wasn't the worst of it. He also wore -- strictly for the purpose of a disguise -- a black leather harlequin mask around his eyes and a leather cap pulled over his identifiable strawberry blond hair. For good measure, he had also added a thick black armband around his left bicep -- a boy needs to accessorize no matter what. The only thing that was missing was a shirt. Even with his summer tan, his light complexion looked absolutely milky against all that black leather. It practically glowed like moonlight. But Jimmy had insisted that he couldn't cover up with a big, baggy shirt, as he had wanted.

"Trust me," Jimmy had told him, "you'll blend in more this way."

One look at Jimmy's outfit confirmed that he thought blending in meant the opposite of what Blakely had always assumed.

Jimmy was wearing a black spandex body stocking. It was like a slutty wetsuit. But instead of a snorkel and fins, he was wearing a full leather hood with a zippered mouth, and patent plastic platform boots that laced to his thighs. He looked like a spider or a zombie mime -- Blakely couldn't decide which was more horrifying. He wouldn't have wanted either haunting his dreams.

As they approached the east side, Blakely was having more than second thoughts. What he saw looming ahead of them triggered a hundred additional thoughts about why they most definitely should not be headed east.

"It looks like the entire city's on fire," Blakely said.

And it was true. The horizon glowed with sinister light. The sounds that issued from the distance were animal and booming and masculine all at once -- grunts, snorts, drumbeats, butt slaps, and cracking whips.

"What it in the world are we getting ourselves into?" Blakely asked. "I think we should turn around now."

"Mmm-nnn-nnnn," Jimmy mumbled incoherently through his mask.

Blakely reached over and unzipped the zipper obscuring Jimmy's mouth. "What was that, Spider-Man?"

"I said, 'No way, man.'" Jimmy eked out the words through his little metal mouth slit. "This is an anthropological chance of a lifetime. Besides, we look too hot to miss it."

"Great, I always wanted to look hot while I was being murdered," Blakely said, but the sarcasm sounded too much like fear. "Besides, you might want to die for anthropology, but it's not even my major."

"Relax, Blakely." Jimmy put a latex-clad hand on his bare shoulder. "Remember, none of this is real."

"It looks pretty real to me," Blakely said. "Fire and squealing tires, revving engines and screaming? It looks like a war over there."

"Just pretend," Jimmy said to soothe him. "No one will ever recognize you. We're just doing surveillance. It's a reconnaissance mission. We're checking them out."

"That sounds even more like a war."

"Come on, Blakely, aren't you a little bit curious?" Jimmy asked. "Don't you want to know how Robert is handling all this?"

"I couldn't care less, Jimmy. I don't intend to speak to him ever again."

"That's why this is the perfect opportunity," Jimmy insisted. "Tonight, everyone is a Meanie. Everyone is in disguise. You can spy on him, and he'll never even know. It's your only chance."

"Who says I want one?" Blakely snapped. But he walked ahead with more force and determination, leaning into his journey against a strong headwind.

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Actually, Robert thought, hell can't be nearly this frightening.

Motorcycles raced through the streets. Barrels full of fire burned on every corner. Robert spied a giant man wearing a leather devil mask with two-foot horns twisting into the air. There were literally people breathing fire on the beach along Market Street. Their belches of flames lit up the sand and surf. People carried torches as if they were

going to burn witches at the stake. Someone was dragging a caged man through the streets on a black bicycle rickshaw, like a tiger on the way to the circus. There was a whipping station set up next to the Arm Pit. For five dollars, you could get three lashes, and the money went to charity. Robert couldn't imagine which organization the activity benefited.

There was arm wrestling and regular wrestling and perilous stunts on motorbikes. There seemed to be no end to the violence, danger, and destruction. Loud music boomed through the streets, primal, metal sounds of bass and drums clashing and pulsing together. It looked like a riot started by demons. Halloween was never so scary or so real.

The Arm Pit had opened its doors and spilled into the street, consuming all of Seaside in its wake. There was a barricade at one end of Market Street that turned out to be a gigantic makeshift bar. Fist stood behind it pouring endless shots of his motor oil concoction. At first, Robert hadn't even recognized Fist as human. He appeared to be just another part of the hardware. He was draped in chains from head to foot, with a padlock at his throat like a bejeweled pendant. He moved surprisingly well in his hellish Harry Houdini getup, but he made a distinct tinkling sound as he juggled his bottles of booze.

Grizz paraded down the middle of the street in a straight line despite his crossed eyes and alcohol intake. He had connected his nipple rings with what looked like a dog leash, and another chain hooked the contraption to a metal loop on the front of his leather jock. It also seemed that he was wearing eye black, ready to play some impromptu game of touch football. However, given the complex network of restraints, Robert was pretty sure Grizz shouldn't make any sudden movements unless he wanted to lose a nipple or something even more vital.

Beyond those faces -- and asses and bulges and half-naked bodies -- that Robert recognized, there were countless frightening strangers everywhere. They wore masks and makeup, leather and chains, vinyl and metal. One shaved-headed man wore a skull half mask that looked horrifyingly genuine, as if he had peeled the flesh from the upper part of his face. Another group of bodybuilders managed to make black feather-covered eye masks look intimidating.

The entire night throbbed and breathed like an enormous dark beast. The darkness was alive. Robert stood just steps from his front door, but he was struck motionless by the foreign atmosphere of this seething other world -- or underworld. It frightened him how the seeming silliness of the Meanies could come to life in the darkness, how their show of costumes and attitude could bloom into something hideous and tap directly into primal fears when given the right environment.

Then he saw Big-D. A shiver raced down his spine. Robert couldn't even think of him as David now. Tonight the transformation had been completed. He was Big-D through and through. Robert saw no vestiges of his previous partner. He wondered if this horrific image was more real than the brooding bookstore owner David had once been.

Big-D had painted his face bloodred, all the way to the rims of his wide, wild eyes. The color dripped down around his shoulder, practically bleeding from his head. He was covered in leather and spikes, from his thick choker collar to his spiked harness and codpiece to the heavy studded gauntlets that laced up his thick forearms and reached his elbows. He looked like he could do real damage with the slightest touch. He prowled through the night like a predator, and Robert made it a point not to meet his red-rimmed eyes.

"Hey, Gibs," Sledge said, approaching Robert from the side and nearly scaring him out of his skin. "Looking good tonight, if a little wholesome for Leather Ball."

"Fashion has never been my strong suit," Robert said, trying to recover from the shock of this evening and the sight of Big-D. "Nice, um, rubber shorts, Sledge."

"Thanks. They're a bitch to get on, but hell, it's only once a year, huh?"

Robert looked at the furry-chested, bearded little man and said, "I'm sure the overall effect is worth the painful hair loss."

"Sure," Sledge answered without hesitation. "Isn't this great?"

"I'm not exactly sure what 'this' is," Robert said. "What am I supposed to be doing here?"

"It's paradise," Sledge said, pointing out the obvious. Robert thought that fire and brimstone were a bit closer to the reality of this event than any image of heaven.

Sledge said, "Just enjoy. Play, party, sit back and enjoy the view. But don't be shy. Tonight, anything goes. Seize the opportunity. Or opportunities."

And with that, Sledge squeaked away to join the men who were dancing to the thumping beat along the edge of the beach. There were bonfires dug deep into the sand and anchored by rocks like medieval pyres. Everything flickered in firelight.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert caught the reflection of flames on perfect, creamy flesh. The shirtless man walked past torches and blazing barrels to approach the bar at the end of the street. For a moment, Robert could almost understand why people insisted on wearing leather. This man was beautiful. The shiny leather pants hugged every curve of his legs and ass. The blackness accentuated the lean, white muscles of his torso. And the dark mask and cap lent a sexy mystery to the rest of the outfit that left nothing to the imagination.

The flawless beauty reminded Robert of someone he wasn't supposed to be thinking about. But he dismissed the fantasy as soon as the thought crossed his mind. That man, of all men, would never be caught dead in leather on this side of town. He would never strut so confidently through a sea of Meanies. Robert couldn't imagine that *that* man would come anywhere near Robert ever again.

Besides, this flawless beauty was accompanied by a freakish, gimplike creature that made Robert squeamish. The lanky little thing teetered on platform heels and had a hellish zipper of a smile. Robert shook his head and turned away. He must have been imagining things.

* * * * *

Blakely held his breath. He tried to swagger and strut and not look nervous at all as he passed through the nightmare all around him. He thought he might pee his new leather pants.

He walked straight through the hell of Leather Ball and up to the bar. He recognized the man wrapped in chains as one of the Meanies who had terrorized him and Robert while they had tried to enjoy one another earlier in the summer.

"Hey, stud," Fist said, obviously not recognizing Blakely for the Queenie that he was. "Can I get you something *stiff*?"

Blakely grabbed one of the prepoured shots of viscous black liquid without answering. He downed it and grabbed another before he even tasted the first one. It was fairly foul, but it had plenty of the necessary liquor in it. Blakely grunted at the barkeep in response. He was playing the part, and he didn't want his Southern accent to give him away.

He joined Jimmy on the periphery of the action. Meaty fists hit tabletops in arm-wrestling defeat. Boots stamped the ground in a vicious masculine form of dance. Howls of celebration rose into the night sky. Jimmy was obviously ecstatic. The emotion even showed through his full leather hood. His eyes gleamed happily out of their tiny slits.

"Eat your heart out, Dr. Anthropology," Blakely said to him. "This sure doesn't look like make-believe to me."

"Mmmm-hmmmp," was all Jimmy managed in response.

Then Blakely saw Robert across the crowd. He looked lost and scared in his ridiculous outfit. It was certainly not the Robert that Blakely had expected. Blakely wanted to hate him. He wanted to witness Robert confirm all the horrible thoughts and rumors of the past two weeks. He wanted to see just another Meanie -- with his Main Meanie boyfriend. Instead, he saw a man who looked just as lost as Blakely felt amid all this craziness.

Just as Blakely was about to tear his eyes away from Robert, a look of pure disgust passed over Robert's face. Blakely follow his gaze. Robert was staring at his ex -- at the bloody horror that was Big-D. In that moment, Blakely was convinced that Robert and Big-D could never be together. In fact, he had a hard time believing that they had ever been a couple.

Blakely looked at Robert afresh. He suddenly seemed innocent and alone in his Meanie costume. Blakely appreciated the bare arms and biceps and the scruff of stubble across Robert's face. He looked quite handsome despite his uncomfortable and unfamiliar state of dress.

Before Blakely could decide whether to hold his grudge or abandon it -- before he could figure out how he'd pull off a serious discussion in enemy territory anyway --

Big-D climbed atop the makeshift bar at the end of the street. The stout man assumed a stance as if the entire platform had been built solely with him in mind.

What a small, pitiful little man, Blakely thought. Why does he always have to be standing on something?

"Meanies! Tonight is our night!" Big-D roared out across the crowd. "Welcome to Leather Ball!"

Cheers and wolfish yelps filled the night. Blakely couldn't believe that a disgruntled bookstore owner could walk into Seaside just a few weeks ago and command such a frightening, cultish following. David might never have even heard of Leather Ball until this summer, but now he ruled it. He had fully become Big-D.

"We are the true rulers of Seaside. And tonight we show the world!" Big-D bellowed on. "Tonight, we make the rules, and we enforce them! And the one true rule is the Meanies are mean and we mean it!"

The animalistic chorus of cacophony seemed to agree with his simplistic call to arms. Blakely thought it was ridiculous. But he had to admit that the bloodthirsty agreement surrounding him was intimidating. Jimmy jumped up and down enthusiastically, like someone performing an interpretive dance in an unfortunate modern-ballet leotard. It was exactly the kind of crowd mentality and distortion he was looking for.

"We have no tolerance for adversaries," Big-D insisted. "Those who oppose us or attempt to ridicule what we stand for are our enemies! Show them no mercy, and show them just how mean the Meanies truly are! Be mean! Let the Leather Ball begin!"

The crowd cheered and swarmed through the streets as Big-D jumped from his perch of power. It seemed absurd that Big-D would find the need to call out his enemies and practically incite violence. Most of the crowd wasn't Meanies at all. God only knew who these freaks in leather were or where they had come from.

And what true adversary of the Meanies would dare walk into the east side tonight? Blakely thought. Well, other than me and Jimmy, of course.

Blakely felt a slight surge in his gut, which was -- surprisingly -- not fear. Maybe it was the effects of too much Queenie contact, but he felt challenged and angered by Big-D's attitude and instigation. He wasn't about to be threatened by this pretend bad guy. Big-D was just a bookstore owner in Halloween makeup. And Blakely wouldn't put up with his shit.

He looked around for reinforcements, but by that time Jimmy had made his way through the raucous celebration and was enjoying the evening far beyond its anthropological value. Blakely saw him over by the bar and fire pits. He was leaned up against a telephone pole, making out with some slinky tourist boy through the open zipper of his mask. Jimmy seemed to have his new friend on a leash, and Blakely didn't even want to imagine what was going to transpire between the two this dark night.

Robert, on the other hand, hadn't budged from his spot across the street. He looked positively deflated after Big-D's angry rant. He nodded and waved to the

Meanies who passed him, but he was obviously putting in an appearance and trying to be a good sport. Blakely couldn't imagine why he was playing along with their game.

Blakely stared straight across the street. He practically stared a hole straight through Robert. Finally, he forced Robert to return the look. By the way Robert's gaze passed skeptically over him, Blakely could tell Robert was unsure who or what was under all the leather.

Without breaking eye contact, Blakely ran his hand slowly over his chest, letting it slide suggestively down his taut stomach until his thumb caught on the waistband of his leather pants. His fingers hung blatantly over the leather bulge of his crotch.

Before Robert could look away, Blakely used his free hand to lift the leather mask from his face and wink a sea blue eye at him. Robert's face broke into a wide smile.

Blakely took that as a yes to his unasked question. Seizing the moment before this wild night could find a way to intervene, Blakely ran across the street. He dodged leather daddies and S&M slaves. He grabbed Robert around the waist and the back of the neck and kissed his stubbled face.

Their kiss was unbelievably deep. Their hunger reflected the weeks they had been apart. They held on to each other tightly as their mouths moved together and their bodies melded to one another. Amid all this craziness, nothing had ever felt so right.

And when they finally let their lips part, they breathed hurriedly just millimeters from each other's face. "I hope you don't think I make a habit of kissing strangers," Blakely said. "Something just comes over me when I see you."

"I don't want to be a stranger to you anymore," Robert said. "Let's get out of here."

Hoping no one had noticed them, they rushed into the shadows of Robert's condo complex. There were plenty of people kissing, and more, throughout the Leather Ball's mayhem. But the Meanies would never believe that Robert could suddenly let quite so loose, even at Leather Ball. And it wouldn't have taken much imagination for someone to undress Blakely with his eyes and reveal his true identity.

Inside Robert's condo they could still hear the pounding of Leather Ball. But the muted sound almost made them feel safe together tucked inside the summer rental. Being reunited gave them a power those freaks beyond the door didn't have. They were stronger together.

Blakely ripped his mask and cap off as soon as they were inside. Robert lost the silly bandanna around his head. Each looked at the other in his true form and basked in the sight.

"They told me... I just thought... The newspaper..." Blakely began awkwardly. "But now I can see the truth."

"I heard some pretty nasty things too," Robert said, but he didn't want to go into it. "I just thought you didn't want to see me again."

"Would I be here if I was out doing nasty things?" Blakely asked, then after a pause added, "Or if I didn't want to see you?"

"No," Robert said plainly. He looked down, ashamed for letting the valuable time of the past weeks slip through their fingers. "I have something to show you."

Robert took a newspaper from the top of an overflowing bookshelf and flipped to a back page. Then he handed it to Blakely. It was another issue of *Rainbow Bay*, an edition printed exactly one week after the copy the Queenies had produced so dramatically. Under the CORRECTIONS section there was a blurb entitled OUT OF BUSINESS (AND LOVE?):

Last week Rainbow Bay featured beloved David and Robert's Books on its cover. As countless letters and a call from previous owner Robert Gibson have confirmed, our neighborhood bookstore closed well over a month ago. We regret any confusion. The interview was conducted several months ago, and we withheld publication until mid-July, which would have been David and Robert's Books' tenth anniversary. No word yet as to whether David and Robert themselves are still celebrating anniversaries.

