

I

MIKEL MAXWELL stared at the empty boxes scattered around the bedroom, knowing he could no longer put off the task at hand.

Like it or not, painful as it would certainly be, he had to—he *needed* to—sort through Slate’s clothes and send them to the Salvation Army, or some other charitable origination that could put them to good use. It was rather foolish, just leaving them in the closet to gather dust. Slate wouldn’t have wanted that; he would have wanted his belongings to be passed on, to someone who needed them, and he would have scolded Mikel for having stubbornly held on to them for this long. He had been gone for nearly two years—nineteen months and two weeks, to be exact—but Mikel was still grieving him, as if only days had passed, since Drake Summerfield had broken the tragic news that Slate’s latest mission for the Freedom Defense Agency (FDA) had gone terribly wrong and Slate was missing and presumed dead, along with the rest of his five-man team.

Mikel had refused to believe it, at first; he had insisted there was a mistake, that Slate would be fine. He couldn’t wrap his mind around the reality that Slate was gone, and not having a body only made it easier for him to hold on to hope. He repeatedly demanded that Drake keep searching, he protested and he raged when all official searches were called

off; he blamed Drake for having talked Slate into one last mission, after Slate had made it clear he wanted to leave fieldwork and take on an official office position, so he and Mikel could build their lives together. Slate had explained to his superiors that being away from his lover for weeks—and sometimes months—on end simply didn't work for him; he wanted to be able to go home to Mikel every night and while Mikel would never have asked Slate to give up fieldwork, he had been relieved when his lover decided to do so on his own.

For three years, Mikel and Slate had managed to build and maintain a relationship, despite the dangerous and chaotic nature of Slate's work, but it hadn't proven easy. It was difficult on Mikel whenever Slate had to disappear for long periods of time and Slate hated it as well, because he often missed out on big events in Mikel's life, such as his first showing in a major New York gallery, to say nothing of the more minor, but still meaningfully occasions, like Christmas and birthdays and special anniversaries. Some would have grown weary and walked away, but the idea had never crossed Mikel's mind; he couldn't have walked away from Slate even if he had wanted to, because Slate was the love of his life, something Mikel had realized right away, when a friend of a friend had introduced them at a festive, beachfront Fourth Of July barbecue.

He nearly lost his breath, looking at Slate for the first time. He had never seen a man more masculine or more beautiful, with darkly lashed cornflower-blue eyes, thick blond hair, and rich, honey-toned skin.

At six-two, he was solid muscle, hard and warm; he was the picture of perfection, dressed that first day in cut-off jean shorts and a sleeveless blue T-shirt that made his eyes even more vibrant. Mikel fell into those eyes headfirst. He couldn't help himself. He was normally reserved and shy. He'd had only two lovers in his twenty-three years and neither of them had made him feel what Slate did with one look; the man made desire burn in his stomach and spread throughout his body like lava and he

knew he was in very serious trouble. But truth be told, he didn't care. For the first time in his young life, Mikel allowed the emotions—the need—to guide him and while he was completely shocked when Slate appeared to be just as intensely attracted to him, there was no second-guessing himself, no reservations. And when Slate asked him to go back to his place for a drink, Mikel readily agreed.

He knew they would end up doing much more than having a drink and they did; they had the most remarkable sex Mikel had ever experienced and Slate made him feel desire and emotions unlike any he had thought possible.

Next to a man like Slate—next to most men—Mikel figured he was average at best; his five-six frame was lean, his black hair curly, untamed, his skin ivory, and his eyes more hazel than green or brown, but Slate's words, Slate's touch, made him feel truly beautiful and desirable. He lost count of all the times they made love that first night—a night Mikel had believed would be a one-night stand, but the next morning, Slate cooked him breakfast, they made love again... and the day and another amazing night went by in a haze of sensual delight. It felt like heaven. Mikel didn't want it to end; he wanted the feelings to continue and, much to his surprise, Slate wanted to know when he could see him again. As simply as that, the greatest love affair of his life began.

The following night, Slate took him out to dinner and over coffee, Slate explained—as much as he could—about his work with the FDA; repeatedly, he apologized for not being able to share very much, but most of what he did tended to be highly classified, which he admitted sounded cliché. But he had been with the FDA for nearly a decade and the work was difficult and dangerous, he didn't deny that, and his missions usually required him to be out of touch for weeks, sometimes months, and he wanted Mikel to be aware of that up front. It was more than some people could handle, Slate understood that, and he offered Mikel an out, but

Mikel didn't want one; despite the short amount of time that had passed since their meeting, Mikel knew he wanted Slate—he was already well on his way to being completely addicted—and Slate was truly and openly pleased when Mikel told him he wasn't going anywhere. He didn't care how hard it might be or how complicated, because they could make it work, if they wanted each other badly enough. At Slate's request, Mikel went home with him again that night. Less than two months later, Slate asked him to move in.

Slate had a beautiful home on the beach, left to him by his grandmother. To celebrate Mikel's moving in with him, he had one of the half-dozen bedrooms converted into a fully operational studio that was more elaborate than any Mikel had ever imagined. It was the most amazing gift anyone had given him and that first night, officially living together, they made love in the studio and afterward, Mikel managed to convince Slate to pose for him for a nude painting that, once finished, Mikel kept displayed in his studio.

To Mikel's dismay, two weeks later, Slate left on a mission—the first one he had accepted, since they had gotten together—and the night before he was scheduled to leave, Mikel met Drake Summerfield for the first time and decided he didn't like the other man. It was obvious to him that Drake had an interest in Slate that went well beyond professional; he was technically Mikel's superior, but a personal desire was there and Mikel sensed it and he mentioned it to Slate, who admitted that Drake had made his interest known in the past and Slate had rejected him. He felt no attraction for Drake, who was certainly attractive, with dark brown hair and brown eyes; the only man Slate wanted was Mikel. He had the love of his life, and Mikel was confident in that knowledge. He knew Drake really wasn't a threat and never would be one.

*“Nothing can pull us apart or come between us, Mikel, and when I leave, I promise that I will always, always come back to you, because I love you.”*

For three years, every time he left for a mission, Slate whispered those words before he walked out the door and time and time again, he kept that promise, coming back home—sometimes battered and tired—and somehow, somewhere along the line, Mikel simply began taking for granted that Slate would *always* come home.

Until the day he didn’t.

Instead, Drake Summerfield showed up, without warning, and Mikel instantly knew something was wrong. But he hadn’t expected Drake to explain that the mission had gone awry and it was highly unlikely Slate had survived.

Mikel refused to believe it; if Slate were gone, he would feel it, in his heart and soul, but Drake insisted there was no hope.

*“Mikel, there was an explosion and—”*

*“And what? Do you know for a fact that Slate was inside the building?”*

*“By all accounts, yes. I’m sorry—”*

*“Don’t you fuckin’ tell me you’re sorry, Drake. Find him!”*

*“Mikel—”*

*“If he’s dead, where’s his body? Tell me that? Where’s your blasted confirmation?”*

For the first six months—six months of endless, unimaginable hell—Mikel refused to accept reality; he refused to listen to anything Drake said,

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because the things that Drake said simply weren't the things Mikel wanted desperately to hear. Friends had to force him into eating, he rarely bothered sleeping, and when he did close his eyes, he endured horrible nightmares; nightmares about Slate lost and alone and calling out to him, but try as he might, Mikel couldn't get to him. And he hated it. He hated Drake, and he hated the FDA. They had given up so easily; they had suspended the search for Slate after a month and, after six months, Drake coldly told him it was time to face the facts and deal with the harsh fact that Slate was dead and gone and that couldn't be changed. He even went so far as to suggest that Mikel was acting like a spoiled child, a conversation that ended with Mikel hitting someone for the first time in his life. Doing so had felt damn good.

Still, when it came to a memorial service, Mikel couldn't arrange it. That fell to his and Slate's mutual friends, but he did attend; he sat in the front row, listening to the wonderful things people had to say about Slate.