"You can't imagine how hard it was to get a copy of this," Robert explained. "I have no idea how they ever got their hands on that first one."

"I didn't believe it anyway," Blakely said. "Not anymore. Not after tonight."

"I've only found one thing in all of Seaside that I can believe in," Robert said, looking Blakely straight in his beautiful blue eyes.

The newspaper fluttered to the carpet as the two men came together again. Blakely's insistent kiss pressed Robert up against the coolness of the sliding glass door. His even more insistent fingers undid the buttons of Robert's leather vest. Blakely spread his hands out over Robert's naked chest, removing the vest altogether. Robert cupped the leather ass of Blakely's jeans with one hand and reached behind himself with the other to pull open the balcony door.

"Let's enjoy the night like everyone else," he suggested. "This will be a balcony scene like none Shakespeare ever imagined."

In response, Blakely unfastened his own button-fly, then stepped out of his leather pants and onto the porch. His erection bobbed in the night air, concealed by darkness as the jubilation of Leather Ball boomed just beyond their protective shadows. The palpable proximity to danger was thrilling. The air reeked of exhaust, latex, and smoke.

Robert tugged the door shut behind them and dropped immediately to his knees. He enveloped the length of Blakely's entire shaft in one swift motion of his head. He buried his nose in golden pubic hair and moved his head side to side, relishing the solid sensation of Blakely filling his mouth and throat.

Blakely moaned, but his sounds of passion were lost among the hollers of the night. He held Robert's whisker-covered face right at the corner of his jaw and slowly

began to move his hips, pulling out and pushing in, feeding himself into Robert's warm mouth.

The feeling was unbelievable -- like every other crazy event of this night. But Blakely couldn't stand it any longer. He needed to kiss this man again right now. He pulled Robert to his feet. Along the way, Robert paused to kiss a navel, a nipple, a collarbone. It was an eternity of small, searing pleasures. When finally their mouths came together, it was as if they had never kissed before.

They held each other's head in their hands. They gazed at one another in darkness, only seeing because of their intimate proximity. Blakely nibbled Robert's upper lip lightly. He tasted the prickle of his beard growth. He reached down and unbuttoned Robert's jeans, reaching into them to grasp his erection and give it a firm squeeze. Blakely ran his fingers up and down the shaft inside those jeans, and when Robert's mouth opened in silent ecstasy, Blakely kissed him again.

Then the door to Robert's condo flew open. From the sound of it and the sight of the men out on the stairs, it had been kicked in by a very large leather boot.

"Gibs!" one shouted. "Where the hell are you?"

"You know you're supposed be at Leather Ball," another insisted.

Through the closed sliding glass door and the gauzy curtain, Blakely and Robert could see the group of Meanies entering the condo. They prayed the darkness was keeping them hidden.

"I sure hope we don't find you in here," a third bellowed.

"And for his sake," yet another said angrily, "I hope we don't find you in here with anyone but a genuine, card-carrying Meanie."

Someone must have seen them. Someone must have said something. Blakely wondered if he had been recognized. Robert wondered how he was going to talk himself out of this one. Was this whole thing a trap for them both?

Robert's jeans were around his knees. Blakely wasn't wearing pants at all. For the moment, it seemed the men couldn't see them from inside the condo. But Blakely and Robert had about five seconds before the men searched the entirety of the tiny rooms and made their way onto the balcony. Maybe less.

"Jump," Robert whispered to Blakely.

"What?" Blakely asked, although he had heard him perfectly. The building was perched high to make the most of the view and the least of water damage. The balcony was nearly a full story up.

"Jump, Blakely," Robert repeated, and then he looked him in the eyes seriously. "Trust me."

Blakely grabbed the railing and launched himself naked into the air. In the dark, he couldn't see where he was headed. He just felt himself fall through space, until he landed with a hard thud in the sand below.

He felt tiny grains of sand lodged in his bare knees. Other than that, he seemed unharmed. By the time he looked up, leather pants, a mask, and a cap were fluttering down on top of him. Blakely grabbed the pants and tugged them on. He nearly had them fastened by the time Robert landed beside him feet-first.

"Let's go," he said and grabbed Blakely's hand.

They didn't know where they were headed, but as they ran along the beach and into the night, they heard the swoosh of the balcony's glass door slide open.

"I can't see a fucking thing!" one of the Meanies yelled over the balcony railing.

"There's nobody here."

They were both shirtless, and Blakely was barefoot. But they didn't waste any time. Quickly, they left the voices behind. They hurried along the water's edge, and they didn't let go of each other's hand.

The strip of beach ran parallel to Market Street all the way through downtown Seaside, but buildings and fences provided some cover from the festivities on the street. The night was blessedly moonless, and the glow from the Meanies' fires and torches did not penetrate the far side of the beach. From Leather Ball, the waves and boats and the two men running through the wet sand all appeared to be one dark sea.

When the fires of Leather Ball had settled along the horizon behind them, Blakely and Robert slowed enough to catch their breath. They themselves could barely see, judging their path by sand and water alone. Blakely plopped his cap back onto his head and snapped his mask in place.

"I'm glad I wore my superhero disguise tonight." Blakely readjusted his mask.

"Maybe this time you should keep it on," Robert suggested.

"Not a chance," Blakely said suggestively and slapped Robert on the ass of his jeans.

"What about your little sidekick back there?"

"Jimmy? He'll be fine. He can take care of himself."

"He looked pretty helpless in that costume -- like a little lizard or something."

"More like a chameleon," Blakely said. "He'll blend right in."

And Blakely had no doubt that Jimmy would be absolutely fine. Jimmy had Seaside figured out better than anyone, and no one suspected a thing of him. Robert and Blakely, on the other hand, stuck out like sore thumbs.

They were public enemies number one and two. They had broken every taboo and betrayed every person in power. The simple act of being together had infuriated the entire town to the point of violence. No matter how they tried, they couldn't play by Seaside's rules.

"Where the hell are we going, by the way?" Robert asked rhetorically, knowing Blakely had as little of a clue as he did. "We can't go back to the east side, or they'll catch us."

"Well, we can't go to the west side dressed like Meanies."

"How far do you think we can swim?"

"We're in far enough over our heads, Robert," Blakely joked, but then he had an idea. "I can only think of one place that accepts every man this time of night."

"You don't mean..."

"It's a must-see tourist attraction," Blakely interrupted. "We'll find out what we've been missing all this time."

"Dressed like this? Or 'undressed,' I suppose I should say."

"I don't think there's a dress code. Although we might have to show a little public display of affection to blend in."

"Oh, no," Robert said sarcastically. "Not that."

"Just try to play along, big boy."

* * * * *

Penis Pier was infamous. No one was supposed to be there, and everyone ended up there sooner or later. In a resort town where crowded little guest rooms with shared baths could cost more than a flashy new outfit, tourist boys doubled, tripled, and quadrupled up with buddies to make the trip affordable. But even with the most liberal of friends, the question was, where could you take a trick?

The pier from the Slippery Boat stretched out toward the water on twenty-foot pilings. Beneath it was a shadowy cavern with plenty of posts, slabs, and soft white sand to find an intimate corner. The town had fenced in the entire opening with chicken wire and posted a security light outside on the beach. However, this only served to improve conditions. A few convenient entryways had been cut into the wire, giving it a protected yet airy feel. And the light outside lent the underside of the pier a soft ambiance instead of utter, fumbling darkness.

Beyond these improvements, the town didn't enforce any stricter limitations. A nice little old lady could walk her dog right along the beach outside, and if her hearing was good, she would only detect the slightest rustles and moans from beneath the pier. Residents and tourists alike considered it a public service. Like a park.

Blakely and Robert crouched to slip through the opening at the darkest end of the pier. As soon as they stood upright in this strange night underworld, each grasped the other's hand as tightly as any straight boy ever clung to his girlfriend on Market Street.

The dark landscape reeked of palpable lust. The scent of sweat floated on the salty sea air. Eyes glinted in the dark. Mouths and breaths and rhythmic motion created a chorus. Possibilities lurked behind every post, within every shadow. Pairs of men went about their business. Groups of bodies gained numbers as passersby joined in, adding more limbs to the tangle.

There were tourists in tank tops. Men in leather who had escaped Leather Ball. Kids too young to get into the clubs. Men too old to bother trying. Desperation and hope and unbridled passion mingled, coexisting in the only place they could all survive.

Honestly, in their current state of dress, Blakely and Robert didn't look any more refined than the rest of the crowd. They avoided eye contact and dodged outstretched hands. They stepped cautiously around couples on the ground and suspicious piles of clothing. Finally they made their way to the center and found an unoccupied post. There were shadowy figures all around them, but none of them were as frightening as the Meanies they had just run from. And although it was dark, the light out on the beach gave them a clear view of all that approached. It almost felt safe.

"This is perfect," Blakely whispered.

"Very romantic," Robert confirmed sarcastically but quietly. "So, where were we?"

"Somewhere right around here," Blakely answered, reaching into Robert's jeans and grabbing his penis. He held it as it swelled in his hand, moving his fingers slowly with the quickening pulse. He reached around with both hands, embracing Robert from behind.

Blakely pulled him close, kissed his shoulder and nape. He continued to work his hands in Robert's jeans until Robert was fully erect in his fingers and the waistband was around Robert's thighs. Blakely pressed his leather-clad crotch against that firm runner's ass, and Robert arched backward into that hardness.

"Can I?" Blakely asked.

"In that outfit, the answer's 'Yes, sir.'"

As soon as they whispered the word "condom," about five people threw unopened wrappers at them in an unspoken "shut up already." There was no shortage of protection at Penis Pier, but the visitors preferred to keep the conversation to a minimum.

"Thanks, I think one will do for now," Robert said, but he mumbled so only Blakely heard. And then all joking was abandoned.

Robert reached his arms up the pole, above his head. Blakely ran his hands along those outstretched arms, feeling every muscle and every goose bump he caused along that skin, moving down Robert's tensed back and placing his hands around the narrow waist.

Then he held Robert's hips and kissed him between his shoulder blades as he slowly pressed the latex-covered head of his penis between those muscled ass cheeks. He kissed Robert's back with each slight advance he made inside him. And when he had entered him fully, Blakely wrapped his arms around Robert's torso and held him there, as close as they could ever possibly be.

Although they were technically in public, in the open sea breeze amid dozens of other men, that moment was theirs alone. Suddenly, they were the only two people in

all of Seaside. Robert leaned back into Blakely's movements as the younger man began to thrust into him.

Robert arched his back and pressed his face against the wooden post, concentrating on the warm friction that seeped deep inside him. The sensation of Blakely's width opening him and the delicate warmth of that man's breath on his back were a delicious contrast -- soft and rough simultaneously. It was like the contrast between the heat they were creating and the cool summer air surrounding them.

Robert reached down and began to stroke his own erection while Blakely's hard young cock continued to push into him deeper as each bucking movement forward became more and more insistent. Blakely's hands ran all over Robert's body, touching his outstretched shoulders, his chest, his nipples, the curve of his waist, and the bend of his spread legs.

Robert felt the swell inside him. He felt the final thrust as Blakely pulled almost completely out and then buried himself as far inside Robert as he could, holding his breath and Robert's hips. In that split second on the edge, Robert grasped the base of his own cock and squeezed as much sweet pleasure as he could from the moment. And then they exploded together -- Blakely pouring into him and Robert streaming into the sand -- the climax shot straight through them like Cupid's arrow.

In the silent aftershock, Blakely could barely hear the men around them or the sound of the waves. There were only shuddering tremors of bliss and the pounding of two hearts side by side.

Then suddenly, Blakely heard a distinct growl. After a night surrounded by Meanies, the sound made him jump. But this growl was high-pitched and grating in a way a leatherman never would be. Blakely turned slowly in the near darkness. He saw the shining green eyes of Nipple among the naked limbs. The tiny dog's white teeth gleamed.

What is it doing here? Blakely's mind raced. Could this just be a pier rat? Could there be another mangy, doglike creature in Seaside? Is this a hook-up spot for lapdogs too?

But it was definitely the genuine Nipple, complete with Queenie attitude. Blakely kicked in the mutt's general direction as he pulled up his pants. The little mongrel snapped at his ankle, but it finally skittered away with a disgruntled look on its muzzle. When Blakely saw where the critter had retreated, he nearly fell down or vomited.

Against the far wall, deep in the shadows of the pier, was Bea. That alone would have horrified Blakely to the point of speechlessness. But the sight of Bea's chosen partner for the evening absolutely stunned him.

If it hadn't been for the makeup, Blakely might not have recognized him. But although slightly smeared from an hour before, it was definitely Big-D. He was propped against the wall with his legs in the air. And Bea was being much too aggressive to be ladylike. Fortunately, they were too engrossed in their activity to notice Nipple's growls or Blakely's revulsion. Unfortunately, Blakely had noticed far more of them than he needed.

"What's wrong?" Robert asked, turning around.

"Um...nothing," Blakely stammered instinctively, inserting himself between Robert and the horror show. "Just having trouble with these pants. The whole leather scene is new to me."

"Let me help," Robert said, reaching for Blakely's fly and kissing him softly on the lips.

"Let's get out of here," Blakely whispered into Robert's ear. "I think I've gotten that public sex fantasy out of the way."

Blakely grabbed Robert's hand and led him out from under the pier and away from yet another nightmare. They stepped beyond the security light and into the darkness, where they hoped they'd finally find sanctuary tonight.

Chapter Ten

Waking Up on the Wrong Side of Seaside

The morning was cool and clean like only a summer dawn by the sea can be. Gulls glided on the breeze. The sun rose out of rapidly disappearing mist. And Blakely and Robert awoke in each other's arms.

They had slept on the beach, snuggled up against dunes and sea grass. Despite the wild activities of the night, no one had ventured out onto the dark beach to disturb their slumber. Even if they had, it would have been nearly impossible to detect the two men curled together in the deep darkness.

Now the morning was silent. The birds didn't make a sound. The waves themselves seemed distant and hushed.

"Good morning," Robert whispered to Blakely, although there was no one else around to hear. There probably wasn't another soul awake for miles.

"Mmmm," Blakely answered, cuddling closer into the crook of Robert's arm, unwilling to surrender the comfort of sleep nestled against his partner's body.

"It's like we're the only two people alive," Robert marveled.

"Perhaps last night was the end of the world." Blakely gazed out over the sea. "We could have Seaside all to ourselves."

"That's a wonderful thought," Robert agreed, "but it's far too much to hope for. I think we'd be better off getting home and changing our clothes before anyone else wakes up."

But what the couple found once they'd made their way back to deserted Market Street was even more surreal than the end of the world. Pink crepe paper and streamers covered the trees. Rainbow confetti and glitter had showered down on the street like a mystical summer blizzard.

It was as if good fairies had come with the dawn to wash away the dark debauchery of the previous night. However, that would mean that good fairies employed gratuitous littering, graffiti, and vandalism. Instead, these mischievous fairies were not exactly good. In fact, it could be argued that they had just balanced the atmosphere of the Meanies' celebration with an equal and opposite evil.

In this case, two wrongs didn't quite make a right. Instead, they made a god-awful mess that was uniquely, charmingly Seaside. Charred logs were littered with sequins. Stray scraps of leather were smeared with whipped cream and pink carnations.

"It's the Fairy Hangover," Blakely said in amazement, practically to himself.

"It's certainly giving me a headache," Robert added. "What in the world is it?"

"Jimmy told me about it. Supposedly it's the Queenies' way of reclaiming Seaside when the Meanies get out of hand."

Blakely was struck by how easily and completely the Queenies could cancel out the Meanies' wrath. What had been a hellish Meanie underworld the night before was now a candy-coated fairyland that was sloppily and strikingly Queenie. It all made the gangs make some kind of sense. Like yin and yang. He wondered if it could possibly be as simple to erase the disapproval that the Queenies and Meanies had heaped on his and Robert's relationship.

"The Queenies have undone Leather Ball," Blakely marveled. "They just waited until the Meanies all passed out, and then they did this."

"I'm sure it makes the Meanies extra nauseated when they finally wake up."

"I never imagined it was so..." But Blakely couldn't find the right word. He couldn't decide if it was beautiful or hideous. Good, bad, or otherwise, Seaside really seemed like a magical place. Two men half-naked, half-dressed in leather could wake up and find themselves all alone in a glittering pink summer morning. He couldn't have dreamed this place up. It was almost worth waking each morning just to see what crazy, unexpected fantasy the day would bring.

Robert's reaction held less wonder but just as much logic. Looking around at the childish games and flamboyant displays of rebellion, he questioned how anything so silly could stand in the way of something that felt as real as Blakely standing next to him. *It's time for us to reclaim Seaside for ourselves.*

"I've got to run a bunch of errands for Aunt Shirley," Blakely said, breaking the magical silence. "The grocery store, the liquor store. God, I don't think I'll be home till this afternoon. They never even knew I left at all last night."

"I've got a few things I need to take care of too," Robert said. "Just be careful, and make sure this isn't like last time we said good-bye."

"I didn't plan on saying good-bye at all," Blakely said. "I was just going to do this." And with that, he leaned forward and kissed Robert deeply, simultaneously reaching around to grab his ass with one hand and cradle his neck with the other.

It was several long moments before they let go of one another. Then Blakely just smirked, winked, spun on his heels, and pranced away. Robert enjoyed the view of Blakely's ass in those leather pants as it bobbed down the pink street before he turned himself around and headed home.

* * * * *

After washing away the pervasive sand, changing into shorts and a T-shirt, and setting out a fresh basket of peach scones on the porch with a note, Blakely sneaked off to the east side. He walked through side streets, gazing at the old houses and tidy window boxes, as Seaside awoke around him. People slowly emerged from behind closed doors, clutching coffee cups nonchalantly as if the Queenies and Meanies hadn't transformed their town twice in the past twelve hours.

Blakely watched from afar as the Meanies awoke as well. They had tamed their outfits slightly to more casual jeans and jackets. And they dragged the heels of their boots a bit as they stumbled instinctively to the Arm Pit, grumbling about the pink carnations they were too hungover to discard. Blakely watched as Robert passed through the busted door of his condo in shorts and running shoes and jogged off into the distance.

Blakely waited until the coast was clear and the last of the Meanies had entered the bar. Then he walked straight up to the black door of the Arm Pit. He really wasn't that scared, perhaps just a bit nervous. He felt incredibly optimistic this morning that he could smooth things over by simply explaining it to them. Blakely had never really talked to a Meanie directly. They couldn't be as scary as they had looked last night. They were just people -- or they had been once -- people like Robert and David and anyone else. If a bookstore owner could become Main Meanie overnight, Blakely could talk some sense into them. As proof of their changeability, Blakely just kept in mind the indelible image of Big-D with his ankles in the air.

Blakely stepped out of the sunshine and into the darkness of the Pit. The Meanies didn't look especially happy to see him, but Blakely could understand that they might be a little under the weather this morning. They looked up groggily from their mugs of coffee or motor oil or both.

"Morning, y'all," Blakely said cheerfully. "I was hoping we could have a little chat."

"What the hell are you doing here?" someone snarled from the back of the bar. Grumbles, growls, and mumbles of agreement rippled through the establishment. It sounded like a cave of bears collectively waking from a long winter's hibernation.

"I just wanted to talk to you about me and Robert."

"Who?" Sledge asked confused, seemingly just awaking there at the bar.

"Gibs," Big-D clarified, stepping ominously from the darkness of a corner. His eyes were rimmed red, and Blakely couldn't tell if it was the remainder of last night's

makeup or the natural effects of the late celebration. "And we don't have a damn thing to talk about. Gibbs is a Meanie. You are a Queenie. End of story. There is no Robert. And there sure as hell is no 'you and Robert.' You shouldn't be here."

"You could have at least worn those leather pants," Grizz added suggestively. Blakely was caught off guard that he'd been recognized the night before. But he was heartened by the fact that they hadn't actually sacrificed him at Leather Ball.

"I think I can explain," Blakely insisted, still clinging to some glimmer of hopefulness. "You see, Robert and I are together. I mean, we want to be. We should be. We just need..."

"You just need to get the fuck out of here!" Big-D bellowed. The entire subterranean pit seemed to shake within its foundation.

Blakely was stunned by the ferocity of Big-D's reaction. The last thing he could do was get out of there. He felt cemented to the floor. This place was suddenly too small. Too dark. Too much like a trap he had walked right into.

Blakely realized that there were men between him and the door. The groggy occupants of the stools had moved, shifted silently, and taken posts in response to Big-D's angry war cry. He was surrounded, and the circle was closing.

Now Blakely was frightened. But he was also pissed off. Like an animal who snarled and fought when it was completely cornered, Blakely felt that flame of adrenaline grow from deep inside him.

He was not about to cower in the presence of the Meanies. That's what they wanted, what they were used to. Blakely had learned from the Queenies. You can't fight fire with fire. You fight it with water. And you fight the Meanies with equal and opposite fury -- the wit and bitch of the Queenies.

"I guess intelligent conversation isn't what you boys were looking for this morning," he said as sharply as he could. "I'll tell Robert he needs to find some new friends."

"You tell Gibbs to get his ass back here before we kick it," Big-D growled, stepping closer. "That good-for-nothing son of a bitch!"

"You're jealous," Blakely said in sudden realization. And when the rest of the Meanies tightened their circle defensively around him, Blakely knew that he was right.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Big-D yelled. "What the hell do I have to be jealous about? I'm Big-D. I'm the Main Meanie!"

"You can't stand it that he's happy, can you?" Blakely challenged. "Happier than he was with you."

"What's he got to be happy about?" Big-D spat. The ring of Meanies cinched closer. "A little Queenie whore like you? Disowning all his real friends?"

"You didn't want him before," Blakely reminded him, "and you don't want him now, David."

"The name's Big-D!"

"And what about the bookstore?" Blakely challenged him. He could tell by the baffled looks on the angry snouts around him that the other Meanies had never heard about Big-D's previous life -- his real life.

"A bookstore?" Sledge asked, baffled.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" Big-D insisted.

"David and Robert's Books?" Blakely told him what he already knew. "You didn't want that either. Or your long-term relationship."

"You're talking bullshit, like only a stupid little Queenie slut could."

"It looks like you were jealous of that too." Blakely kept right on going even though he could feel the heat of the men looming around him. "Because you went right out and got yourself your own Queenie, didn't you?"

"And now you're just fucking crazy talking," Big-D said.

"Am I? What about you and Bea under Penis Pier last night?" At this point, it didn't matter if the other Meanies knew what Blakely was talking about or if they believed a single word Blakely was saying. Big-D was at the boiling point. He was ready to explode. His face had regained its red hue naturally from anger and heat and pent-up blood.

"You're just a..." Big-D stammered, so angry that he couldn't find the words or get them past his clenched jaw.

"And you're just a pitiful little bookstore owner who's trying to compensate for throwing his whole life away."

"Shut up! You shut up!" Big-D screamed at the top of his lungs. "You'll say anything to keep from getting your ass kicked, won't you?"

And although he might have been on the edge of getting beaten or worse, Blakely could swear that he saw fear in Big-D's eyes. In fact, that look might have been coming from deep down through *David's* eyes. There was something he was afraid of, something they all were afraid of.

"All I want is the truth," Blakely said, pointing out the simplest request in the world. "And Robert."

Big-D was now so close, Blakely could feel his breath. He could feel the hot, moist air billowing out of him like swamp gas, like steam from the back of a beast.

"Look, pretty boy," Big-D growled into Blakely's face, his nose almost touching him, his serpent's tongue lashing out between words, "just because he got a piece of you and forgot what's important doesn't mean you can come waltzing in here like we all want some of it."

Blakely felt the Meanies all around him. He felt their anger and fear and shoulders pressing up against him from all sides. There was no longer any space for words here. What little light there had been was squeezed out by the mass of fury around him. He was hot and dizzy and nearly blinded, nothing but snarled faces and dark bodies in all directions.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" a huge voice boomed from the entrance like the condemnation of some really pissed-off god. The door was open, and a brilliant slice of light cut into the Arm Pit. Illuminated there in the doorway was the wide figure of Aunt Shirley, like a cross between a warden and a linebacker. "If you make me kick your ass, you'll never be able to show your face in Seaside again!"

She stormed into the bowels of the place without hesitation, reaching out for Blakely as the Meanies parted around her outstretched arm. If they hadn't, they would have met her fist.

She dragged Blakely out in one swift movement. But by the rough way she clutched the scruff of his neck, Blakely wasn't sure he was much better off than the Meanies would have been if she'd gotten her hands on them.

* * * * *

"Blakely isn't here, is he?" Robert asked, looking up onto Aunt Shirley's Porch at the gaggle of Queenies. He had circled the block at a jog and had seen no sign of Blakely.

"If he were, we would not let him come out and play with the likes of you," Bea answered in a singsong, fluttering a silken kerchief in the air for emphasis.

"Good," Robert said, hoping he was catching them by surprise. "I actually wanted to talk to you alone."

Bea looked down at his bangle watch and sighed heavily as if his schedule for the day was packed with appointments other than the one he had with his cocktails. Then he glanced at the mostly full highball in his other hand and shrugged. "I suppose we have a few moments, but make it brief. And do keep your unwashed self down there."

Nipple stood on the uppermost step and growled with his tiny hackles raised. There was no way he was going to let Robert up on the Queenies' porch. So Robert remained below in his sweaty jogging clothes.

"It's about me and Blakely," Robert began. "Don't you think things have gotten out of hand? You've had your fun, but now it's just getting ridiculous."

"I couldn't agree more," Bea slurred. "Whatever novelty your little tryst once held has worn thin. All fun aside, it's time you left that boy alone for good."

Bea held court like a grande dame. The other Queenies sat around him like ladies-in-waiting, chomping at peach scones, just lending support and background giggles. Or he could have been the preacher and they were the congregation, throwing in "amens" and "hallelujahs" when necessary.

The only one up there who didn't look like a true believer was Jimmy. He looked hungover, and his lips were chapped something awful under his lip gloss. But there was also a tinge of worry in his eyes that Robert couldn't quite figure out. Blakely had claimed Jimmy could take care of himself. This morning, however, it looked like there was something happening beyond his control.

"You know that's not what I mean, Bea," Robert said sternly. "Blakely and I are through with your interference and your gossip. We are going to be together whether you like it or not."

"So butch," Bea said as if he hadn't really heard a word. "No wonder those Meanie savages made you one of their own. And that, I'm afraid, has made your request for Blakely Belle's hand impossible. Denied."

"I am not a Meanie. I never wanted to be. And Blakely never asked to be one of you. Can't we just be Blakely and Robert?"

"It's not that easy," Bea dismissed with a wave of his royal hand. But then he turned his steely eyes on Robert and glared down at him with a grave scowl. "It's not about you. You have involved the entire town. You could have rented a quiet bungalow and read books all summer like a good little musty librarian."

"I owned a bookstore," Robert corrected.

"Whatever!"

"And that's exactly what I intended to do."

"But instead, you rented a Meanie condo, went to the Arm Pit, disrupted the Leather and Lace Dance, seduced a Queenie, flaunted it throughout town, caroused about with the Meanies in public, made a scene at Leather Ball, and then had sex in front of half the population of Seaside." Bea counted each offense off on a ringed finger; it took both his hands. "Now you're standing here asking for...for what exactly? Clemency? Truce? Forgiveness?"

Bea downed his entire cocktail to douse the fires that seemed to be erupting from within. Robert expected flames from the dragon lady's nostrils at any moment. But he knew those accusation weren't true -- not exactly. That was not how the summer had gone. At least, that was not what he had meant to happen. But that is how the Queenies -- and probably all of Seaside -- had chosen to see it. And he knew it was pointless to argue otherwise.

"I'm just asking you to leave us alone," he said finally, quietly. "Let us live our lives."

"It's too late for that," Bea said. It sounded like a proclamation of a death sentence. "That's all we asked of you at the beginning of the season. And did you let us live our peaceful, undisturbed lives as we have every other summer? No! You came into town and created a mess. You upset a balance that has worked quite well for years."

"We fell in love," Robert said, and the answer was out of his mouth before he had even processed it. This was the first time he had said it, even to himself. He hadn't had the time. He hadn't had the chance. But it was the truth. And it made all the sense in the world. The only thing that made no sense at all was that he was standing here saying those words to Bea -- leader of the Queenies -- instead of pledging them to Blakely himself.

"Love?" Bea spat, along with a few droplets of booze. "I love vodka and rimjobs. You don't see me destroying towns for them. You don't see me 'falling' in love. So...just fall out of it! You weren't ever meant to be together."

"That's what they told Romeo and Juliet."

"Oh, Christ! We have a fucking drama queen!" Bea looked like he was gagging. "Don't give me that star-crossed-lovers bullshit. Those stupid little brats should have known better. They weren't going to the junior prom. Fortunately, those imbeciles killed themselves before it got out of hand. They would have started a war, destroyed their families, killed dozens of their friends and relatives -- split a city in two. Now do you see the similarities? Don't make this a tragedy too."

"You're quite the literary expert," Robert conceded. However, he refused to be defeated by clever bitchery. "I took a very different moral from that tale. Act five, scene three: 'See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.' I know it's cliché, but can't we all just get along?"

Some of the other Queenies applauded his performance. They appreciated drama even more than your average drama queen. And for a moment, Robert thought he might just have swayed them with theatrical cleverness.

"Yes," Bea said, "it is cliché. And no, we cannot. Don't be such a child, Robert. This isn't Shakespeare, and it isn't summer theater camp. It's Seaside. And Seaside is too small for that feel-good bullshit."

"So what else can I do?" Robert asked, and he meant it. He just wanted to resolve this disagreement. He wanted to move beyond this impasse. He was ready to do anything.

"You are not a Queenie, despite your dramatic leanings," Bea concluded, "and Blakely will never be a Meanie, no matter how often he wears leather pants to Penis Pier."

"How did you...?"

"As I said, it's a small town, Robert." Bea seemed to be calming down, pleased with himself. "You can't escape, no matter where you run and hide. You can't change the rules to suit yourself. That's Seaside. Take it or leave it."

"Well, maybe I should leave it, then." Robert was frustrated and exhausted. He wanted to be done with the entire thing -- this conversation and every other complication this town had thrown at him.

"Finally, we agree on something," Bea gushed, exasperated. "It took nearly all summer. But finally you've come to your senses. There are only a few more weeks of summer. Be gone by Carnival. Let us end this summer the way it should have started -- without you."

And with that, Bea jingled the ice cubes in his otherwise empty glass, looking over his shoulder as if a cabana boy would magically appear. Since Blakely -- the appointed cabana boy -- was missing in action, several Queenies made useless gestures of feigned assistance until Jimmy grabbed the glass and headed inside.

Robert felt suddenly invisible. He had come here to settle things. And this is what it had come to. There was something in him that wanted to resist, that wanted to stand up and be seen and fight. But what good would that have done? Maybe it was time to give up. Surrender looked like the only way out. In fact, now getting out of Seaside didn't look so bad at all.

"I thought I would try to reason with you," Robert said just to regain some semblance of attention from the porch. "But I can see that's never going to happen."

"Good," Bea said apathetically, turning back to Robert as an afterthought. "You're slow. But at least you're not brain-dead."

"As soon as Blakely has finished his obligation here with Aunt Shirley, we'll leave."

Jimmy returned with a fresh pitcher and handed Bea a brimming glass. Bea grabbed it like a scepter.

"No," he declared. "There is no 'we' about it. Blakely stays here."

"You can't expect me to leave him here with you," Robert said in astonishment. "You can't expect me to leave him at all."

"Queenies and Meanies aside, this is where Blakely belongs," Bea said, sipping his refreshed refreshment. "And you don't, which I think we've adequately covered."

"Blakely belongs with me," Robert said as strongly as he could. But standing there in old running shorts, with sweat drying on his face, he didn't feel very powerful as Bea threw down royal decrees upon him.

"If you love him so much, you'll do what's best for him." Bea sipped and winked. He looked as if this was what he'd been waiting all day to say, as if this was the trump card he'd been holding up his frilly sleeve. "That poor boy has spent his entire life searching for his place. From south to north and everywhere in between. Seaside is that place he's been searching for. Just look at him. He absolutely glows here. He's not that shrinking Southern violet that showed up at the beginning of the season. He's flourished in Seaside. Despite you."