Mikel didn't speak.

He couldn't bring himself to talk about Slate as if he were really gone, and the reality that he seemingly was became more and more agonizing as time passed and Mikel was repeatedly faced with a host of friends who told him he needed to move on. He needed to let go. Slate wouldn't want him to sit around and slowly waste away; he needed to begin rebuilding his life. Some even suggested the he move, but Mikel refused to leave the house he had shared with Slate, the house that Slate had left him. Needing a distraction, he began painting again. He attended the shows set up by his agent. He did what he could, to make it appear he was healing; he did what he could, to assure his friends he was okay, but on the inside, he was in never-ending pain and the chill inside of him seemed to consume everything, from his heart to his soul.

At the one-year mark, he stopped calling Drake, demanding answers that Drake refused to give; Drake had insisted everything regarding what had happened to Slate was classified. e wouldn't even tell Mikel where Slate had supposedly died or what exactly he had been doing.

*"This is about more than you, Mikel."*

*"Damn right. It's about Slate and I... damn it, I want to know where he's at."*

*"He's dead!"*

*"So you keep saying, but how... I didn't see a body, I don't even know where his body might be, and you're a fuckin' cyborg."*

*"Mikel—"*

*"All you do is spout off about classified information."*

*"Because it is classified—"*

*"You're nothing but an arrogant, self-centered asshole and you hate me, because Slate loves me and he doesn't want you."*

The parting comment was childish and immature, but Mikel was too upset to care and he decided not to contact Drake again, because it was pointless and it only made him feel worse. Not knowing all the facts was torture.

He couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, Slate wasn't dead, but even that hope faded in time, and he was left wondering if he had suffered, or if he had died quickly; he knew Drake knew a hell of a lot more than he had shared and that ate at him like acid.

He couldn't find any peace.



Nearly two years later—nineteen fuckin’ months and two fuckin’ weeks—the not knowing still kept him up at night and while he went through the expected motions of living, he knew he was lying to those around him, and himself.

He wasn’t healing.

He wasn’t moving on.

But he had to—like it or not, and he didn’t like it—he had to get past the soul-devouring grief, and his best friend, Mallory, had suggested the first step in letting go might be sorting through Slate’s clothes and sending them away. Mallory had even offered to help him. But Mikel had turned her down. He had to do this himself; he didn’t want to see anyone else filtering through things that had belonged to Slate. It was too personal and too intimate and the idea made Mikel feel sick as he sat there on the bed he and Slate had shared, staring at the still-empty boxes.

*They’re just clothes, Mikel; it’s not like you’re giving away your memories or agreeing to stop loving Slate and missing him all the time. It makes sense to do this. Just pack the boxes. Don’t think about how unfair, how wrong it is, that Slate’s gone.*

Reaching deep down inside of himself for strength and determination, he stood and walked to the closet, slowly opening the door and staring inside, holding his breath for a moment as his eyes fell to what had been Slate’s prized clothing possession.

A tattered, borderline hideous Red Wings jersey. Seeing it, tears instantly filled Mikel’s eyes and he slammed the door closed.

*No!*

He couldn’t do this; he couldn’t pack Slate’s things and send them away; he couldn’t let go because he simply didn’t want to let go; he

wanted to hold on to everything Slate had ever touched because letting someone else have it meant Slate was really gone.

Leaning against the closed door, he sank down to the floor, wrapping his arms around his legs, his face resting on his knees as the silent tears turned into heaving sobs that relentlessly boiled from deep inside of him, reminding him that he wasn't healing. He wasn't moving on. He was just as devastated now as he had been the day Drake Summerfield had shown up at the door; he was still mourning the love of his life and if others couldn't understand why, that was their problem and not his. He couldn't worry about anyone else, because it took everything he had to keep his own head above water, when all he wanted to do was curl up in a corner and cry until all the heated tears finally faded.

Mostly, he wanted the one thing—*the one person*—he couldn't have.

He wanted Slate.

*“Nothing can pull us apart or come between us, Mikel, and when I leave, I promise that I will always, always come back to you, because I love you.”*

The promise Slate had made, the promise he had finally failed to keep, haunted Mikel, as he sat there, not fighting the tears, knowing in his heart and soul that he would never completely crawl out of the dark place he had fallen into. It wasn't possible. How could it be? How did anyone go on without the love of their life? Maybe he could function enough to make it seem as if he actually cared about the world around him, but harsh truth be told, he no longer had the strength or the will to really care about anything or anyone, himself included.

Physically, he was alive, but emotionally, he was dead.

There was no escaping death, not even in the figurative sense, and Mikel understood that; he knew he was little more than a walking zombie

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and if all he had left to cling to were his memories and Slate's earthly possessions, he wouldn't—*he couldn't*—pack them up and give them away, even if doing so might have been the right thing to do.

## II

TWO nights after his failed attempt to pack away Slate's belongings, Mikel met Mallory for dinner at their favorite restaurant, an Italian place Slate had first introduced him to. Right away, Mallory asked how the packing had gone.

Mikel simply told her he didn't want to talk about it, and Mallory knew him well enough not to push the issue; they had literally known each other their entire lives, as their families had lived next door to each other and Mallory's mother and his mother had been best friends. He trusted Mallory more than he had ever trusted anyone—with the exception of Slate—and when he first decided to come out, it was Mallory he confided in first, and she had offered unwavering support. She knew his moods, understood how his mind worked; Mallory had pulled him back from the edge numerous times since Slate's death and odds were she would do it again, but she never complained.

They enjoyed a nice meal. Mikel kept the conversation light and Mallory allowed him to do so, right up until dessert was served and she looked at him with piercing gray eyes that made it clear she wasn't in the mood for bullshit.

*Wonderful.*

“I’m not going to ask about the packing again, because I can guess the outcome.”

“Mal—”

“I won’t push you to do something you really aren’t ready to do, but I am going to ask you to come to New York with me Friday night and stay through Monday.” She set aside her fork before resting her arms on the table.

“What’s happening in New York?”

“Remember that artist we met at your last show, two months ago?”

“I think so. Do you mean the French guy?”

“His name is Jean-Paul and he’s having his own show and he sent me an e-mail asking me to come, so I thought you might tag along with me.”

Mikel smiled. “I get the feeling you like this guy, so why would you want me around? I might put a cramp in your style.”

“Not at all, my dear, and I want you there, because if you’re around, I won’t do something foolish and go back to his hotel.”

“I see.”

“Hey, I’m trying to cut down on the one-night stands.” She picked up her fork and dove into her slice of strawberry cheesecake with eager delight. “Come on. I might be fun.” She didn’t come out and say fun was really something he needed, but Mikel knew that was what she was thinking, and he sighed as he considered her offer.

“I guess I could tag along and keep you from acting like a wanton hussy.”

“Thanks.” Mallory rolled her eyes, but then her mood shifted and Mikel looked down at his still-untouched cheesecake. “Do you want to tell me how you’re doing, or do I just get to worry?” Her voice—as always—was soft, laced with compassion, and Mikel wasn’t surprised when she reached across the small table to cover his hand with hers.

“If I say I’m just fine, you won’t buy it, will you?”

“Nope.”

“Figured.”

“Mikel—”

“I’m coping, Mal. I have no choice. I get up. I go to sleep. I paint.” He shook his head, the tears he hated burning his eyes as he looked up at his best friend. “And I miss him so much; I think about him night and day and I... people say time makes it better and with time, moving on with my life will come naturally somehow, but I don’t believe it.”

Mallory squeezed his hand in a show of comfort. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve said that before, but it’s all I know to say, love. I wish I could do more.” He knew she hated feeling powerless and Mikel forced a smile for Mallory’s sake, but he knew it didn’t reach his eyes; he knew she could see his pain and fear and she understood that he couldn’t always pretend the world was right. Because it wasn’t. He was the walking wounded—cliché as that sounded—and he felt disconnected and completely out of touch with the rest of the world that continued to relentlessly move around him.