"Despite me?" Robert yelled. He couldn't help it. "Did you ever think that I might have had something to do with it?"

"Think about it, Robert," Bea said so very calmly that it just pissed Robert off all the more. "Everything you did to him -- the Meanies, Big-D, heartache, humiliation, and shame. Despite it all, he's made the best of it, and he's made a home in Seaside. Imagine how amazing his summer would have been without your interference."

Robert scowled up at Bea and the rest of the Queenies. It couldn't be true. But he remembered how Blakely had resisted leaving Seaside when he'd mentioned it before. He remembered the sad tales and repeated disappointments of Blakely's young life. There was a certain magic to Seaside that eclipsed even the Queenies and the Meanies. Robert wasn't immune to that. And he just wasn't confident enough to pit himself against the town for Blakely's affections. He wasn't willing to ask him to choose.

"Don't take my word for it, Robert," Bea said oh so grandly. "Blakely never wants to leave Seaside. I guarantee that. But go ahead -- ask him yourself."

At that moment, Blakely appeared along Market Street, but not as anyone expected. Aunt Shirley had him by the ear. She marched him straight past Robert and straight up to the porch, knocking Nipple out of the way without breaking her stride. She was not a happy woman. Before anyone could say a word, she released Blakely there in front of them.

"They are going to talk," she proclaimed, pointing at Blakely and Robert with two separate index fingers. "And you are all going to shut up and let them. They are going to figure this mess out. And then everyone is going home. The Porch is closed for the day."

No one, not even Bea, said a thing. Despite Aunt Shirley's usual bluster, they had never seen her so direct and so serious. Robert walked up the steps, and even Nipple stood aside. Blakely and Robert walked into the house and straight up the stairs without saying a word.

* * * * *

Blakely and Robert stood looking at each other in that little blue bedroom. It was clear to both of them, just staring into each other's eyes, that monumental and perhaps horrible things had happened during the short hours they were apart. They couldn't turn their backs on Seaside for a second -- like the surging tide.

"Blakely, what happened?" Robert said softly. "And what are we supposed to be figuring out up here?"

"I think I can explain," Blakely answered slowly. "It makes some kind of weird sense. But first, there's something I have to tell you."

"This doesn't sound good."

Blakely sat on the edge of his bed and reached for Robert's hand. He gently pulled Robert down next to him. And he took a deep breath before beginning.

"Last night," Blakely began, "I saw something I didn't tell you about. I still don't want to tell you now, but you need to know everything if we're ever going to figure this out."

"You can tell me, Blakely," Robert said, squeezing his hand and trying to look at him just as reassuringly.

"Last night, under the pier." Blakely could only bring himself to speak in short phrases. He just couldn't look Robert in the eye. "I saw David. He wasn't alone."

"He was with someone," Robert said, trying to help pull the information out of Blakely.

"He was with Bea." Blakely spat it out. "And he was being pretty darn submissive for the Main Meanie."

"Wow, I don't know what to say." Robert just stared at him until Blakely finally turned back and met Robert's gaze.

"I knew you'd be upset," Blakely said, and his pale blue eyes looked so sad for all the wrong reasons. "Look, I completely understand. You two were together a long time."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I really do understand, Robert."

Robert nearly laughed, but the pained expression on Blakely's face wouldn't let him. "No, thank you for not making me look at that mess last night. Yuck! I mean, there's nothing wrong with a little B and D, as in bondage and domination. But 'Bea and D' as in Bea and Big-D? That's just sick."

And then they both laughed so hard that they rolled back onto the bed together. The tension that had been building all morning eased around them. Slowly, the pleasure of being together was chipping away at the barriers the gangs had built up around them.

"Blakely, David was never the best-behaved boyfriend. I can hardly expect him to be faithful now, when I was under that same pier with you last night. It's over between him and me. The only thing I *will* hold against him is his atrocious taste in pier partners."

"And Nipple the lapdog was there too." They laughed again even harder.

"Bestiality aside," Robert said once they'd regained their breath, "at least now we know how that edition of *Rainbow Bay* got to Seaside and into Bea's hands."

"Right. Bea used your relationship and bookstore against us, and then Big-D just pretended it never happened."

"That sounds like David," Robert agreed. "So we've figured one thing out. But what else? And what would cause Aunt Shirley to drag you down Market Street by the ear?"

"Well, I suppose there is something else I should tell you," Blakely admitted, and all traces of laughter disappeared from his voice. "I went to the Arm Pit today."

Robert could tell by the flash in Blakely's blue eyes and the way he quickly looked down to the floor that his visit had been just as bad as Robert could imagine, maybe worse.

"Blakely, are you all right? What happened?" Robert pulled him close.

"I'm fine," Blakely said into his chest. "Aunt Shirley busted in there and dragged me out before anything could happen. But I sure didn't make any friends."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there. I really wish you hadn't gone, Blakely." Robert rocked him there, back and forth in his arms, on the bed. "But I didn't solve a damn thing here either. Now things are only more complicated."

"It's just like Jimmy said," Blakely told him. He sat up and looked Robert straight in the eye all of a sudden. "That's the part that's beginning to make sense. That's what's happening all around us right now in Seaside."

"You do know that I have no idea what you're talking about, right?" Robert furrowed his brow and wondered if Blakely was going into some kind of posttraumatic shock.

"Their roles have become their reality," Blakely tried to explain. "It's the dangerous point where their make-believe crosses the line. They think it's real. And when it's threatened -- when we threaten it -- they will do anything to protect it."

"You're talking about the gangs, the Queenies and the Meanies? What do we have to do with their make-believe?"

"I know how to beat them." Blakely smiled. "That's exactly it. We can beat them."

"Beat them? Blakely, how about we get the hell out of here?"

"And leave all this?" Blakely said, half joking. "It's just getting good."

But Robert knew there was more behind Blakely's resistance to leaving than a joke. Everything was getting too serious now -- the danger, their relationship, whatever warped alternate reality was unfolding around them.

"Blakely, I have to ask you something. I'm not asking you to leave. I'm just asking if you ever would. Would you leave Seaside?"

"I don't know," Blakely answered, and it was obvious he had never asked himself that question. "But I sure as hell won't leave because the Queenies and the Meanies drove me out of the first place I ever felt I fit."

"And you shouldn't have to," Robert said. He placed his hand on Blakely's knee. He realized how important this place was to a young man who had been searching his whole life. And he realized just how real a threat the Queenies and the Meanies were to their happiness. "So how do we beat them?"

Blakely's smile grew a mile wide. His eyes sparkled a mischievous blue.

"We tell the truth."

"That's all?" Robert asked.

"That's everything," Blakely corrected him. "You should have seen David's face when I mentioned the bookstore, you, Bea, his real life. He was horrified. Their make-believe can't stand up to the good old boring truth. Now we just have to hope we can find the truth amidst all this craziness. And then, they're going down."

"You sure aren't the innocent little Southern boy I met at the beginning of the summer," Robert marveled.

"And are you the same depressed, demure bookstore owner?"

"It *would* be very satisfying to kick some ass."

"That's my man." Blakely leaned over and kissed him. "You are so sexy when you talk all tough."

* * * * *

As Robert walked out the front door of Aunt Shirley's Porch, the cleaning crews along Market Street were using utility trucks with hydraulic lifts to remove crepe paper from trees and telephone poles. They were carting away burned logs and smoking barrels in wheelbarrows. Men with nails attached to picker poles were piercing crushed beer cans and cups smeared with motor oil shots. Workers with push brooms were sweeping away clouds of glitter and confetti.

The rest of the Queenies had cleared from the porch. But Bea lingered, sucking ice cubes and bobbing a foot crossed over his knee. He looked at Robert walking away alone and raised a manicured eyebrow in his general direction.

"Thanks for the advice, Bea," Robert said and kept on walking.

"The truth ain't pretty," Bea called after him loudly enough for the entire town to hear, "but that's why God invented pancake makeup."

Chapter Eleven

The Seaside Sleuthing Society

It had originally been an old captain's house, back in the day when fishing was more popular than swishing in Seaside. Then it was a meeting hall. And most recently it had been a library. But now it was just a grand old building perched on the edge of the ocean, waiting for the town to get around to auctioning it off or knocking it down.

The captain's house was smack-dab in the middle of Seaside. It stood halfway along Market Street, and its tall, shingled turrets and shuttered windows were visible from Spartacus Pizza. It also happened to be equidistant from the east and west sides. So although it was too big for a summerhouse and too small to convert to offices, it was the closest thing to neutral territory in all of Seaside.

Around back there were three small apartments that opened up onto the beach. They had once been storage or staff quarters or boathouses. But this summer, one of the rooms was Jimmy's home away from home when he wasn't loitering on Aunt Shirley's Porch with the Queenies. So Blakely and Robert sneaked quickly between buildings and entered the apartment.

"Do you have this place all to yourself?" Blakely asked cautiously.

"There are a few Eastern European waiters renting the other flats, but they don't speak much English or do anything but roll joints on the beach."

"I can't believe they boarded this beautiful old place up," Robert said. "And a library too. The death of books is really a sad state of affairs."

"No one comes to Seaside to read, Robert," Jimmy reminded him.

"I did," Robert protested. "Really!"

The inside of the apartment was nothing to write home about. There was a single bed, a dorm-size fridge, a microwave, and a card table next to a folding chair.

"It's...quaint," Blakely said, looking around in the murky light. "And what's this?" He picked up a dog leash from the foot of Jimmy's bed.

"That's nothing." Jimmy grabbed it away and tossed it under the mattress. "It's just...for when I have to walk Nipple."

"It's from Leather Ball boy, isn't it?" Blakely taunted. "And if I was Nipple, I wouldn't get anywhere near you, knowing your fetish for dog accessories."

Jimmy pointedly ignored him and made his way to the back of the tiny apartment. He moved the card table out of the way and ran his hand along the edge of the wall.

"Anyway," he said, "*this* is what I wanted to show you." And with that, he removed a section of wallboard and revealed a door.

"You cut open the wall?"

"I could see the hinges sticking out along the floorboards," Jimmy defended himself. "Besides, if they didn't want me in here, they would have locked the door." He swung it open.

"They put it behind a wall," Blakely pointed out.

"Are you two coming up or not? We've got work to do." Jimmy crossed the threshold and started up the stairs that led into the shuttered, abandoned portion of the captain's house.

Beyond that secret door, the hardwood floors were covered with grime. But the light from stained-glass windows painted the main parlor in a fantastical array of colors. The banisters and stairs ascended into a golden cloud of dust motes and disappeared somewhere in the darkness of the floors above.

"Welcome to the first official meeting of the SSS," Jimmy said.

"The what?" Blakely asked.

"The Seaside Sleuthing Society," he explained patiently.

"Do you have to lisp when you say that?" Robert asked

"Sorry," Jimmy apologized. "I'm still in Queenie mode."

Quickly, Jimmy repeated to Robert the anthropological overview class he'd given Blakely weeks earlier. Initially, Robert had been fairly skeptical when Blakely insisted they bring Jimmy into their little rebellion, but he warmed up to the theory as Jimmy presented his findings. Being the literary, scholarly type, Robert caught on much more quickly than Blakely had. However, Robert seemed more concerned with the surrounding details of role versus reality instead of the phenomenon of transformation itself.

"So why Seaside?" he asked. "What's so important about this place? Why isn't this happening everywhere? Why didn't I see Queenies and Meanies back home?"

"It's a controlled, isolated environment," Jimmy answered without hesitation. "Like a petri dish for growing bacteria or the Galapagos Islands for evolving species. The conditions are ideal. Seaside is a small, gay, seasonal town. It's completely accepting and completely anonymous."

"And there's that magic about it," Blakely piped in. It would have sounded stupid amid all the science, but they knew what he meant. It was the light on the water and the salt in the air. It was the gay bounce it put in everyone's step that Blakely had noticed on his first day. Robert could see that Blakely was enchanted, and he understood what caused the emotion.

"It's the secret ingredient," Robert agreed.

"Exactly," Jimmy said, getting excited by his area of expertise. "There's always that unknown, that spark that starts it all. It's that mysterious allure that drew the gay boys here and created this ideal environment. No one knows who you are when you arrive or where you go when you leave. So you can be anyone you want."

"That didn't work very well for us," Robert pointed out.

"That's because the Queenies and Meanies were further evolved," Jimmy retorted, having thought through every angle imaginable. "They were already established. You two were like prey showing up on an island full of predators."

"So we get devoured?" Robert asked. "That's about how it feels."

"You evolve," Jimmy corrected him. "You outsmart them. You find their weakness. You *devolve* them."

"So how do we do that?" Blakely asked.

"You've already figured it out," Jimmy said. "Their true identities are their ultimate weakness. Confronting them with that is like peeling off their masks. It's like waking them from a dream. Their true realities will dissolve the reality they have fabricated here. It will return the Queenies and Meanies to simple role-playing."

"That sounds a lot more magical than even Seaside can handle," Blakely marveled.

"And even if it's theoretically possible," Robert added, "how in the world are we going to find out everyone's identity?"

"That's what the Seaside Sleuthing Society is for," Jimmy said, as if it all made perfect sense. "That's us."

"Oh, now I feel completely confident," Robert said.

"It's not as impossible as it sounds," Jimmy said. "We have several advantages. First, they think they've already won. Their guard is down, which is why you two can't be seen together. Second, no one else in Seaside wants to know the truth, and no one knows we want it, so it may not be that well hidden. All we have to do is look. And that brings me to number three -- the Seaside Sleuthing Society! We're in the gangs. We know the members. We're the perfect spies!"

"Every theory has a flaw." Robert looked worried sitting there on the dusty floor.

"I'm still figuring that part out," Jimmy admitted. "It's a work in progress."

"Speaking of," Blakely added, "how's your master's thesis coming? Are we ruining the entire thing by destroying the gangs' reality?"

"Are you kidding?" A look of sheer excitement spread across Jimmy's face. "This may not be terribly ethical, but the only way to prove my theory completely is to deconstruct their parallel realities. Otherwise it's just speculation."

Jimmy pulled a gigantic pile of papers from his satchel and plopped it down on the floor in front of them. Dust billowed in the errant streams of sunlight that shot through the shutters. There must have been two hundred pages.

"I've got a great start," Jimmy said as the dust settled around his manuscript and reams of notes. "Now all I need is for you to give me a happy ending."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Robert asked rhetorically, but no other member of the Seaside Sleuthing Society dared to answer.

* * * * *

Robert wanted nothing to do with the Meanies. After what they'd done to Blakely and to their entire relationship, Robert wanted to bust into the Arm Pit with his fists flying. However, the rest of the SSS had made him promise to keep his cool.

Logically, he understood that the only way to defeat the gangs was to be smarter, to play along and destroy their game. But Robert couldn't imagine wasting countless hours scowling convincingly in the Arm Pit or tagging along with Big-D and the rest of the Meanies.

Big-D himself -- or, more accurately, *David* -- seemed wary of Robert. David had shown his weakness when Blakely confronted him with the truth of the past. And Robert was the personification of that past. Even if the Meanies had been successful in scaring Blakely out of the east side and all the way back to full Queeniedom, Robert still had the ability to take Big-D away from David. And Robert could tell from the way David avoided his glare that his ex wasn't sure whether Robert knew he had that power.

So Robert played dumb. He chatted aimlessly with the other Meanies in the yard as they grilled meat and did push-ups and oiled their leather goods. He began to pack up his boxes of books in full view of the entire town, as the population of Seaside watched through his busted front door.

The Queenies were absolutely giddy that Robert had taken their advice on moving out. The Meanies asked where he was going, concerned that he was abandoning the gang or rushing the end of summer. It was the perfect excuse to initiate prying conversations with anyone who passed his door.

"I don't really know where I'm going," Robert answered every time. "Where do *you* go at the end of the summer?"

But the Meanies didn't take his bait. It wasn't going to be that easy to uncover their true identities. When Sledge walked by Robert's open door one afternoon, his initial response was typical of all the others.

"What's the rush? There's plenty of summer left," Sledge insisted. The stout, bearded man paused at the foot of Robert's stairs, staring in at the books and boxes lined up inside the door.

"Just a couple weeks," Robert challenged him. "Then it's Carnival."

"Yeah, but Carnival's the best," Sledge said.

"The way I hear it, it's also the end," Robert said, feigning the disappointment of inevitability. "No more tourists. The shops start closing for the season. School's starting. The weather's turning."

"Man, don't ruin it. It's still August."

"For a few more days."

"Ugh. You're depressing me, man." Sledge took a couple of steps into the condo. "You need help with those books?" He looked a bit too interested in the written word for a half-naked man in leather shorts.

"Sure," Robert agreed eagerly. "I've got more books than I know what to do with."

"No problem." And with more exuberance than Robert could have hoped for, Sledge threw himself into the work.

"I kind of have them arranged by genre," Robert said. "But I can always sort them out later."

Sledge was making more progress than Robert had all week. Robert had been more interested in passersby than truly packing. He'd just been taking advantage of his kicked-in door to reveal his stack of moving boxes to the nosy world of Seaside.

"Don't you worry," Sledge said, appraising the vast collection. "If anyone knows books, it's me. You want them arranged by author or Dewey decimal?"

Librarian, Robert thought immediately. No one knew more about books than a bookstore owner -- except a librarian. And no one else used the Dewey decimal system anymore. This was easier than the SSS had planned.

"Just keep the fiction away from the nonfiction. They don't get along," Robert joked. "I used to own a bookstore, you know?"

"No," Sledge said absentmindedly, completely engrossed in the rows and rows of paperbacks along the kitchen counter. "I didn't know that."

"Well, this place is a giveaway. It's like a mini bookstore. I don't know what to do with all these remainders."

"These are amazing," Sledge said, mesmerized. He was holding a matching pair of volumes, one in each hand, as if to weigh one against the other. "We don't even have these in our collection."

Definitely a librarian, Robert thought. Underfunded, overeducated, and salivating over semihistorical texts. But a Meanie librarian?

"Oh, that old thing," Robert said playfully. "It's just a bunch of old queer pulp poetry. No one ever bought it."

"Really?" But Sledge wasn't really listening. He was settling into an armchair with the book.

"So how's the library?" Robert asked, sitting down in his own chair.

"Fine."

"You thinking about adding to the collection this year?"

"Huh? Oh, yes," Sledge answered absently. That book was like a truth serum. Sledge didn't even know he was answering. His mouth just kept providing the truth as his mind devoured the text in front of him. Robert decided to step his interrogation up a notch.

"You seem like a pretty organized guy," Robert suggested.

"Yes."

"That doesn't seem to be a common Meanie trait."

"Someone has to keep everything straight."

Robert bit his lip. "Straight" wasn't exactly the correct word to describe men scantily clad in leather who sexually harassed every tourist boy who entered town.

"What kind of things?" he asked instead.

"Mailing lists, summer rentals, newsletters, leather store directories, bondage Web sites, membership enrollment..."

"Wow. You must know a lot about them all."

"Everything."

"How do you keep it all 'straight'?" Robert asked innocently.

"Careful notation and cross-referencing," Sledge said matter-of-factly. He pulled a small book from the back pocket of his shorts and held it up for Robert to see. Robert had assumed it was just another Meanie accessory. It had looked like an oversize wallet. In fact, it was even attached to Sledge's belt loop with a chain. "Speaking of which, you need to add yourself to the Meanies Membership Manual, Gibs. Alphabetical by nickname -- that's under G -- and listed in the index by summer -- that's this year."

Sledge wagged an instructional index finger at Robert like only a librarian could. Then he unclipped the chain and handed over the little address book that was, of course, covered in leather. It was the only time Sledge looked up from his newly discovered poetry book.

"Oh, sure," Robert said. He accepted the book as if he couldn't care less about its contents, as if it were a small chore to complete such a task.

The book's contents blew him away. He'd hit the jackpot. It listed full names, full addresses, and revealing notations like, *Mail in unmarked envelope (lives with mother)*.

The book would have looked completely boring and harmless -- except for the attached chain -- to anyone outside the Meanies' circle. It probably would have been

indecipherable to anyone else as well. Words like “Grizz” and “Grunt” in the margins sounded more like painful noises than names, and the addresses seemed arbitrarily organized. The annual lists in the back looked like bad haiku poetry in some foreign language.

But to Robert, it was like discovering the Rosetta stone. It translated the Meanies’ real worlds away from Seaside into everyday terms. Suddenly it all made sense.

“Here,” Robert said casually, handing Sledge a stack of musty poetry and gay history books. “You might enjoy these too.”

Sledge settled deeper into the armchair and kicked up his ankles. He was enthralled by the vast array of literary treats. A kid in a candy store had never looked so satiated. When Robert was sure that Sledge was completely engrossed in his reading, he discreetly started copying the information from the Meanies Membership Manual into the inside covers of *The Gay Man’s Self-Help Guide to Destructive Relationships*. David and Robert’s Books had never sold a single copy. No gay man was smart enough to open *that* book.

* * * * *

Blakely was the picture of lovelorn depression. Ever since “The Day of Reckoning,” as the Queenies insisted on calling it, Blakely had moped around Aunt Shirley’s Porch and sat in the wicker armchairs with his arms crossed and a scowl across his face.

They said that’s what he got for mixing oil with water, plaids with stripes, Queenies with Meanies. Regardless, they congratulated him on having perfected the pout.

“Blakely Belle, if you stick those lips out any farther, you’re going to make all the boys think you’re the local blowjob queen,” Bea told him, somehow making it sound like a title to be proud of.

“Perhaps they are swollen from overuse,” Zsa suggested.

“Fuck all y’all,” Blakely snapped back with uncharacteristic vulgarity.

“You are quite an energetic young man, aren’t you?” Gigi exclaimed. “All of us, really? Do I have your word on that?”

The sun had set hours ago, and Blakely’s waiter service had disappeared along with it. A plate of crumbs from his pecan cookies and several empty pitchers of Seaside iced tea sat on the table. The Queenies were nursing their remaining drinks into the night.

Part of Blakely’s pout was genuine. He truly was annoyed. He had had his fill of the Queenies, and he wanted to be able to spend time with Robert openly. But the pout was also a mask. It was the disguise Blakely was wearing to infiltrate the Queenies’ secret world.

The Queenies believed that they had won Blakely over once and for all. His little tantrum was assumed to be just his stubborn displeasure at having been proven wrong. They never suspected a thing when his bitching and moaning took on an investigative slant.

"Now what am I supposed to do when summer ends?" Blakely whined.

"Why don't you fly south with the rest of the circuit kids for the winter," Bea suggested offhandedly. "There are plenty of parties and party boys to keep you warm till next summer."

"Is that what you do?" Blakely asked, hoping to prompt some additional information about the Queenies' winter whereabouts.

"They hadn't invented the circuit party when I was your age."

"Or electricity, for that matter," Blakely added smugly.

"Besides, Nipple gets nervous around that many dancing feet."

Hearing the reference, Nipple stood on his hind legs and did an impromptu little prance around the porch. Blakely wondered if circuit boys wagged their penises quite as vulgarly as the little dog did when he danced.

"So what do y'all do all winter?" Blakely asked.

"You're a boy with unique talents and abilities, or so I've heard," Leela answered without actually addressing the question directly. "I'm sure you'll find something or someone to occupy your winter...and your orifices."

"Put those pouty lips to good use," Zsa reminded him.

"I'm going back to university in the fall," Jimmy offered, trying to help spur along some truthful conversation.

"Now isn't that terribly interesting," Bea said with a yawn. "Spare us the riveting details, would you, Jimmy? See why we don't have this discussion?"

But both Blakely and Jimmy knew the real reason. They weren't going to uncover the truth just by asking. Blakely could pout all he wanted. He could ply them with liquor and let them linger on the porch till well past closing. But the Queenies were never going to let their guard down enough to offer up their deepest secrets.

"You could always stay in Seaside and shovel snow all winter," Gigi suggested.

"Yes, become a resident," Leela agreed. "You could be Aunt Shirley's housewife."

Then Aunt Shirley herself appeared in the doorway. It was as if she were the annoyed mother who had been kept up all night and heard every word. She'd finally had enough. Blakely half expected her to be wearing curlers, but her word choice immediately dismissed any thoughts of motherhood.

"It's too late for this bullshit," she said gruffly. "Don't you bitches have some potions to brew or some children to devour?"

"Certainly," Bea exclaimed, stroking Nipple like a witch's black cat. "We just thought we'd finish up this brew and devour young Blakely first."

"Just because Blakely lives here doesn't mean you can sit out here cackling till all hours," Aunt Shirley said. "Now scram. And I hope you know how much more this is costing you. Just remember who has your credit card information."

Jimmy looked at Blakely from across the crowded porch and raised his eyebrows as if to acknowledge the futility of the night's line of questioning. Then he winked. It was time for the SSS to start playing hardball -- even if that meant expanding their methods from merely "unethical" to "illegal."

"Jimmy, help me take care of some of this mess, will you?" Blakely asked casually, resorting to his newfound whine that the Queenies so enjoyed.

"Yes, Jimmy, we wouldn't want little Blakely Belle to break a nail," Zsa said.

"Not now that he's back on the market," Gigi added. "A girl's got to look her best."

"But don't let him get too lazy," Leela jumped in. "Domestic skills are an essential part of being a good wife. You need more than sugar to get a sugar daddy."

Finally, Aunt Shirley succeeded in shooing the Queenies off the porch. The ten or so drunken queens roared off into the night to cause mayhem wherever they could find it. Aunt Shirley grumbled good night and was gone, leaving Blakely and Jimmy to clear the pitchers and plates.

In the kitchen, they piled dirty dishes in the sink and ran water to let them soak. The two didn't speak for a while. It was as if they couldn't say aloud what they both knew they were about to do. They just exchanged glances that said everything they needed to about their impending criminal behavior.

Aunt Shirley herself had reminded them just how easy it was. It was the middle of the night. They were all alone. She was finally going to get some deep, snoring sleep.

"Technically, you work here," Jimmy pointed out.

"No technicalities about it. I *do* work here."

"Then there's, technically, nothing wrong with it."

"Technically," Blakely agreed.

The technicality was that the Queenies never officially paid a bill. They never received a check. They came and went freely at Aunt Shirley's Porch all summer, eating and drinking whatever they liked or whatever happened to be put in front of them.

The menu and the payment method were extremely casual. Only Aunt Shirley paid attention, and she made sure they paid too. She had each and every Queenie's credit card information on file, and she never let them forget it.

Periodically throughout the summer, she would sit in the spare bedroom that served as her office and charge one card after the other. In her mind she would approximate food and booze and whatever gratuity she thought she and Blakely deserved for putting up with the Queenies' bullshit. She'd round off numbers and estimate based on whim and how annoyed she was on that particular day.

It worked out for all involved. Aunt Shirley had a built-in customer base and a steady, guaranteed income. She never had to print menus or receipts or be polite to her guests. The Queenies never had to lift a finger or make any choices or carry cash. All in all, it was more like paying rent to a grumpy landlady who happened to keep them in booze and biscuits. It was the most functional relationship most of them had ever had.

There was just one catch -- and that was a level of trust that the Queenies would never have allowed in a romantic relationship. Handing over credit card information and letting someone do what she pleased with it would have been risky for anyone. However, for the Queenies, it went far beyond potential fraud.

Their convenient form of payment meant that Aunt Shirley had names, addresses, and the paperwork to back it up. She held their true identities in a filing cabinet somewhere. Although no one ever spoke about it, it was understood that this was the one taboo subject in their contentious, confrontational, symbiotic relationship.

Blakely and Jimmy climbed the stairs silently. The big old Victorian house seemed extra creaky and echoey with each step they took. Blakely had to reassure himself that this was no different from every other night. There was no reason for Aunt Shirley to expect a thing. There was no reason to feel guilty for giving the Queenies what they deserved. There was no reason this all couldn't go off seamlessly.

The small bedroom was crammed with boxes and an old desk. A goosenecked lamp craned over a battered filing cabinet. There was barely a path from the door to the ancient, wooden office chair.

"How are we ever going to find a thing in here?" Blakely asked Jimmy, looking at the mess in the small room.

"Puh-lease," Jimmy said dismissively. "Lesbians are notorious pack rats. She'll never open one of these boxes again as long as she lives. Whatever we need will be right here."

And with that, Jimmy walked up to the desk and grabbed the black plastic inbox next to the oversize accountant's calculator. There was a stack of neatly arranged papers piled in it that Blakely would have mistaken for mail or stationery. In reality, it was meticulous photocopies of credit cards, licenses with pictures, and authorizing signatures. Jimmy flipped through the pages and handed one to Blakely.

The page showed Jimmy's beaming face on his license, looking young and studious and clean-cut. There was no glitter or spiky hair. He looked every bit the college student. Beside the license was a copy of his parents' credit card, front and back, with his name added as an authorized signee.

"But aside from that, lesbians are incredibly organized." Jimmy smiled and pulled a slim little pocket camera out of his satchel purse.

"And you are a very prepared spy," Blakely said. "Are you sure you're not actually a lesbian?"

"Don't nauseate me."

Jimmy spread all the pages out in an elaborate fan on the floor. He sat in the middle, snapping photos in a clockwise motion. Blakely picked each sheet up as it was photographed and placed it back in the inbox efficiently.

They tried to be quick and quiet, but it was impossible not to pause in disbelief over the pages. License photographs are notoriously horrific. However, these brought a new sense of shock with them. In the photos, the Queenies were not coiffed and bejeweled. They looked absolutely common and worn-out, not a shred of royalty about them.

And then there were the names. It wasn't that Blakely and Jimmy truly expected to find "Leela" and "Zsa" stamped across licenses and credit cards. But the revelation of such typical, and often horrible, names was amazing. It completely demystified the Queenies' show of superiority.

"Leonard?" Jimmy whispered as quietly as he could in his shock. "John?!"

"Read them later," Blakely shushed him. "Just take the pictures."

Then Blakely himself saw a photocopied sheet he just couldn't ignore. He snatched it from the floor with his jaw agape. It was Bea's information.

"Oh, my God!" he said far too loudly. "Is his name really --"

"Shhh!"

Then the door behind them opened. Despite their best efforts, Blakely and Jimmy's rustling and whispered snooping had penetrated the snores that normally protected Aunt Shirley's sleep. She stood there in sweatpants and an oversize teddy-bear T-shirt that would have been hilarious in another situation. The expression on her face was not at all humorous.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"We just..." Blakely began, but there was no real explanation. "We need to..."

"I've heard all about identity theft," Aunt Shirley said with her hands on her hips and disappointment in her voice, "but I never suspected you boys would be the kind I had to watch out for."

She blocked their escape with her terrifying bulk. Blakely suspected it would be the last thing he ever saw on earth. But what really frightened him was the disapproval spread across Aunt Shirley's face, as if she were saying, *After all I've done for you*. Blakely wanted to throw himself guiltily at her bedroom slippers and beg for mercy.

"No no no," Jimmy protested, standing to meet Aunt Shirley's angry glare. "That's not it at all. It's the opposite of identity theft. We want to give them back their identities."

Aunt Shirley looked at him skeptically, narrowing her eyes. Blakely and Jimmy didn't exactly look like the types to run a credit fraud scheme. And the Queenies weren't the easiest people to deal with. Aunt Shirley knew that as well as anyone. But did that really explain this little break-in? Blakely could have taken the information anytime.

"All we want to find out is the truth," Blakely said, finally finding his voice. "Honestly, Aunt Shirley. After this summer, I'm not sure what's real anymore."

Aunt Shirley hesitated. She bit her lip. Then she shook her head. Compared to everything else that went on in Seaside, was this really any crazier?

"Put everything back just the way you found it," she barked, "and I might think I dreamt this whole thing."

She turned and walked away. The back of her T-shirt showed the rear view of the teddy bears holding hands. Blakely and Jimmy would have chuckled if they hadn't still been scared half to death.

Chapter Twelve

Get Ready to Rumble

Only half a mile from the hustle and bustle of Market Street, the beach felt worlds away. In the late afternoon, the crowds thinned, heading to tea dance and leaving Blakely and Robert practically to themselves. The sun shimmered on the water. Grass whispered behind them in the dunes. And the soft, warm sand tickled between their toes.