“I just... I know how crazy it sounds, but sometimes, I still think it’s all a mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I still believe he’s alive.”

“Sweetheart—”

“I know. I know, Mal. But sometimes, I have this feeling that... I can’t explain it. And logically, I know he can’t be alive, but emotionally, there’s this nagging voice that keeps telling me if he were really gone, I’d know it....”

“Not having a body has to make it hard.”

“That and not knowing exactly where he was, what his last moments were.” *Was he afraid? Did he suffer? Was it over quick?* He knew those questions—those answerless questions—would haunt him for the rest of his life, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to change that. “I’m sorry. I don’t meant to be such a weepy jerk, Mal. I guess I’m not the best company these days.” He hadn’t been for a while, as far as he was concerned, but Mallory shook her head, squeezing his hand again and, as always, her eyes were warm with understanding and compassion.

Clearing his throat, Mikel regained control of his wavering emotions and quickly changed the topic, and Mallory allowed him to do so without resistance. They finished their dessert and coffee in comfortable silence.

Afterward, he walked Mallory to her car, kissed her cheek, and promised he would call soon to confirm their weekend plans. He really felt she would have more fun without him, but he was trying hard to make an effort, to rejoin the world, to a certain extent, at least. And he didn’t want to give Mallory yet more cause to worry about him; he didn’t want to be a burden on his friends—especially Mallory—but the “happy” charade got tiresome sometimes and for that reason, Mikel suspected he was better off staying away from others most of the time.

At least he had his memories to keep him company.

He tried to keep those memories at bay as he drove home, but once he reached the house, he parked the car inside the garage and decided a walk along the beach would be good for him. He knew the fresh air would help clear his mind, and it was a beautiful, early autumn night with cool breezes and a full moon lingering low, on the vast, watery horizon.

*The kind of night Slate would have loved so much.*

How many nights had he and Slate walked along the beach? Slate had loved the water. So many nights during the summer they would spread a blanket in the sand, near the water's edge and eagerly make love, while bathed in lustrous moonlight.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see Slate, naked and glorious, his eyes filled with passion, his hands so sure and so confident; no one had ever known his body the way Slate had and no one ever would, because Mikel simply couldn't imagine allowing any man to touch him.

To do so would be a betrayal.

Walking to the water's edge, he stood so close the white-capped waves almost touched the tips of his black shoes.

Eyes still closed, he drank in a deep breath and when he licked his lips, he could taste a faint hint of slate in the mist.

*I miss you, Slate. I miss you so much! Why did this happen? Why did you leave me?*

It was an unfair thought, he knew; Slate hadn't wanted to leave him—hell, Slate had decided to walk away from the FDA so they could build a life together, and Mikel knew that life would have been amazing, filled with love and passion.



The three years they had shared had certainly been incredible.

Lifting a hand, he brushed tears from his cheeks and eyes and turned to walk back to the house, but he paused suddenly and listened, unable to shake the sudden, consuming feeling that he wasn't alone, that someone was watching him.

*That's crazy.*

Frowning, he looked left and right. He could see a fair distance, and he was obviously alone, as he should have been, considering it was a private beach.

Trying to shake off the unsettling sensation, he began walking again, but he had only taken two steps, when something—*something he couldn't see*—collided into him, knocking him down with such force the air was pushed right from his lungs. He tried to suck in a breath as he rolled onto his back, feeling the damp sand beneath him; he blinked rapidly, working to clear his vision, trying not to panic when a large, imposing figure blocked out the moonlight and an instant later, a heavy weight descended on him, pressing him into the ground. A large hand covered his mouth, pushing down hard, to keep him from screaming; he wanted—*needed*—to scream, to fight, but the weight was too much. The figure holding him down seemed to have some superhuman strength and he was completely frantic, as his eyes finally focused and he found himself looking into the face of a monster.

He was pale—unnaturally pale—and his hair was stringy, long, dirty-looking, and his eyes were an odd yellowish color; they were inhuman. There wasn't any hint of human emotion in those eyes. All he could see was madness and animal lust.

*Dear God, help me!*

Desperate, terrified, he tried to struggle, tried to push the man—the creature—off of him, but a long, cold hand captured both his wrists above his head, holding them firmly in place, and the body stretched out over his imprisoned form.

His captor laughed, roughly and deeply. “My, my, my. Aren’t you pretty....” He leaned close, his lips brushing against Mikel’s ear, sending chills washing over him that went beyond the flesh, down into his bones and his soul. “I’m gonna move my hand now, and you can scream, my sweet, but no one will hear you and it will only amuse me.”

Sadly, Mikel knew he—*it*—was right; the nearest neighbor was six miles in either direction, which meant he was completely alone.

*Trapped with a monster.*

The hand moved away from his mouth and he licked his lips, losing his battle not to panic, as the creature grinned down at him and Mikel sucked in a breath, seeing sharp teeth that looked deadly in the glowing moonlight.

“What... what are you...?” His voice was little more than a whisper and the creature laughed.

“My sweet, I am the last face you will ever see....” A long finger caressed his cheek and he swallowed back bile.

“Please—”

“I’m going to fuck you until you beg for mercy and when I’m finally done with you, I’m going to take my time, draining your blood.”

“No... get off of me....” Panic gave him a surge of energy, but it wasn’t enough and the hideous creature above him laughed and wrapped

one hand around his throat, squeezing just hard enough to cut off Mikel's air for a terrifying moment.

"You can fight me, if you want to. It will amuse me. But I assure you, I will do as I wish." Hand still on Mikel's throat, the creature—*he couldn't think of it as a man*—crushed chapped, cold lips, to his mouth, tongue delving in with surprise force that had Mikel gagging.

*This isn't happening!*

Desperate, Mikel tried to work a hand between them, tried to shove the creature off, but the effort was in vain and he did scream when the creature lifted off him just long enough to rip open his shirt, running a hand down Mikel's chest.

"Gonna fuck you until you bleed, pretty boy."

"The bloody hell you are!"

For a second, Mikel thought he had imagined the voice, but suddenly, the weight holding him down was gone and rolled onto his side quickly, struggling to his feet as another voice sounded and Mikel looked to see Drake Summerfield running down the beach toward him.

*What?*

His eyes returned to the creature, who was now crouched on the ground, growling up at the darkly clad figure that stood above him.

"Mikel!"

He heard Drake scream his name, and then the man was there, grabbing his arm and pulling him back as the darkly clad figure—head covered by a hood—lifted what appeared to be a crossbow and without hesitation fired it at the monstrous figure.

A sharp-looking stick lodged in the creature's chest and Mikel watched, in disbelief, as the creature cried out and seemed to evaporate right in front of him, which was impossible—things like that just didn't happen—but the creature had been a creature; it hadn't been a man. Mikel was sure of that. He felt like he had fallen into some alternate world. Nothing made sense... the creature and the man in the hood and then there was Drake.

"Mikel? Mikel, answer me! Did he hurt you?"

Drake had turned him so they were facing each other and shook him slightly, trying to shake him from the shocked stupor.

"What was... what was that...?" He looked back at the place where the creature had vanished.

"It's okay now. It's over—"

"Over?" A laugh escaped him and it sounded a little crazed to him, but all things considered, he had a right to feel and sound a little crazy.

"Mikel—"

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Language, love. I don't think I ever heard you use that word before."

The voice—*that voice*—he knew that voice; he lived to hear that voice in his memories, in his dreams. It was the voice that belonged to the love of his life, the man that was dead.... Mikel felt thoroughly off balance.

Turning slowly, Drake forgotten, Mikel stared, disbelieving, at the darkly clad figure who had pushed back the hood to reveal his face.

*Slate's face.*

He closed his eyes tight, wanting to reopen them, to see if the image was real, but at the same time, he just wanted to keep his eyes closed; he wanted so much to believe that maybe, just maybe, it was all real and Slate was actually there.

“Mikel, please, look at me, baby.”

The voice was demanding yet pleading all at once and Mikel forced open his eyes, and Slate was still standing there.

His hair was shorter and a faint scar curved along his right cheek, but those eyes—God, he knew those eyes. As improbable and impossible as it seemed, Slate was standing there, alive and beautiful. Mikel opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

He felt a hand rest on his shoulder, and he knew it had to be Drake, but he didn't care. He could only stare at the man he loved.

Alive.

Slate was alive!

Slate was alive and there were monsters on the beach. Slate had killed the monster that had attacked him.

“Mikel....”

“Slate—”

He heard Drake's voice, but he couldn't understand what he was saying and it didn't matter to Mikel, as he took a step forward, with his hand outstretched, needing to touch Slate, to prove to himself that it was real.

*Please, God, please!*

Slate moved toward him just as the world went black, and Mikel felt himself tumble headfirst into a cool, black abyss.

### III

SLATE sat on the edge of the bed, watching Mikel with unwavering eyes, unable to believe he was finally close to the man he loved.

“Slate—”

“Go away, Drake.” He didn’t bother to glance over his shoulder; he knew Drake was standing in the doorway, likely looking nervous.

“Funny, but I was about to suggest you go away.”

“No.”

“Would you—”

“I won’t leave him, Drake, until I explain. Damn it, I owe him that.”

“You saved his life tonight.” He obviously thought that made everything right, offset the wrongs, but Slate knew better.

“His life was in danger, because of me.” Carefully, he reached out, brushing a lock of curls back from Mikel’s face, feeling rage burn his stomach when he noticed the bruises on Mikel’s neck and more on his wrist.

“What are you going to tell him, Slate?”

“Everything.”

“You can’t—”

“I’m telling him everything, Drake. Deal with it. I owe him the truth and I don’t care if you don’t like it, because he deserves to know what happened tonight and why... why I let him believe I was dead for nearly two years.”

He heard Drake curse, and then he heard footsteps, which told him Drake had at least moved into another room, allowing him a moment alone.

“My beautiful Mikel.” He leaned close, brushing his lips against Mikel’s cheek, looking at the oh-so-beautiful face, savoring this moment, this chance to simply look his fill.

He felt like a man who was starving; he felt like he was breathing for the first time in years. Just sitting close to Mikel chased away the chill inside of him. It made him feel human. God! He had missed this man so much; without Mikel, he had been trapped in hell for nearly two years and the only thing that had kept him alive, kept him going, was Mikel’s memory.

*And now what? Maybe Drake’s right. Maybe this is a mistake. How can I tell him the truth? How do I explain that there is so much more to the world than he ever realized? How do I make him understand that this can’t be a happy reunion?*

Sitting back, Slate closed his eyes for a moment, knowing he had to control his emotions, he had to keep calm.

Like it or not, he had to think like what he was.



*A monster in a man's body. But how much longer can the man control the monster, before the monster finally takes control?*

It would happen eventually and when it did, he would have to die for real, he would have to be destroyed, to keep others safe from madness. He and Drake had already talked about it and Drake knew that in the end he would likely have to be the one to kill him; he knew it wasn't a responsibility his old friend wanted, but Drake had assured him he would do what was necessary, when the time came. Drake still hoped that doctors and scientists working for the FDA would find some miracle cure for the virus he had been subjected to, but Slate wasn't as optimistic.

Reality was what it was but for now... for now, for a brief moment, he was with Mikel again and that was enough to make Slate think that maybe he could die happy.

*But what happens to Mikel when this is over? What will he do? I know he's grieved for me all this time and I look around this house and nothing has changed. He's trapped in the past. Will the truth make it hard for him to move on? Or will knowing the truth make it possible for him to move on, to find himself a man who can love him, the way he deserves to be loved?*

He had no answers, only questions, but he knew he would have to offer some serious answers to Mikel, as soon as he opened his eyes.

As that thought filtered through his mind, Mikel stirred, moaning slightly, as his eyes fluttered several times before opening fully, landing on Slate and locking there as he pushed himself up slowly, the emotions in his eyes unmistakable.

Disbelief.

Confusion.

Relief.

Love.

The love was most notable and Slate opened his mouth to say something—anything—but Mikel scooted closer, lifting a trembling hand, and Slate leaned into the precious touch when that hand cupped his cheek gently.

“Slate....”

“It’s me, baby.” He made no effort to control the tears that sprang into his eyes. He knew he didn’t have the strength to stop them, as Mikel let out a strangled sob and then, he flung himself against Slate, into his arms, and Slate caught him and held him close.

Burying his face in Mikel’s dark hair, Slate inhaled deeply, holding Mikel tight, as Mikel sobbed in his arms, his body trembling.

“Baby, I’m here and I... god, Mikel, baby, I am so sorry....” Slate kissed his hair, ran a comforting hand down his back. “Baby, please... please, don’t cry. Please. I’m so sorry I ever gave you a reason to cry, Mikel, and I... I’m sorry I agreed to that last mission because... because I ruined everything and I am so sorry for that, baby.” He cried along with Mikel. He couldn’t help himself. Seeing Mikel again ripped at his heart and soul and the pain seemed to consume him; he felt the weight of the past nineteen months crushing down on him and he knew Mikel was feeling the same pain, mingled with a dozen other twisted, complex emotions.

Finally, Mikel pulled back, tears on his face, his eyes red, but he was still beautiful—*so damn beautiful*—that he stole Slate’s breath, as Mikel lifted trembling hands to cup his face and Slate savored the innocent but glorious touch, while wondering if Mikel would be willing to touch him

once he knew Slate wasn't much different from the creature that had attacked him on the beach.

"You're real." His whispered words were filled with awe. "I... everyone said I was crazy and I... I thought maybe I was and I... I tried to believe you were dead, but I couldn't.... I kept thinking I would feel it, if you were gone. I just couldn't.... I kept begging for answers and you.... God, you're real and you're here and I.... Oh, Slate...." He laughed and sobbed all at once, and then his lips were on Slate's, demanding and hungry and without thought. Slate wrapped him in his arms, returning the kiss with desperation and need. He had never tasted anything as wonderful as Mikel's kisses.

Mikel's hands tangled in his hair and Slate moaned. He wanted to fall onto the bed, strip Mikel naked, and make wild love to him; he wanted to sink into that perfect ass, hear Mikel call out his name and frantically beg for more.

But he couldn't.

*I can't let Mikel make love to a monster.*

Breaking the kiss, Slate drank in a breath, trying to get his emotions controlled and his thoughts in some rational order.

"Baby, we need to talk."

"Slate—"

"I know you're feeling a lot of things right now, and so am I, but you know you have questions and I certainly owe you answers." Slate brushed a cloud of dark curls from Mikel's face. "I owe you a lot of explanations and—"

“I do have questions, Slate, but I.... How can anything else matter, as long as you’re here?”

“Baby....”

“You’re alive.” Mikel grinned. “You promised, remember? You promised you would come back to me and you did.... You kept your promise to me....” Fresh tears filled his eyes and Slate smiled, despite the pain in his chest, wishing he could tell Mikel that yes, he was back, and yes, everything would be okay now.

But he couldn’t say that.

It would be a lie.

Mikel deserved better than that.

“You have to know everything, baby,” Slate whispered.

“I know you’re here—”

“But don’t you want to know how? And why?” Of course he wanted to know, but he was clearly afraid of the answers, and why wouldn’t he be, after what had happened down at the beach? But Slate knew he had to get him past that, he had to make Mikel listen—had to try to make him understand—and once the ugly truth was finally out, odds were great that Mikel would want him to disappear again and never come back. “God, baby, I want so much to kiss you and hold you and pretend the last nineteen months were nothing but a really bad dream, but I can’t. It’s not possible. I have to face reality and I... you have to know where I’ve been and why I didn’t come back to you long before now, because I wanted to; every damn day I wanted to come to you and....” He shook his head, knowing he was getting off track, but it was damn hard to focus, when he was sitting on a bed with Mikel—sitting on their bed, damn it. He didn’t

want to break Mikel's heart all over again, but he was about to do just that and there was no way to avoid it.