Moments like this were why they had come to Seaside. But the craziness of the summer hadn't allowed for a lot of beach time. This afternoon, they had dipped in the brisk waves of the ocean and warmed themselves in the late-summer sun. They had shared a picnic of cheese and wine and read poetry till they fell asleep.

They didn't even mind the men silently stalking the swells and hollows of the dunes behind them -- staring at each other, having quick, sandy flings, walking back and forth as if they were biologists terribly concerned with the various species of dune grass. Blakely and Robert didn't mind the boys prancing along the water's edge with guts sucked in and chests puffed out. It looked like an ornithological preserve. These tourists were like so many birds, preening and squawking and cooing to the others.

Blakely's and Robert's attention was devoted solely to one another. It was rare for them to have time alone. Now, it wasn't just the Queenies and the Meanies who stood between them. They also had the daunting task of uncovering the truth while living their own little lies. This afternoon in the sun together was an indulgence.

"Your hair looks like gold in this light," Robert said, reaching over to stroke Blakely's head. He pulled Blakely toward him and cradled him against his bare chest.

"And your skin looks like honey." Blakely kissed Robert's warmth along his breastbone.

"I think we've been reading too much poetry," Robert said. They both laughed, cuddling on a blanket in the afternoon glow of late summer, enjoying their stolen moment despite the danger.

They knew this was a risk. They were not supposed to be seen together. But the Queenies and Meanies rarely made it out to the main beach. The windy, salty air was hell on hairsprayed dos and freshly shined leather. Sand was a nemesis to all such engineered appearances. Still, they couldn't count on going undiscovered. Members of both gangs occasionally made the trek to tease, taunt, and take advantage of practically naked tourists. Blakely and Robert just hoped this wasn't one of those days.

As they made their way back to town along the sand-strewn road that evening, the warm pavement warmed their bare feet. They held hands and watched the molten sun along the horizon. For once, they didn't worry about what had been keeping them apart all summer.

Then, as they neared town and turned onto Market Street, Blakely and Robert saw the only thing that could have ruined this moment. Immediately, they let go of each other's hands and leaped to opposite sides of the street. They put distance between themselves and pretended they had not just spent a wonderful, romantic day together. They were instantly back in the romantic closet.

The gangs were making the rounds. Hisses and growls emitted from them like packs of cats and dogs that couldn't exactly decide who would win if they actually did fight. The Queenies were at one end of Market Street. The Meanies approached from the opposite direction. Normally they would have passed one another with a lot of snarling and barking and nothing more. But today, Blakely and Robert were caught in the middle.

Despite Blakely and Robert's show of nonchalant separation, the gangs were not fooled for a minute. They saw the tanned faces and bare feet and the towels slung over shoulders, and they closed in on the two lovers menacingly. They didn't give Blakely and Robert a chance to protest their innocence. They locked the couple in a tight circular trap, barricaded on one side by the Queenies and the other by the Meanies.

"I thought we made it perfectly comprehensible even for a moron like you," Bea hissed at Robert just inches from his face. "You are not to be with him. You are not to be here in Seaside at all!"

"No," Big-D spat, poking a meaty finger into Blakely's chest. "I know for a fact that blondy here heard us loud and clear the other day. He nearly wet his panties. What the hell are you doing near a Meanie?"

"You are forbidden to see him ever again!" Bea screeched at Robert. Bea grabbed Blakely and handed him over to the rest of the fuming Queenies.

"Who the hell are you to forbid anything?" Big-D snapped. "No Meanie is going to be seen with a piece of trash Queenie, because *we* say so!" Furry-armed men pulled Robert into the thick of the Meanies' side.

"Really?" Bea's eyes narrowed and fixed on Big-D like a viper about to strike. "Maybe you Meanies need to be taught a lesson about who's on top here. Who has *always* been on top."

Big-D set his jaw as if he was about to bite as well. The veiled reference to their night under the pier was a direct challenge.

"If there's any lesson here," Big-D declared, "it's that you Queenies are going to get your pansy asses kicked. And we'll be doing the teaching. It's going to be a harsh education."

"As exciting as that sounds," Bea sneered, "we'd have to rip you and your little leather outfits to shreds first."

The two stared each other down. The rest of the gangs looked absolutely ferocious. It was impossible to decide which was more frightening. The seething anger of the Queenies made it appear that any one of the group could gouge eyes into a bloody pulp with a swift, manicured scratch. The Meanies were chomping at the bit and ready for a stampede. They looked anxious to crush skulls beneath their leather boots.

The stakes had never been higher. Despite Bea and Big-D's revolting liaison, despite all the lies and rumors and newspaper clippings, the gangs still hadn't been able to keep Blakely and Robert apart. The leaders needed to reclaim their thrones. They had to determine once and for all who would triumph, who would win the war over Blakely and Robert.

The lovers had thrown the entire balance of Seaside out of whack. They had disrupted the tenuous equilibrium that had kept the two gangs confrontational -- yet basically harmless -- for as long as anyone could remember. But now, after all these years, one group was determined to reign supreme over Seaside. The truce was over.

Bea and Big-D argued back and forth. Whenever one of them scored a verbal hit, his side cheered. The gangs seethed with barely contained fury. They pressed closer and closer. The boiling point seemed not only near, but inevitable.

"You two argue like an old married couple," Blakely called out from his imprisoned position on the Queenies' side. He wasn't sure if he was trying to break the tension or push them over the edge. At this point, he really didn't care. He was fed up with everything. He had reached his own boiling point. If he and Robert were going to be the downfall of Seaside, so be it.

"I'm throwin' down the gauntlet!" Big-D hollered. He removed the fingerless leather motorcycle glove from his left hand and threw it violently onto the pavement of Market Street.

Before the crowd could look up from the symbolic but frightening gesture, a silk glove floated down on top of it. Bea wasn't missing a beat, and his evening glove was paying the price for it.

"And I'm taking out the claws."

"You want a rumble?" Big-D challenged.

"I thought you'd never ask." Bea's sarcasm cut as deep as any angry confrontation.

"Name the time and place."

"Carnival, of course," Bea said matter-of-factly, as if the entire summer had been leading up to this unavoidable end. As if this just might be the end of Seaside.

"Summer will go out with a bang," Big-D said in agreement.

"And with an audience," Bea added. And so it was settled. The biggest event in all of Seaside would be turned into a war. All those tourists making the trip to usher out summer were going to be in for a huge surprise. Carnival was going to be a show like no other. In fact, it could be the ultimate finale.

"Name your weapon," Big-D offered ominously. Robert wondered where the hell he had picked up this gang-warfare lingo. But the sincerity in his voice was horrifying. This was not to be a war of words as usual. This was serious.

"Dildos," Bea offered, referencing Blakely's now-famous assault on the Meanies. Until now, it had been the most physically violent act of the summer. And the mention of it was a direct attack and insult to the Meanies.

"Whips!" Big-D answered Bea's offense by raising the stakes.

"This isn't supposed to get you excited. I want to kick your ass, not fuck it," Bea said knowingly.

"Attack dogs," Big-D countered.

Nipple growled fiercely in response. He looked as if he could do some serious damage, starting with the ankles.

"Enough foreplay," Bea concluded. "Why don't you surprise me?"

The truth, of course, was that they had no weapons. They'd battled each other and everyone else with attitude and attire, bitchiness and bravado. They didn't have knives; they had fingernail files. They didn't have guns; their leather holsters held up jockstraps. They didn't have attack dogs; they had Nipple. But now the rules had been broken, and they were being completely rewritten.

"Get ready to rumble!" cried Big-D to rally his troops.

"And if we ever catch you two together again," Bea threatened Blakely and Robert, "we'll use you for practice."

"Not if we get to them first!" Big-D pledged.

And with that, the gangs pulled Blakely and Robert in opposite directions down the street. The two men looked over their shoulders at each other as if it might be the last time they'd ever see the other alive. The Queenies and Meanies ripped them from one another like tearing apart a victim on some medieval torture device. And they were just getting warmed up.

* * * * *

Jimmy hadn't been able to make it to the disastrous scene on Market Street. He had been too delirious with delight over the wealth of new information for his thesis. Between the identifications he and Blakely had stolen and the address book full of details Robert had transcribed, he had more than enough to keep him busy.

This was going to be one hell of a thesis. In fact, it was turning out to be a lot more fascinating than most scholarly texts. The reality of Seaside was crazier than fiction. And it was the wildest anthropological theory Jimmy had ever heard of. And it was his! He just hoped he had enough time to finish it.

He had barely left his room in days. He had made calls to everyone at the university he could track down. He had contacted professors and his advisor and librarians. He had practically begged on bended knee and sold his soul to gain access to the school's archives and computer systems all the way from Seaside.

Finally, he had violated his parents' platinum card yet again to equip the Seaside Sleuthing Society with an Internet connection. Now if he crossed his fingers, he could slowly log on to the university's Web site.

From driving records and credit reports to gym memberships and neighborhood newspapers, Jimmy scoured the Internet and media outlets for any trace of the Queenies' and Meanies' real identities. He printed out piles of secure and privileged information. He logged on to financial sites with other people's credit card numbers and zip codes. He hacked into e-mail accounts and phone records. He was certainly committing some type of fraud, but he had never had so much fun.

Sleuthing combined with science was a euphoric combination. It was his version of drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll. Jimmy was on a natural and intellectual high. He was writing, revising, and developing his thesis at warp speed, as if truly powered by some performance-enhancing drug.

He spread all his sleuthed findings out upstairs on the floor of the captain's house parlor and highlighted relevant information till he was practically blind. Then he organized by section and tackled the daunting task of incorporating the day's discoveries into his paper. Finally, he identified the remaining holes in his story and made a list for the following day. He told Blakely and Robert to dig deeper. Then he picked up the trail of clues again first thing in the morning. The next day, he did it all over again.

Sometimes he hit Aunt Shirley's Porch for a nightcap to relax and laugh and keep up appearances. His physical appearance, however, was not at its best. The rings under his eyes rivaled the ones on the Queenies' fingers. And he wasn't getting much summer sun locked in the dank recesses of the captain's house and his dingy little room.

"You look like shit warmed over in hell," Bea said to him one evening. "I certainly hope it's because you're making the most of these last days of summer."

"Absolutely," Jimmy agreed and smiled mischievously. "Burning the candle at both ends."

"A good Queenie always takes it from both ends," Bea remarked. "But for Christ's sake, slap on a little pressed powder or something."

All the Queenies laughed and sucked back their cocktails. Jimmy and Blakely did the same, but they also caught each other's eyes knowingly. Because they were laughing at something completely different than anyone else. They were laughing at how extra ridiculous the Queenies seemed in light of their true identities. They laughed at the inside joke that was Seaside, and they laughed because they hoped that joke was no longer on them.

* * * * *

Blakely could tell that the end of summer was almost in sight. It couldn't quite be seen, but it could be felt. There was something in the air. It wasn't cold yet. But there was a fleeting scent, as if the sea grass were turning to hay, as if the sounds of the waves were already memories.

It made the gangs edgy. Bea snapped at the slightest impropriety: a dropped napkin; a tourist within twenty paces; three ice cubes wasting space in a cocktail glass instead of two.

Now Blakely knew why. He knew what they all had to return to once summer was gone. And he knew what had to be done if he and Robert were ever going to escape intact.

The Queenies didn't trust him after catching him and Robert together again. But they wouldn't give him the pleasure of disowning him. They practically kept Blakely under lock and key. The gang hardly ever left Aunt Shirley's Porch. There seemed to be a perpetual guard there, even if it was a lone queen sipping Seaside iced tea slowly or Bea standing watch as he maniacally stroked Nipple's fur. They barely let Blakely take a piss without a personal escort.

The gang treated him more like Cinderella than a Southern belle now. They barked orders and complained incessantly. They planned their impending war with the Meanies as if it were a ball that Blakely wasn't invited to. Fortunately, he had his fairy godmother as well. Every few days, Aunt Shirley would shoo Blakely out of the house on "shopping errands" and hand him a long "list" that would take all afternoon to complete.

"And don't dawdle," she would yell after him. "There's a lot of shit on there I need tonight. Don't forget my hair depilatory cream, tampons, and stool softener!"

It wasn't exactly the type of shopping that the Queenies enjoyed. No one volunteered to chaperone a shopping trip devoted to feminine hygiene. However, when Blakely unfolded the paper, there was no list of embarrassing personal care items. Instead it would inevitably say something like, *Tuesday 2:00*.

He would leave the Queenies leering suspiciously from the porch and head down Market Street, making sure not to walk toward the east side and the Meanies and Robert. After a few blocks, he would cut up a side street and loop back eastward.

He felt like some secret operative making evasive maneuvers on the battlefield. But he also enjoyed the feeling of freedom and excitement that came from escaping, from defying the Queenies, from possibly winning this war. His walks on these late-summer days gave him the rare opportunity to enjoy the hidden silence of Seaside and be alone with his thoughts.

He marveled at the quiet beauty of this town when the gangs weren't around. If the Queenies and Meanies could be overthrown, Seaside would be the most perfect place Blakely could imagine living. Some days he cut through quaint residential blocks inland. Other times he sneaked along the pristine beach. He dreamed what it would be like to actually live in one of these seaside homes.

No matter which route he chose, his "shopping trips" always ended in the same place -- the captain's house and Jimmy's room -- because these occasional escapes were a combination of one part SSS meeting and one part romantic rendezvous. He would kiss his lover hello and report the latest finding.

There was a unique, thrilling pleasure in seeing the pieces of their plan fall into place. The discoveries they had made, and the newer revelations Jimmy continued to feed them daily, gave Blakely such an inner rush of excitement that sometimes he had all he could do not to burst into spontaneous laughter. In those moments, it all seemed possible.

Blakely quickly realized that there were good and bad things about being under nearly constant surveillance. Not being able to see Robert when he wanted, not knowing if the gangs were suddenly going to launch into battle, not having a clue if any of this would ever work out -- all of that was torture.

But there were also juicy tidbits to be found in his captivity. One day he had emerged from the kitchen with his trademark pout on his face and said, "I put potato peels down the garbage disposal."

"Uh-oh," Leela scolded, "naughty boy." And without even knowing it, the plump little queen had betrayed himself.

"Is that wrong?" Blakely asked guiltily. "It does seem clogged now. Can you help me, Leela?"

"Me?" he asked, suddenly horrified. "Why me?"

"Well, you seem to know all about plumbing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I was just saying..." Leela was completely flustered for no apparent reason, or no reason that anyone but Blakely knew. "I guess you'll just have to call a..."

"A plumber?" Blakely asked, and Leela visibly flinched when he heard the word.

Blakely just smiled as he headed back into the kitchen. He ran water into the sink and watched it go down the drain with no problem whatsoever. There was nothing wrong with the garbage disposal. He'd just wanted to see Leela get all clogged up himself.

Jimmy was a genius. The entire Seaside Sleuthing Society was chock-full of geniuses. If Blakely could get that kind of paralyzing reaction out of a single Queenie with a tiny, teasing hint about the truth, he couldn't imagine the effect all the scandalous material they had dug up would have on the gangs.

* * * * *

"Afternoon, gentlemen," Robert called out in mock friendliness to the lurking Meanies as they stalked past his busted door.

He hadn't bothered to fix the broken latch. If they really wanted to see in, let them. That was Robert's theory. Besides, they could just kick it in again. He wouldn't put anything past them at this point.

The Meanies patrolled Robert's condo like guards in front of a castle and trailed him wherever he went. They held war councils out among the clotheslines to keep an eye on him. They went drinking at the Arm Pit in shifts.

But sometimes, if Robert sat and read in one spot long enough without moving, his wardens would bore of the game.

"You're missing a really exciting part here, Grizz," Robert would tease. "This chapter is even better than the last one."

Eventually his bodyguard would grumble in boredom and frustration before stomping off. Fortunately, Robert liked to read. And now he was doing more of it than he had all summer. It was the first chance he'd gotten. And it was the only way to get a moment's peace.

It was also the only way he could ever sneak off to see Blakely. They were less than a mile away, but they couldn't even talk on the phone. Robert felt like they were grounded teenagers.