He had to know the truth.

He had to know what had happened and worse yet, what would happen, in time.

Mikel sighed, easing back from him slightly, but he didn't look at all happy about doing so and Slate almost smiled.

God, but he loved this man more than life.

"I do have questions and I should ask them and I will, but I just.... You have no idea, how many times I prayed that you would come back."

"Mikel—"

"And Drake? I begged him for answers."

"He couldn't give them to you," Slate whispered, reaching for his hand.

"He's here, isn't he? I remember him being on the beach."

"I think he's in the living room, or something." Slate didn't really care, at the moment. Drake was a big boy and he could fend for himself. "Why don't we start there? Can you tell me exactly what happened to you, on the beach?"

"Well, I went for a walk. I had dinner with Mal and I... I was attacked." He closed his eyes. "I was so afraid and that... what was that thing?" His eyes opened and he looked at Slate helplessly. "I tried to get him—or it—off of me, but... I wasn't strong enough and he... he said he was going to fuck me, before he drained my blood...." He shivered at the memory and Slate squeezed his hand, resisting the urge to haul him into

his arms and cling to him because really, he didn't have the right, not when he wasn't all that different from the vicious creature that had terrified Mikel so completely.

"I'm sorry, baby."

"And you and Drake came out of nowhere. Slate, I don't understand...." He was afraid, that much was obvious to him, and Slate hated it, but truth be told, Mikel had a reason to be afraid. "I'm really confused and I... I just know you're really here with me. I know you saved me. If you hadn't shown up, that thing would have killed me." He would have done far worse than that, Slate knew. He had seen what the "creature" in question was capable of, and knowing how close Mikel had come to a fate worse than death made him sick.

Taking a moment, Slate simply looked at Mikel, at the ivory skin and those beautiful hazel eyes and those perfect lips.

He wanted this man.

He wanted a lifetime with this man.

*But I don't have a lifetime to live and I have to tell him that.*

"Do you remember when I first told you about the work I did for the FDA?"

"You told me what you could, but a lot of it was classified, and you couldn't talk about it."

"Well, one thing I didn't tell you: the FDA does handle security threats, but not the typical threats that the FBI would handle."

"Okay...."

"The FDA deals with threats of a supernatural nature."

“Slate—”

“That thing, that creature, that attacked you on the beach was a vampire hybrid; he was once a normal man, but some people injected him with a souped-up combination of drugs and the virus that causes vampirism and... well, the results are what you saw.” He paused for a moment, allowing what he had said to sink in. “That creature, the man he used, to be was named Marcus Logan and he was once an FDA agent. I worked with him. I was friends with him and he was with me, on that last mission; he was with me when we went into the lab, where the vampire hybrids were being generated and, like me, he was captured, Mikel, when the mission went wrong.”

As expected, Mikel shook his head, rejecting a truth that made no sense to him, but Slate knew he had to force the issue.

“I was captured, Mikel.”

“No....”

“I will never tell you everything that happened to me, because I don’t want you to know things like that happen, but I do have to tell you that I... Mikel, I was injected with that virus-and-drug combo, but for reasons I don’t understand, I didn’t change right away—”

“Stop—”

“I didn’t change like Marcus, but I am changing and I... it’s only a matter of time before I end up just like Marcus.”

“No!” Mikel jumped from the bed, crying, shaking his head. “No! I... I don’t understand this, but I can believe that thing on the beach was some kind of monster, but you aren’t like that and you never will be and I... Slate, I don’t understand....”

“I know, baby—”

“Explain this to me. Make me understand....”

“I’m trying.”

“You’re here, damn it! You’re here....” He broke down again, crying harder, and Slate stood, going to him, gathering Mikel tightly in his arms, holding him close. “You died.... They said you died and I... I just know you’re back now, Slate, and I won’t lose you again. I won’t! I won’t!” His reaction was more than understandable. Slate knew it was all more than difficult to accept; he doubted he would believe it if he hadn’t lived it.

Hell, he was still living it.

*And now, Mikel’s in the middle of this mess.*

And the worst was yet to come.

Slate allowed them both a moment to calm down, before guiding them back to the bed, where he sat down with Mikel in his lap.

If this was the last time he would hold the man he loved, he intended to make the most of it, for his sake, and for Mikel’s.

“I’m going to tell you everything now, Mikel, and no matter how impossible it all seems, I need you to listen and believe me, and most of all, I need you to trust me.”

“I do trust you, Slate. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby, and no matter what, nothing will ever change that.” Not even the monster living inside of him could destroy what he felt for Mikel, what he would feel as long as he was alive, to feel anything at all.



## IV

MIKEL sat at the kitchen table, staring at his untouched coffee, the previous night's events replaying themselves in his mind.

Drake Summerfield—a man he hated—was currently sleeping on the sofa, in the living room, his back-from-the-dead lover was sleeping in the windowless attic, to avoid exposure to sunlight, which couldn't kill a vampire hybrid, but it could significantly reduce their strength. Several bagged pints of human blood were cooling in the refrigerator. Apparently Slate had to consume blood, or he would become sick; it wasn't something he enjoyed—for obvious reasons—and until recently, he hadn't truly craved it, but it seemed the “monster” inside of him was getting more powerful, and therefore, more demanding, and Slate had to satisfy it, in whatever way he could. For as long as he could. But it wouldn't be forever; Slade had repeatedly explained that, in the end, the monster, the vampire would take control, as it had with all the others who had been exposed to the drug-virus combination.

Slate had spent hours explaining everything to Mikel; he had told him about the mission to destroy the lab the FDA suspected of producing vampire hybrids. Somehow, someone at the lab had known in advance that

they were coming and Slate and the other four men in his team were captured and tortured for information.

*“I can only tell you it was bad, but I... I won’t tell you what they did, but I... eventually, when we refused to give up any information, the leader of the lab and the hybrid project decided to turn us into hybrids and the nightmare really began.”*

For the others, the transformation had occurred almost immediately, but a second FDA attack on the lab had prevented Slate from getting a full dose of the virus-drug combo and he didn’t undergo a change right away.

But he would.

The cravings were stronger, the urges were stronger. He had never consumed blood directly from a human, but the monster inside of him wanted that and, eventually, he would get his way; he would take control, just as he had with the others.

*“The FDA didn’t know what to do right away, but eventually, they had to use me, to track and destroy the others the lab had infected before we were captured and I... well, I had to kill three members of my team, including Marcus, last night.”*

*“Slate—”*

*“Marcus—the thing Marcus had become—knew I was coming after him, so he came after you to get to me, and I’m sorry for that, Mikel.”*

*“This is all—”*

*“Crazy sounding, but true.”*

*“Why didn’t you come back to me sooner?”*

*"I couldn't. I was nearly insane, when I realized what would happen. I never wanted to expose you to any of this."*

*"I had a right to know."*

*"I know. And I'm sorry, Mikel. I'm so damn sorry."*

The apology only resulted in more information; Slate told him that Drake had known for nearly a year that he was alive, but he hadn't been allowed to reveal anything, and that annoyed Mikel. But what pushed him over the edge was knowing Slate could have contacted him. He could have called him or sent for him—he could have reached out and pulled Mikel from his grief—but doing so seemed unfair to him, because in the end, the monster would win and he would die and Mikel would be left to grieve again, while weighed down with knowledge no person should ever have to possess. He offered logical reasons to justify the decisions he had made, but Mikel was pissed—he *was furious*. His soul, his heart, had died when he lost Slate, but Slate hadn't died. He was alive, just different. Most of it didn't make sense to Mikel and he wondered if it ever would, but he did know what he felt and what he felt was betrayed and hurt and confused.