As he left his condo with his paperback tucked under his arm, there were Meanies swarming everywhere. He was going to have to make his departure casually, slowly moving reading spots farther and farther away until they lost interest. But he couldn't be too quiet and sneaky or they'd grow suspicious.

"The hair looks fabulous," Robert called out loudly to Fist as the shaved-headed barkeep was unlocking the front door of the Arm Pit.

Fist just scowled in response. It was clear he didn't know how to take the comment. What bald man would? However, there was also a glint of worry or distrust or fear in his otherwise flinty eyes. That suspicious look seemed to wonder if maybe, just maybe, Robert knew something he wasn't supposed to.

"Did you just go to the hairdresser, or do you style it yourself?" Robert asked sarcastically. But there was a hint of forbidden knowledge in his voice. And the disgruntled way Fist ducked into the Arm Pit confirmed to Robert that the information the SSS had dug up on Fist's off-season occupation was accurate.

Robert sat and read half a chapter at the base of his steps. Then he moved ever so nonchalantly to the far end of the yard, settling among clothesline poles and tufts of grass poking out of the sand.

He had long ago gotten accustomed to the leather goodies hanging and swaying from the lines. But he was slightly shocked when he saw a group of Meanies a few rows away pinning up their latest load.

Instead of the now seemingly normal harnesses and jockstraps, the Meanies were admiring metal rings, dozens of them hooked to the line and glinting in the sun like earrings. Next to these silver adornments were long strips of leather with buckles and balls attached. Robert realized these were not just pretty bracelets. This was not jewelry. They were handcuffs locked to the line and ball-gags dangling beside them.

"Remember, men," one of the Meanies instructed, "these aren't just fun in the bedroom."

They all laughed nastily.

"Yeah, just imagine those Queenies fit to be tied."

"All bound up and nowhere to go."

"Stripped to their panties in the center of Seaside."

"And best of all, they won't be able to open their bitchy mouths."

"They'll be running silently for the hills!"

Robert ducked behind some actual laundry pinned to the nearest clothesline and sneaked away from the crowd. No one noticed. The Meanies were too absorbed in their violent fantasies to watch Robert jogging away through the dunes.

* * * * *

The first thing Robert did when he entered Jimmy's place, sweaty and slightly out of breath, was report the battle plans he had just overheard.

"Oh, that's nothing," Blakely answered. "You should have heard the Queenies this morning. They're stockpiling cans of pepper spray, and they've placed an order for stun guns. 'Cattle prods for those beasts,' is a direct quote."

He looked at the beads of sweat along Robert's tan brow, and he thought he'd never seen anything so sexy. "By the way, hello," Blakely said and grabbed Robert by the waist. He placed a deep kiss on his lips and held him close. It had been days since they'd seen each other. The excitement of treason and war paled in comparison to their denied desires. Robert kissed him back.

"Okay, enough!" Jimmy said, prying the two apart. "God, I wish *I* had a cattle prod. I've heard of 'Make love, not war,' but you two are ridiculous. We have work to do. Exactly who is ordering cattle prods?" he asked, his inner detective kicking in. "He could be a rancher."

"Or if they're stun guns," Robert pointed out, "what about a cop?"

"The Meanies are the ones with the handcuffs," Blakely reminded them.

"At this point, a Meanie cop is just too obvious and expected," Jimmy said.

"So a Queenie cop makes more sense?" Blakely asked.

"We've found out crazier things," Jimmy insisted.

"Well, a Queenie rancher is certainly a crazier thing," Robert said.

"Yes," Jimmy admitted, "but what about the craziest part of this all? No matter who is a cop or a cattle rancher, these people are getting really serious. They're turning into real gangs. Weapons and restraints and God knows what else."

"You're the one who said they were only going to cross over more and more into their created realities until we disarmed them," Blakely said, quoting almost directly from Jimmy's thesis.

"Yes, but I was hoping 'disarm' was a metaphor," Jimmy explained. "The truth is powerful, but it ain't riot gear."

"Everyone's playing for keeps here, Jimmy," Robert said seriously. "The Queenies and Meanies have a lot at stake. And so do we." He reached over and took Blakely's hand.

"Is this whole thing getting out of hand?" Jimmy asked.

"Most definitely," Blakely confirmed. "But we're the ones who caused it."

"We could still escape," Jimmy proposed, "run away before it's too late."

"Not a chance in hell," Robert declared. "You heard the gangs. This is war. And I have no intention of letting either of them win."

"Good." Jimmy smiled. "I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page."

"If anyone is going to win this rumble, it's going to be us." Blakely held even tighter to Robert's hand. "Seaside could use some new rulers. A couple of star-crossed lovers to unite the monarchies."

"Why didn't Romeo and Juliet ever think of this?" Jimmy asked.

"They died," Robert reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. Right." Jimmy shook his head as if he'd forgotten all about that silly little Shakespearean story. "I've got another surprise for you," he said, changing the subject to more optimistic topics. "It's about my thesis."

He headed to the hole in the wall that led up into the main section of the captain's house. The wallboard was removed and the door was open. He had stowed his computer and stacks of thesis-related papers just inside the passageway on the stairs.

"Is it done?" Blakely asked in excitement.

"Almost. I can't really finish until we see what happens at Carnival. But I can tell you that my advisor is absolutely thrilled so far."

"Congratulations," Robert said.

"It gets even better," Jimmy promised. "You're never going to believe this, but he says --"

At that moment there was a thunderous banging on the door. The threesome looked at one another in horror for a split second before Blakely and Robert ran for the secret stairway up to the captain's house and Jimmy grabbed the loose section of wallboard.

"Open the friggin' door, Jimmy!" Bea screamed from outside. "We know you're in there!"

"Hold on just a sec," Jimmy called back pleasantly as if he might be finishing up some private beauty treatment instead of harboring fugitives. He was struggling to fit the rectangle of wallboard back in place.

"And we know you're not alone!" another fey voice added. The knocking continued even more fiercely. Those Queenies were definitely going to break a nail.

The gang had figured out more than the SSS had given them credit for. The Queenies had grown suspicious of Jimmy's absences. It was not unusual for attendance to drop off toward the end of the summer as members reluctantly prepared to return to the real world. But this summer was different. This summer they were planning for battle. And Jimmy's rare appearances at the Porch seemed increasingly dubious to the paranoid Queenies.

When the Queenies thought about it, they'd also realized that, although Jimmy's participation was declining, he never, ever showed up while Blakely was on one of his "shopping trips." They weren't taking any chances.

"Coming." Jimmy ignored them and pushed the table back as silently as he could. "I'm not decent."

Before he could answer the knocking and feign innocence, the flimsy door flew open and sunlight shot into the tiny room like an explosion.

* * * * *

In the cavernous parlor of the captain's house, Blakely and Robert could only hear muffled, angry sounds from below. They looked up through the dust dancing in shards of sunlight to the open floors above. They could have hidden deeper within the large house, but they feared the creaking staircase and deteriorated boards would give them away or result in some other unfortunate injury if the gangs didn't get to them first.

They didn't speak for fear of being heard. Instead they took each other's hands and crawled into a corner nook beside the grand fireplace. Presumably, this space was meant for wood stacked against the ocean breeze and winter chill. But now it held only the warmth of their two bodies and the spark that was their passion.

There was something barnlike and cozy about this place, despite whatever horror scene was playing out below. It smelled of warm wood and open space, like silence and potential. As inappropriate as it was, given the threat down there in Jimmy's room, there was something undeniably romantic about the place.

There was a glimmer of Seaside magic here, and that feeling only grew as they pressed their bodies together. They were hiding, but they also longed hungrily for each other from days and days apart. In spite of the danger, there was something hot and exciting about almost getting caught.

They felt electricity between them. The heat seeped through their clothes. Their arms entwined. Their faces met. Their eyes locked.

"I love you," Blakely whispered, barely a breath, against Robert's ear.

"Since it's been publicly forbidden and constantly threatened," Robert whispered back, "I think we should make our relationship official. I love you too, Blakely Crawford."

And those were the last words they dared speak. Those were the last words they needed. Their lips came together in perfect, silent agreement.

* * * * *

"You certainly are not decent!" Bea exclaimed, his lips recoiling from his teeth as if he'd just tasted something repulsive -- tomato juice without vodka, for example.

The gaggle of Queenies spilled into Jimmy's tiny apartment, and they all stared down at him there on his narrow twin bed. He was lying there casually stroking the dog leash.

"This is even worse than I suspected!" Bea shouted, as if he were a starlet who'd just come across a mangled corpse in a horror flick. "A leather fetish?! Jimmy, maybe you've been in the wrong gang all along!"

Jimmy looked down coyly at the strip of leather and chain in his hands. "This?" he asked innocently. "It's not a fetish...really."

"Admitting you have a problem is the first step," Zsa said with more condemnation than helpful intervention in his voice.

"It's just an accessory," Jimmy insisted, "like a...a purse."

"Purse bondage?" Bea spat. "You are one sick little puppy."

Nipple growled gutturally from between Bea's feet, as if to warn Jimmy that he didn't have a chance with this puppy.

The Queenies turned before the whole lot of them could vomit up their morning Bloody Marys. As soon as they had left and disappeared from view through the sunlit entryway, Jimmy bounded from the mattress, slammed the door, fastened the chain, and pushed the bed against it for good measure. He counted to ten before entering the secret passage and tiptoeing up the stairs.

At the top, he peered through a porthole of a window and confirmed that the Queenies were walking away down Market Street. They looked distorted, yellow, and angry through the tiny pane of thick stained glass. Then he turned to the house's interior and spotted the tangle of limbs that was Blakely and Robert.

"Okay, you two! Whoa!" Jimmy jumped back in surprise at the full-on make-out session. "I hope you're just doing that to scare away the enemy, right? Just like I was?"

But there was no answer from the two rolling on the dusty floor.

"I, uh, I guess I'll just leave you two alone for a while," Jimmy said, backing down the stairs. "You can thank me later."

He shut the door.

Chapter Thirteen

Carnival of Carnage

The entire town had been planning for weeks, preparing all summer, really. While the Queenies and Meanies were preoccupied with orchestrating the next world war, travel agents and tourists and local businesses were gearing up for the biggest day in Seaside's summer -- Carnival.

There were floats and parades planned. There were sequined gowns in every color of the pride rainbow. Sailor-boy vendors would be hawking wieners from trays strapped suggestively around their waists. Drag queens would tower over real women. And most real women would be as muscled and butch as any of the men.

Carnival was Seaside in all of its gay glory. It was the last hurrah before the leaves changed color and the sea breeze turned bone-chilling. It was a celebration of summer and a revolt against the coming cold, as wild as any pagan ritual.

If people from faraway lands happened to gaze upon the revelry and music and dancing, they would have recognized the innate elemental force of it. They would have felt a kinship with the primal celebration of these cross-dressing, lip-synching, half-crazed inhabitants. In Seaside, Carnival was as natural as the progression of the seasons.

The party would go on into the night and linger for days. This first day, however, was the kickoff. It was the party of all parties. It was the moment when Seaside became Carnival.

Like overly excited children on Christmas morning, the town woke up early. People were busy at home, adding final touches to their outfits or applying that last bit of makeup and glitter. They were walking their dogs and brewing their coffee -- getting the necessities of life out of the way before leaving them behind for the pull of celebration.

The town was spangled and bejeweled. All of Seaside was decked out like a bawdy whore. The buildings along Market Street were draped in banners and bunting. The trees were dripping with beads and baubles. The street itself was painted with colored chalk and watercolor scenes. Streamers waved in the breeze, and countless sparkles of foil and tinsel and mini disco balls twinkled like a galaxy of constellations.

As the cool mist rose from the harbor and revealed the tarnished globe of the golden sun, the early-morning scene made Blakely and Robert love Seaside all the more. This was not the Queenies' bitchy vandalism and retaliation. It was not the Meanies' boisterous little Halloween charade. Seaside's Carnival costume made the Queenies' Fairy Hangover look like a child's birthday party. It made the nighttime debauchery of the Meanies' Leather Ball look like a college keg party by comparison. It had nothing to do with the gangs. Carnival was truly Seaside magic.

They walked down Market Street hand in hand as Seaside woke up. Residents passed them with dogs on leashes and coffee cups in hand. Little old lesbians smiled and nodded, passing by and yawning.

"Morning," someone said, sipping his latte nonchalantly as he walked on.

"I can't believe we're getting away with this," Robert said, adjusting his long, fire-engine red wig. "I look like Lucille Ball. On steroids. With PMS."

"Don't complain to me," Blakely said, scratching at the pelt of fake fur pasted to his chest and rubbing his scratchy stick-on Fu Manchu mustache. "You're the one that made me dress like the lesbian."

Robert teetered on silver stiletto heels and tugged at his taffeta tutu. His face was painted powder white, like a Victorian lady who had also applied way too much bright pink eye shadow.

Blakely's flannel shirt was wide open to display his new faux-fur chest. He wore ripped jeans, aviator sunglasses, and a yellow plastic hardhat. The Village People would have disowned him for his outdated campiness.

"Nice legs," Blakely said in an affected deep voice, looking at his partner lewdly over the top of his mirrored lenses.

"Shut up," Robert said between candy pink lips. "What are you trying to pick me up for? Are you giving mustache rides?"

They stationed themselves along the wide open lot at the base of the town pier where the parade floats and people were beginning to gather. As the sun climbed, the crowd grew. Flatbeds loaded with flowers and disco balls arrived. In convertibles, drag-queen princesses practiced their waves. Muscle boys in roller skates showed up to do figure eights. Dykes on bikes roared in with their children in sidecars. Music began, and the entire town was suddenly in celebration.

* * * * *

For a moment, it seemed magic had won out. But then it happened. It came as a surprise to everyone gathered there, except for Blakely and Robert. And when they saw the approaching tides of disaster, even they weren't prepared for the horror.

It was as if twin storm clouds of Armageddon had blown across the sun. The Queenies and Meanies converged on the center of Seaside from their opposite ends of town. It was immediately apparent that this show of violence was not just another Carnival stunt. The parade separated like a miracle-afflicted sea as the gangs made their entrances.

The Meanies' leather had been augmented with battle armor. Breastplates and gauntlets and helmets made them look like warriors straight from hell. They were swinging chains and cracking whips. They had spikes on sticks and handcuffs dangling from their belts.

The Queenies looked just as fierce. Their makeup was smeared wildly like war paint. They wore thick-ribbed corsets that appeared impenetrable and chunky boots with dangerous-looking platform heels. They brandished cans of pepper spray like grenades and waved metal implements that crackled and hissed with sparks of electricity.

Bea was wearing a single satin glove that reached to his elbow, and the fingertips were pointed with triangular razor blades. It was one part Michael Jackson and one part Freddy Krueger.

"I was always jealous of that bitch Freddy," Bea said, pulling the cuff of his glove snugly around his arm. "She had such beautiful nails." Bea admired his new manicure with a psychotic gleam in his eyes.

Big-D swung his medieval weapon. The metal-spiked ball whipped around on its chain, and when it came to a rest, its owner caressed it gently. The metal knight's gauntlet that Big-D wore made a grating metallic screech that echoed across the crowd.

"So here we are," he growled. And the rest of the Meanies herded near, roaring and howling, moving like one large beast. They swung weapons and scraped boots and rattled their chains.

"Not for long," Bea promised. The Queenies swarmed around their queen like killer bees, readying their lethal stingers for the attack. They hissed and buzzed and zapped their stun guns into the air.

"This has been a long time coming," Grizz shouted from the Meanies' front.

"Once and for all," Leela pledged.

"One will rule," Fist swore.

"And one will be gone forever," Zsa prophesied.

Then there was a pause more frightening than their vows of death and destruction. It was that single, heavy moment -- the silent sound of the entire future hanging in the balance. The quiet before the storm. The awkward moment at weddings when the priest asks if anyone objects. The briefest opportunity to change everything

and avert disaster. The one second when every single person can't breathe from the oppressive weight of powerlessness.

And then like gravity, like the pull of the tides, the gangs rushed forward. They ran toward each other from opposite sides of the street into a vortex of violence.

Before they could meet -- before they could make contact with fists and blades and burning gas and searing heat -- Blakely and Robert ran into the fray. Robert ripped off his curly red wig. Blakely pulled off his hat and sunglasses and half of his Fu Manchu.

"Stop!" they screamed in unison.

They prayed that they had the power to undo this. They were the reason this imbalance had come to pass. They were the trophies that the gangs were fighting over. They were the star-crossed lovers, the boys from the wrong sides of the tracks, the opposites attracting that had turned Seaside into a war zone.

Though the gangs came to a screeching halt, skidding on platform heels and stumbling in combat boots, they did not look placated. Blakely and Robert stood exposed before the entire town. They felt more like the spoils of war than peacekeepers.

Queenie eyes narrowed into luminescent slits. Meanie teeth snarled wolfishly. The gangs' rage became more focused and concentrated. Now they had something tangible to fight over. There was something physically between them that they could crush and tear in a twisted, real-life tug-of-war. Something to feed their anger -- an appetizer before the main battle.

Blakely and Robert felt the heat and sweat and sheer hatred pressing in on either side of them. Dozens of stomping feet closed in. And then they heard the bells.

From down Market Street, bells chimed out over and over again. They were unmistakably the bells of a bicycle, like a child delivering the newspaper or some other cheerful news. When, inevitably, all heads turned to look, they saw Jimmy.

He approached on a curvaceous pink bike from a previous generation. As he drew nearer, two things became apparent. First, he was wearing a sparkly green tiara and a pair of gossamer wings strapped to his back. Second, he was pulling a cart behind his bike, laden with stacks and stacks of spiral-bound booklets.

"Hello! Hello! Hello!" he called out joyously as he rode straight into the tension of the scene, ringing the bell on his handlebars. He pulled his bicycle in between the gang fronts and came to a stop right next to Blakely and Robert.

"I am the Truth Fairy," he announced grandly, bowing first toward the Queenies and then toward the Meanies.

Again, the crowd was frozen. They were all transfixed, waiting to see what bomb would drop next. But no matter how crazy everything had gotten, there was no way anyone could have predicted this.

"Don't knock out any teeth for me," Jimmy continued, "because I'm not the Tooth Fairy, and I'm all out of quarters. I'm the *Truth Fairy*, and all I have are these little tidbits of truth for you. A sprinkling of Truth Fairy dust."

"Will it make us fly?" Gigi asked sarcastically, as if he was itching to return to battle. But there was a slight tremor in his voice.

"I wouldn't count on it," Jimmy said, dismounting his bike, wriggling his wings, and walking round to the cart in back. "It might actually bring you down a bit -- down to reality."

Jimmy distributed copies of his thesis like a good fairy princess. There was one copy for each and every member of the gangs. And there were spares that spilled over into the speechless audience huddled on the sidewalks. People peered over shoulders and flipped pages anxiously. But no one spoke a word.

Jimmy had flagged particular pages with sticky notes and highlighted several choice sections amid the scientific theorizing and biting social commentary. Although he was intensely proud of his scientific breakthroughs, he didn't want the moral of his tale to get lost amid his brilliance. He wanted to make sure they read the good parts first.

No one will be surprised to learn that Sledge is a librarian. He is too anal, organized, and sensitive, even for a gay man. However, his many patrons back in Cedartown may be surprised to find that Stan Eldridge, the cardigan-clad librarian, grows out a beard and squeezes into a pair of leather shorts for the summer. It's not exactly the summer reading lesson your local library usually recommends.

Leela, it turns out, is short for Leonard. Despite his flawless summer manicure, which happens to be topped in a shade called "Pearly Luster," Leonard Alvarez is a plumber specializing in septic systems. It's amazing the shit you can find.

Grizz seems to have acquired his crossed eyes from peering too closely at credits and debits. Larry Griswold is a certified public accountant, CPA. Normally he wears thick-lensed glasses with horn-rimmed frames. So don't be offended if he didn't seem to see you this summer. His clients, however, may like to know that much of his bookkeeping genius is devoted to the operation of a business called the Arm Pit. He also manages dues and funds that subsidize expenses for dozens of Meanies.

Gigi is not French. He is not even French-Canadian. George Easton, however, is most certainly a long-haul trucker. He usually transports poultry. Sometimes he has the good fortune of hauling bales of sawdust. He frequents low-rate motels across the country, eats from vending machines, and sends postcards home addressed to his cat.

Fist is a bald hairdresser. Go figure. Fritz Barbisol mixes his hair colors as strong as his drinks. Most of the customers at his swank downtown salon emerge with a bouffant the color of coffee spilled onto a terra-cotta patio. He went bald at seventeen, and it seems he vowed to get revenge.

Nipple the lapdog isn't even truly named. The little bitch isn't a purebred either. The mutt is registered as Nipper, named after the famous pup from the RCA record labels. It seems his elderly owner has not entered the world of digital music. And this overused, retread of a pet name is even more antiquated.

What can one say about Zsa? It is terribly anticlimactic to admit that he is simply John Zachs, the banker. Does he wear a three-piece suit? Can he quote the latest mortgage rates? Does anyone care? Even the most common name and occupation are major embarrassments here. It deglamorizes the world the gangs have built. It is totally un-Seaside. There is nothing magical about it.

Jimmy's thesis went on to detail the most mundane and personal truths about every single gang member in town. The Queenies and Meanies were, by and large, everyday citizens leading everyday lives in everyday towns. Three seasons a year, they were respectable, boring, lonely, and completely typical people -- often supplemented by cats and overweight female friends.

The thesis was, of course, dedicated to Blakely Crawford and Robert Gibson for their invaluable help and devotion.

Slowly, people looked up from their texts. They had very different expressions in their eyes. They had removed their Seaside-tinted glasses. The crowds on the sides of the street -- who had previously been terrified and horror-stricken -- looked at the gangs frankly. They finally saw them for what they truly were. Ordinary.

The immediate effect on the Queenies and Meanies was less dramatic. They still looked angry, if not even more so. However, now there was also an element of confusion in their scowling faces.

That didn't necessarily make the three members of the Seaside Sleuthing Society feel any safer stuck between them. They couldn't tell if the gangs were going to run away crying like bullies embarrassed on the playground or if they were going to kill all present who had witnessed these sacred secrets. It seemed more likely that they might sacrifice the three people responsible for these revelations as a warning to all others.

"Turn to the last page," Jimmy suggested before they could attack. "I think the ending will interest you even more."

The final page of the document was not actually part of the thesis. It was a gushing letter of acceptance from a mainstream publisher. *Anthropology aside*, it stated, *this is exactly the kind of thing people would love to read on summer vacation. This is going to be the sensational beach read of next summer!*

Jimmy was getting more than his master's degree. He was getting a publishing contract. Excerpts from his paper on role vs. reality were also accepted for publication

in a major scientific journal. However, his text in its entirety would be published in paperback and distributed nationally in time for summer vacation next year.

"You little tramp!" Bea screamed. "Both of you! You traitors. I will personally rip you limb from limb."

He lunged at them with his razor claws extended. They jumped to the side at the last minute, and Bea tumbled past them, losing his balance and nearly falling. The razors scraped the pavement and sent up sparks. He readied to pounce again.

"Oh, shut up, Bartholomew!" Blakely yelled at him.

"Shhhhhhhh!" Bea hissed at the sound of his real name, cringing like a vampire exposed to sunlight. The exclamation sounded less like an order of silence than a rush of air rapidly deflating Bea's ego and maniacal Queenie powers. He looked like they'd just dumped a bucket of water on the witch.

"You're a school-bus driver," Blakely reminded him. "You're that grumpy old man with the perfect driving record who spends the entire school year getting hit in the back of the head with spitballs by children with a hell of a lot more attitude than you."

And suddenly that was exactly what Bea looked like. He was no longer the leader of the Queenies. He was not the fierce and feared Queen Bea. He was a little old man in a stupid outfit. And while Bea would have been fully capable of scratching their eyes out and leaving them for dead, Bartholomew could not.

Blakely, Robert, and Jimmy turned to leave. Their work was done. The gangs had nothing left to fight over. They'd been defeated by the truth.

"Not so fast!" Big-D shouted. "You don't get away that easy!"

He pushed forward to confront the three, but Robert turned to face him confidently. Standing there in his heels and drag ensemble, he absolutely towered over his ex. Despite the costume, Robert looked strong and sure and ready to take on whatever Big-D could dish out.

"David, you owned a bookstore," he said as Big-D approached, "with me. Your middle name is Tracy. You played the flute in high school. You were a shitty boyfriend, and you're an even worse bad guy."

Each truth was like a bullet. David flinched and cringed in pain, but he dragged his wounded body forward in a fury.

"I will destroy you!" he vowed.

"With what?" Robert asked. "You don't have anything left, David. You lost. Everyone knows the truth. And everyone already knows my secrets. I'm happy to tell you all. Because the truth is what it took to make it real. I love Blakely."

"That's not... I don't..." David stammered.

"You may have been Big-D here," Robert said, "but you're not big enough to handle the simple truth."

"And I love Robert just as much," Blakely added. "That's the truth too."

And finally, David stopped. He succumbed to the reality pressing in all around him. Even the other Meanies looked at him in disgust.

Robert leaned down and kissed Blakely full on his lips. He smeared lipstick everywhere, and Blakely's fake mustache got in the way. But no matter, nothing could come between them anymore.

Applause spread like a wave through the crowd. Music began playing. And all of Seaside was engulfed in celebration.

Chapter Fourteen

A New (Sea)Side of Summer

The first day of summer was as warm and beautiful as usual in Seaside. However, a lot more than the seasons had changed since last Carnival.

Blakely and Robert stood in the sunlight in front of the captain's house. Together, they hung a large wooden sign on the post there. In deeply carved letters shining with gold-leaf paint, it read: SOUTHSIDE BED & BREAKFAST.

The couple had bought the house and fixed it up with the money from Robert's bookstore nest egg and their share of the book advance from the publishing company. Jimmy had negotiated a hell of a deal for his "key researchers."

The house was neither east nor west. Instead, it was a healthy dose of Southern hospitality in the middle of Seaside. Blakely and Robert had renovated all winter. They had settled into the snowy season, snuggling in front of the fire, reading, cooking, and making love right there on the Oriental rug in the parlor.

Some days, Aunt Shirley visited. She'd shoot the shit with her fellow establishment owners and nurse a tumbler of bourbon in front of the fire with them. Blakely and Robert also got to know the other year-round residents. Those die-hard Seaside folks had been overshadowed by the more flamboyant spectacle of the summer visitors. But they were uniquely Seaside, appreciating the wonderland of a quiet winter as much as the magical party of summer. But now it was summertime again, and Blakely and Robert were open for the season.

It was amazing how beautiful the house was beneath all the dust and shutters. Blakely and Robert had scrubbed and repaired and decorated their new home in a plush, romantic style that suited their relationship and new life together. There were velvet drapes, claw-foot tubs, canopy beds, and dark mahogany woodwork. The stained-glass windows lit the rooms in a rainbow of colors, and the crystal chandelier

filled the parlor with sparkles after the sun set. Every guest room even had a balcony. Southside B&B could have easily been the set for a modern-day adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. And in a way, it was.

Southside was already being lauded as the most romantic guesthouse in Seaside by travel agents and the gay media. Before they even opened, Blakely and Robert barely had a vacancy remaining all season. That first day of summer, they welcomed their first official guest -- none other than Jimmy.

Jimmy's book was a runaway success. Gay and straight, people were buying copies as quickly as they hit the shelves. Jimmy was something of a celebrity in the anthropological world and beyond. However, next to the dedication page that credited Blakely and Robert, there was a disclaimer:

This fictionalized text is based on a true story and anthropological thesis. Names have been changed to protect the identities of the subjects. All references to people and places are used strictly for illustrative purposes. Although based on scientific facts and events, any similarity to the names of actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

The publisher's lawyers thought it was the best approach. Jimmy insisted that a real scientist would never compromise the identities of his experiment's subjects anyway. But mostly, Seaside just wouldn't have been the same if they had written off the Queenies and Meanies. Sure, the gangs had needed to be taken down a couple of pegs. They'd needed to be neutered and declawed. But they were as much a part of Seaside as the surf and the sand. And now, so were Blakely and Robert.

Blakely and Robert and the Southside B&B had a unique status in Seaside. Not only was the house located smack-dab in the middle of town, halfway between east and west sides, it was also completely neutral territory. It was the one place in town where a tourist could be safe from the Queenies and the Meanies. The gangs wouldn't dare step foot in that place. Robert and Blakely would wave from their own porch as the members passed, but as usual, they just looked straight ahead and pretended reality didn't exist.

Just like every summer, there were new tourists and new gang members. Some returned, and some, like David, were never heard from again.

Although many came to Seaside with the widely popular book tucked under their arms, most didn't even know it was based on the resort town. Occasionally they noticed striking similarities, and they marveled at the coincidences and the universal message of Jimmy's story. Robert was just thrilled that Seaside was now a place people actually came to read. He made sure the B&B's library was stocked with several signed copies.

Some readers had heard that the book might be true through rumors passed down from those who had been present at the historic Carnival that had been the finale of Blakely and Robert's first summer together. But like everything else in Seaside, the story seemed too wild and crazy to be real.

There was an underground reading group that tried desperately to decode the pieces of the story and wrote pleading fan letters to Jimmy begging for answers. Like any other mystery surrounding a book, however, all the scandal and questions just fueled its popularity. Jimmy already had a deal for the next novel.

"I was thinking it could be a tell-all book about the happenings at a gay bed-and-breakfast," he said to his old friends as he sat on a balcony of their house overlooking the ocean.

"Are you looking to start another rumble?" Robert asked him. They all laughed. "Whatever it's about, you're welcome to write it right here."

They had renovated Jimmy's old room too. They had knocked down walls and put in picture windows. Now it was open and bright, with a private entrance to the beach. Of course, it still had its own door that led up into the parlor. Blakely and Robert had hidden it behind a sliding bookcase as an inside joke and a nod to the past.

Jimmy wouldn't be staying there alone, however. During the winter, as Blakely and Robert renovated and his book was published, Jimmy had caught up with the boy from Leather Ball. He turned out to be a quiet, smiley man named Reginald.

"I almost didn't recognize you without your collar," Blakely joked as he poured Reginald's coffee and served cherry muffins. "But Jimmy sure does keep you on a short leash, huh?"

"You are never going to let me live that down, are you?" Reginald asked.

"Never ever."

"You can take the boy out of the Queenies," Jimmy said, "but you can never take the Queenie out of the boy."

"Hey, your boy likes a little leather. And we like a little bitchiness," Blakely retorted. "All things in moderation."

"Except love," Robert added. He grabbed Blakely and kissed him passionately, his hands lowering to cup his butt.

"You two!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Don't you ever get enough?"

"Never," they said in unison, parting their lips to answer their friend and share a laugh.

"Besides, here at Southside we guarantee a romantic getaway," Robert said.

"And a happy ending for all," Blakely added.

 THE END 

Scott & Scott

Scott Pomfret and **Scott Whittier (a.k.a. Scott&Scott)** met, fell in love, and now live together in Boston, Massachusetts. They realized the story of their own romance wasn't the only one out there, so they created Romentics, a line of gay romance novels for all gay men who believe in happily ever after. They are also the co-authors of the *Q-Guide to Wine & Cocktails*.

Pomfret, 39, a native of Wellesley, Massachusetts, is a branch chief in the Division of Enforcement of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly named him one of fifteen "Up-and-Coming" lawyers for 2005. Pomfret's short stories and erotic fiction have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Post Road*, *New Delta Review*, *Genre Magazine*, *Friction 4, 5, and 7* (Alyson Books), *Best Gay Love Stories 2005 and 2006* (Alyson Books), *Best Gay Erotica 2005* (Cleis Press) and *Fresh Men: Best New Gay Voices* (Carroll & Graf). Pomfret was co-counsel with Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders in a case bringing a constitutional challenge to Massachusetts sodomy laws.

Whittier, 32, a native of Poland, Maine, is an advertising copywriter. His commercial work has appeared on radio, billboards, TV, and in print media internationally and has won top honors in the Healthcare Advertising Awards and Admission Advertising Awards. He has published fiction in *Children Churches and Daddies*, *Playguy*, *In Touch*, *Honcho* and Alyson's anthologies *Just the Sex*, *Ultimate Gay Erotica* and *Friction 7*.