*"I did what I had to, Mikel—"*

*"Bullshit!"*

*"I didn't want you involved in this nightmare."*

*"Nightmare? Nightmare? I've lived a fuckin' nightmare, thinking you were dead—"*

*"I am as good as dead!"*

*"No, you're not! You're alive. You've been alive. And I should have been with you."*

He had stormed out of the room, needing some space and some air, but he hadn't ventured outside, clearly recalling what had happened on the beach. He just went into his studio and locked himself inside and he had stayed there, until just before dawn, when Slate knocked on the door lightly and told him where he would be and where Drake was at.

*"We still need to talk, baby. Please. I'll give you space now, but I... we need to talk."*

He had waited fifteen minutes after Slate walked away before leaving his studio and heading into the kitchen to make coffee, but he couldn't drink it. His stomach ached. In a matter of hours, the world as he knew it had been turned upside down; the world he thought he had known was actually filled with monsters and people willing to turn others into monsters, all for the sake of a profit. Slate had told him the lab the FDA had eventually destroyed had been turning out vampire hybrids, to market as some sort of ultimate warrior, available to the highest bidder. It was all sick and twisted and Mikel wasn't certain how to process any of it, when all he could think about, all he could focus on, was the reality that Slate was alive—different, maybe, but still alive—and that was truly a miracle, that was what he had wanted, what he had prayed for and, angry or not, he was grateful.

*Grateful but so damn confused.*

The door leading into the kitchen opened and Mikel tensed as Drake stepped into the room, looking rumpled and groggy. Mikel gestured toward the coffeepot without speaking. He had no idea what he wanted to say to this man. He had hated Drake for so long and he suspected he still did, but Slate had insisted Drake's hands had been tied and he hadn't wanted to lie. He simply hadn't had any choice and Mikel supposed he should try to look at the situation from that standpoint, but it was difficult;

he was so pissed and he needed to direct that at someone, and he didn't want to direct it at Slate, which really left Drake as the only option.

Not exactly mature, but considering what he had been through in the past few hours, Mikel figured he had a right to some immature moments.

They remained silent as Drake located a cup, poured himself some coffee, and sat down at the table across from Mikel.

"If you want to yell at me, you can." He made the comment casually as he dumped sugar into his coffee, and Mikel glared.

"Thank you so much for your permission."

"Can you pass the cream?"

Mikel was tempted to throw it at him, but instead, he slid it across the table. "Was it easy for you to lie right to my face?"

"No. Honestly, it was one of the hardest things I've ever done."

"Right."

"I mean it, Mikel. I hated lying to you. I didn't know anything right away, but once the truth did come out, I wanted you to know but—"

"But it was *classified*."

"Yes." He had the good grace to look ashamed and Mikel tried to consider that a victory, but he couldn't and that annoyed him more.

"Drake—"

"If I had told you any of this—*all of this*—would you have believed me?"

"That's beside the point."

“Maybe.” Drake sat back, taking a sip of his coffee, seeming to savor the rich flavor.

“All of this is....” Mikel shook his head, which had begun to ache. “Slate never told me what the FDA was exactly, or what he did for them, and I tried not to think about it too much. I didn’t let myself get too imaginative, because I worried enough, whenever he went on some mission, but.... Well, needless to say, I never thought his work involved anything so... so unbelievable.”

“You’d be amazed by the things we’ve seen in our jobs.”

“So vampire hybrids are common?”

“Well, not vampire hybrids exactly, but similar creatures, as well as other experiments gone very wrong. And we get to clean up the mess.”

Mikel considered that for a moment. “I can’t wrap my mind around this.” That was putting it very mildly. Drake half-smiled.

“I won’t pretend to understand what you’re feeling, because I can’t, and for what it’s worth, I’m sorry that I can’t make it easier for you or Slate.”

He had to admit, the apology sounded sincere, and it occurred to him that the situation couldn’t be easy for Drake.

He was Slate’s friend, and had Slate felt the same, Drake would have happily been more, but Mikel had been the one to win Slate’s love. And he wasn’t about to apologize for that. But he didn’t want to make the situation worse for any of them, and there was a chance that Drake could give him some additional information.

“Slate told me that he’s getting weaker, that the thing inside him, the virus, or the monster, as he calls it, is getting stronger.”

“It is. He’s lucky he hasn’t lost the battle before now.”

“He said it had something to do with the amount of the drug he was given.”

“That seems to be the case, but honestly, we can’t be sure why Slate didn’t transform as rapidly as the others.”

“Are they all dead?”

“We managed to destroy the hybrids the lab turned out before the first FDA mission and three of the former FDA agents had to be killed.”

“That leaves Slate and one other alive?”

“He’s being held in a containment unit and....” He sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked at Mikel again. “Listen, Slate refuses to put much faith in this, but the FDA has some very talented doctors and scientists working on a possible cure.”

“A cure....”

“They’re close to a breakthrough and they intend to test it, on the hybrid we have—”

“Are you saying Slate could be okay?”

“I can’t say that for sure. I wish to God I could. But there is a slim chance this cure could work, and if it does, Slate might be okay.”

“But it’s a serious long shot, right?”

“Yes.”

“And Slate....”

“He won’t let himself hope for a cure.”

“He’s accepted the fact that this is going to kill him.” Mikel nearly winced at the thought.

“You have to understand, he’s seen what happened to the others, he’s seen what they’ve become and he doesn’t want to end up like that, Mikel. And I get that you’re hurt and I understand. I’d be pissed if I were in your shoes.” He chuckled. “Hell, I was pissed when I didn’t find out until six months after the fact, but Slate.... Please know that he thought about you every day and I know he wanted to come back to you but he wanted to protect you. He didn’t want to expose you to this mess. He figured it would somehow be easier for you to go on thinking he was dead, rather than find out he was alive but doomed to a fate worse than death.”

As much as Mikel hated it, the logic made sense, to an extent; he got that Slate had been trying to protect him, but he hadn’t. Not really. And as insane as the truth seemed, Mikel was relieved he knew it at last. The question was, what came next?

How could he let Slate walk away from him?

*I can’t. I can’t just let him leave me. I won’t let him leave me. If he has to face this nightmare, he will damn well face it with me at his side.*

“I know he plans to leave again soon—”

“Mikel—”

“Help me delay that, Drake. Please. Let me have this time with him. And give those doctors some time to work on that cure.”

“I want so much for the cure to work, but I.... Mikel, the virus, the monster, whatever you want to call it, it is getting stronger and Slate won’t be able to fight it off much longer. It’s a fact. And he... he made me promise that I would... when he starts to turn into what you saw on the beach last night, Slate made me promise that I would stop him.”



“Stop him?”

“You know what I’m saying,” Drake whispered and Mikel looked away, because he did know, and he hated it. He sensed that Drake hated it too.

“You know more facts than I do, as far as how this works, what this virus does, so tell me, Drake, how long do you think Slate has before he can’t fight this any longer?”

“I’m amazed he’s fought it this long, but I...” He blew out a breath, shaking his head. “I know he’s craving blood more and more and in far larger quantities and any exposure to sunlight makes him really sick, so if I had to guess... he has maybe three weeks.”

“That’s it?”

“Maybe more. Maybe a month. Or it could be less.”

“But the three-week mark is a pretty good guess, right?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Give me time with him, Drake. Please?”

“Mikel—”

“Two weeks. If you think three weeks is the deadline, give me two. Please.” He knew he was close to begging, but he didn’t care; his pride meant nothing. “I’ve grieved for him for nearly two years and it’s been hell and I... odds are, he’s really going to die and then I will have to grieve for him all over again, so let me have this time. Let Slate and I have this time. I’ll keep you updated. Hell, if you want, you can stay here. There are plenty of guestrooms, so take your pick, but let me have this time with Slate because we deserve a chance to be happy.” It wasn’t the lifetime they deserved, but it was more time than Mikel had ever thought

they would have and he wanted it; he wanted to hold Slate, make love to him, fall asleep in his arms, even if he had to do so in the damn attic during the day.

Drake sighed, raking a hand through his hair, clearly in conflict, weighing the pros and cons, but finally—to Mikel’s relief—he sighed again and nodded.

“Okay, if I agree and you can get that stubborn jackass upstairs to agree, he can stay here for two weeks, but I will be in contact and I will have to drop in and check on him.”

“Thank you—”

“Don’t say thank you, because you and Slate do deserve this.” He smirked. “I can’t wait to explain to the suits back at headquarters.”

“Will they cause problems for you?”

“Not a lot, but they will bitch and moan.”

“Drake—”

“Just enjoy the time, Mikel. I will do what I can.”

“And the cure?”

“I’ll keep pushing on that front, but don’t get your hopes up too much. I’d give anything for a cure to be found, but it’s unlikely.”

Mikel nodded, the anger he had felt at Drake gone. He actually felt a respect for the man and he was certainly grateful.

Drake had just handed him two weeks—fourteen days—to be with the man he loved, the man he had thought was lost to him forever, and Mikel wasn’t going to allow his fears about the future to stop him from enjoying the precious gift he had been given.

NEEDING some air, Drake took his second cup of coffee outside to enjoy the view as he considered what he had just done.

His superiors—the doctors and scientists looking for a cure—would be pissed, but hell, Slate had been living in hell for nineteen months and he deserved a chance to be happy for a while, and Mikel would make him happy.

*In a way no one else ever could, me included.*

He had long ago accepted that Slate had never and would never see him as anything more than a friend, and Drake was truly content with that and he wanted only what was best for Slate. He was a good, decent man, and he didn't deserve the hell he was in and had been in; he deserved to be happy and for that matter, so did Mikel.

The least he could do was give them two weeks.

*Two fuckin' weeks.*

The jarring ring of his cell broke his thoughts and he answered the call, knowing it would be someone with the FDA.

"Summerfield."

"Drake, it's Dr. Keller. We have a problem."

"What's new?"

"The subject we had—the hybrid—he broke free—"

"What?"

"He escaped, sir. I don't... don't know how... but we... we had to destroy him, sir—"

“He’s dead. You’re telling me our last subject is dead?”

“Well, Agent Quinn is alive—”

“Agent Quinn isn’t a bloody subject,” Drake snapped, anger rising.

“Of course. I apologize, sir. I just... well, obviously, with our last subject dead—”

“We can’t test the cure.”

“Well, we could test it on Agent Quinn.”

“I can’t deal with this now. I’ll call you back.” He slammed the phone shut, ending the call, and resisting the urge to throw the damn thing into the sand.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a breath that did little to calm him; he was furious and afraid and as impossible as it seemed, the nightmare had gotten worse for Slate. If by some chance a possible cure came into play, Slate would have to accept it—or refuse to—without having the buffer of knowing the possible outcome in advance.

*Shit!*

He knew he should go and tell Slate and Mikel the truth, tell them that the odds were suddenly even less in their favor, but he hesitated.

What good would it do, to tell them now? It would become just another cloud over what time they did have together. Why not hold off and tell them once their two weeks came to an end? Maybe, just maybe, allowing them to have some peace of mind—a possible hope—would be the kinder thing to do in this particular situation.

*Fuck it. I’ll keep this to myself. It will all come out soon enough.*

Sliding the phone back into his pocket, he poured the rest of his coffee into the sand, no longer having the stomach for it.

Turning, he went back inside, another ugly truth locked inside himself.

## V

THE sun had just set on the horizon when Slate came downstairs, to find Drake in the living room. He was understandably surprised when his old friend told him what Mikel had requested and he was even more surprised when Drake urged him to stay with Mikel. It was the last thing Slate expected. Drake hadn't even wanted him to tell Mikel everything, but he had done an about-face and while Slate was grateful for that, he was confused. And reluctant. He relished the idea of two weeks with Mikel—he loved knowing Mikel wanted that time with him—but the timetable he was on was unstable at best and he didn't want Mikel to be in needless danger, and being around him could very easily place him in danger, if the virus took control.

And there was the blood issue; God, he didn't want Mikel to see him consuming blood, just so he could stay alive.

“Don't overthink it, Slate. Just go with it. You deserve this.”

“Drake—”

“Two weeks with Mikel? Can you turn that down? I know how much you love him and I know how much you've missed him, so take this and make the most of it.”

“What if I start to feel out of control?”

“Call me.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It is.” Drake casually shrugged. “And since I know you want to know, Mikel is upstairs, in your room taking a nap, so get up there and enjoy this time.”

Not having the strength and most especially not having the will to argue, Slate left Drake and almost ran upstairs. His heart was pounding. Hell, his hands were shaking. He couldn’t remember the last time his hands shook, and being nervous... that felt almost alien to him, as he stopped in front of the bedroom door long enough to draw in a breath.

Opting not to knock, he opened the door and stepped inside, smiling to see Mikel asleep on top of the covers.

He had taken off his shirt, leaving his beautiful chest bare, and his dark curls were a mess. His lips were slightly parted and damp; the sight of them alone made Slate instantly hard, as he closed the door and crossed the room. He set down on the edge of the bed, trying hard to control his emotions; he felt the most overwhelming sense of intense desire—the desire he had always felt for Mikel—but mixed in there was the love he had for this remarkable man and his fear for what would happen when he could no longer stay in control. Was he doing the wrong thing? Would it be kinder to leave now? No matter what, Mikel would be heartbroken, but what decision would cause him less pain, in the end? He had suffered so much already and Slate wanted to spare him more suffering, but he couldn’t; he couldn’t change what the final outcome would be, but any thought of walking away from Mikel in that moment faded as Mikel opened those remarkable eyes, smiling slowly to see Slate sitting there,

and Slate found himself smiling in return, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

For a moment, nothing else mattered; the world beyond their bedroom didn't exist, there was no tragic end facing them. They were just two people very much in love, and that was the only thing that had any meaning for either of them.

Reaching out, Slate flipped on the lamp that rested on the nightstand and Mikel pushed himself onto his knees.

Wordlessly, he reached for the hem of Slate's shirt and Slate lifted his arms, allowing Mikel to remove the garment and carelessly throw it aside. His heart was pounding again, harder than before, and he realized he was holding his breath, as Mikel's eyes moved over him, seeing the scars on his chest—scars that hadn't existed before that last damn mission—and he knew Mikel well enough to know he recognized the new scars and he was thinking about how they came to be there. He had meant it, when he told Mikel he would never tell him everything he had suffered. He would never allow Mikel to live with those images, but the scars told a story all their own.

He could see the tears that came into Mikel's eyes and Slate reached for him, pulling him into his arms and seizing his mouth. God! He needed this. So much. Seeing Mikel, being able to hold him and kiss him, it felt like he was standing in the sunlight again; he felt warm inside and out and he delved his tongue into Mikel's warm and welcoming mouth. He tasted so good! Like chocolate and vanilla and strawberry, all the wonderful flavors in the world rolled into one delicious kiss. He could spend eternity kissing Mikel and never get enough, but eternity wasn't something they could count on and it made Slate all the more determined to make the most of the precious time they did have.



Frantic, wanting to take his time, but fearing he couldn't this time—the first time in so very, very long—he eased from the bed. Still holding Mikel and with trembling hands, Slate quickly finished stripping both of them.

“Missed you, baby....” Slate whispered the words, between desperate kisses, as Mikel gripped his shoulders almost painfully, and holding onto each other, they fell onto the bed, with Slate coming down on top of Mikel. “I ached to be close to you, Mikel....” He eagerly kissed Mikel’s jaw, down to the oh-so-very-sensitive place just below his ear, and Mikel’s back arched in reply, allowing Slate to feel his lover’s heated erection against his stomach.

“Slate....” Mikel breathed his name, hands tangling in his hair. “I love you. I love you.” He sobbed, as Slate moved down his chest, kissing, licking. He wanted to explore and reacquaint himself with every inch of Mikel’s utterly delectable body. “Dream about this... about you touching me....” Slate felt the hands in his hair tighten, as he latched on to one nipple, sucking hard, the way he knew his lover liked, and Mikel cried out, withering, chest heaving, needy little sounds escaping his throat. He was so open, his reactions were so honest, and Slate savored each sound that reached him.

Moving slowly, his hands skimmed over Mikel’s body; he loved the soft skin, the sleek muscles, the way the pale skin flushed. Never in his life had he seen a sight as beautiful as Mikel when he was aroused and aching and Slate whispered words of praise, telling Mikel again and again how much he loved him and how he had missed him. He had so much he wanted—needed—to say and two weeks hardly seemed like enough time to say those things, but two weeks were all they had, a reality Slate tried not to focus on, as he kissed Mikel’s hip bones, before homing in on Mikel’s straining cock. God, but it was a work of art. Slate had never seen anything so perfect. It was long and hard, the veins evident beneath the

pale skin, the head already leaking slightly, even before Slate eagerly wrapped his lips around the head and Mikel again cried out, his hips bucking, hands tangled in the covers.

Slate moaned, his tongue snaking around the head, teasing the slit. He savored the taste; he knew he was driving Mikel closer and closer to the edge and he loved it. He loved being able to give Mikel this pleasure because he deserved it.

*He deserves so much more than I will be able to give him.*

What he could give him was here and now and Slate was determined to make it perfect, as he eagerly, hungrily, licked and kissed and sucked Mikel, until his body tensed and he came with a strangled cry that sent a shudder of delight through Slate.

This was what he wanted.

This was what he and Mikel needed.

Slate shifted until he laid at Mikel's side, looking down at him, at the passion-glazed eyes and the sensual, content smile.

Without hesitation, Mikel reached for him, pulling him into another heated kiss that Slate returned with equally desperate adoration.

"Make love to me, Slate..." Mikel whispered against his lips. "I need to feel you inside me. I need it so badly..." He sounded so needy, so consumed with longing, and Slate smiled, kissing him again and again for a long moment as Mikel blindly reached for the nightstand, jerking open the drawer. Slate laughed when he felt a container of lubricant pushed into his hand.

"Demanding as always."

"Been too long since I've had this... had you..."

“Oh, baby.”

The fire inside him seemed to intensify and explode when Mikel rolled onto his stomach, allowing Slate a look at that firm, delicious ass. He had dreamed about that ass. It was perfect. God! His cock was so damn hard, he wanted to bury himself inside of Mikel and stay there, but he knew he needed to take this slow and get Mikel ready for him.

Leaning down, he kissed the back of Mikel’s neck, earning a wanton little moan that brought a smile, as he kissed his way down Mikel’s back.

“Slate....”

“Soon, baby. Soon,” Slate whispered, sliding his hands down to squeeze Mikel’s ass. “I’ll take care of you, baby. I swear it.” Gently, he buried his face between the firm globes, tongue teasing the amazingly tight opening, and Mikel arched up in obvious surprise, but Slate held him firmly in place, recalling clearly how much Mikel had always loved this.

He eagerly threw himself into the task, his tongue tracing circles, darting in and out of the budded cavity while he slipped one hand beneath Mikel, cupping and massaging his balls. He knew Mikel was hard again. Damn, but Mikel had always been insatiable; it was one of the many, many things Slate adored about him. He was the most passionate and responsive man Slate had ever known and knowing he could give Mikel pleasure only intensified his own pleasure.

“God, Slate... please...,” Mikel pleaded, arching his hips again and Slate moaned, knowing he had reached the point where he couldn’t hold out a moment longer.

Grabbing the lube, he generously coated his fingers and Mikel pulled himself up on his knees, looking back at Slate over his shoulder.

His hair was a mess and his cheeks were flushed, his lips parted and he panted; he looked wanton and beautiful and Slate's eyes burned with tears he wouldn't let himself shed in that moment. He'd have a chance to cry later. In two weeks, when he would have to walk away from Mikel forever. He was fairly certain doing so would kill him before the monster inside him had the chance, but he forced that thought from his mind as he slowly slipped a finger inside Mikel's already saliva-dampened opening, finding their locked eyes made the moment even more erotic.

He could feel his heart thundering, hear the sound of their labored breath; he could smell sweat and sex and it was incredible, as finally he withdrew his fingers and positioned himself behind Mikel. Mikel trembled, pressing back against him.

Biting his lip, he held Mikel's hips in a grip that would likely leave telltale marks on that pale skin, but he knew Mikel wouldn't care.

He never had.

Head thrown back, urged on by the needy little whimpers that sounded around him, he pushed into Mikel, an inch at a time, still taking his time. He didn't want to cause pain and Mikel was so hot and so tight, it felt like he was coming home at long last, he was finally where he was meant to be; nothing had ever felt so perfect or so very right.

Finally, completely buried inside the luscious opening, he shivered, aware that the tears he had told himself not to shed stained his cheeks, but he didn't care. Nothing—no one—could ruin this moment, this perfect moment in time.

He was home.

Maybe he couldn't stay forever—as much as he wished he could—but for now, he was home, and nothing else mattered.

THEY fell asleep, wrapped around each other, and when Slate awakened again, Mikel was sitting beside him, simply watching him.

Slate understood why.

His return, actually being with Mikel again, it all seemed surreal, like some wonderful dream that might end without warning, leaving him alone, secluded in the medical bay back at FDA Headquarters; he had certainly suffered that particular torture often enough, during the many months he had been away from Mikel, living a nightmare.

Pushing up on his elbows, he smiled and Mikel laid a hand on his chest, above his heart, as moonlight spilled through the open curtains.

“Did Drake tell you what I want?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“And are... are you willing...?”

Slate picked up the hand that rested on his chest, lifting it to his lips. “Of course, I’m willing. God, I want to be with you for as long as possible, but—”

“Drake explained to me that you.... He elaborated on what you told me and he explained that you’re getting....”

“Weaker and the thing inside of me is getting stronger.”

“Slate—”

“If we do this, Mikel, if I stay here, we have to be honest and we have to face reality; there is something unnatural and terrifying living inside of me and sooner rather than later, that thing will win the battle for control.”

“Drake thinks you have maybe three weeks or so, but you’ve fought it this long.”

“And it’s taken one hell of a toll and I can’t fight forever. Hell, I’m already changing. I feel cravings I don’t want to feel, but this thing inside of me....” He shook his head slowly. “I know how insane this has to seem to you and I wanted so much to spare you this, which is why I made myself stay away.”

“I think I understand why you did that, why you didn’t let me know you were alive, but Slate, I would have been there.”

“Mikel....”

“I had a right to be there; I love you and if you’re fighting something....” Tears filled his eyes and he looked away.

“Maybe I made a mistake not telling you, but I thought I was doing the right thing, letting you think I was gone, rather than forcing you to watch as I became a monster.”

“I may not be happy about it, but what’s done is done, and now....” Mikel looked at him again and Slate could see the desperation and the fear in his eyes. “I can’t think about what will happen. I have you here now, Slate, and I... God, can we just make the most of this? It’s not enough time, but it’s so much more than I ever thought we’d have again and... I love you so much, baby.” His tears fell freely and Slate sat up, gathering Mikel in his arms, clinging to him, his own eyes closed against the need to cry, as he put aside his fears and his uncertainty.

He couldn’t walk away from Mikel now.

Not yet.

Not until he had to.

He pressed a kiss into Mikel's hair. "Two weeks isn't nearly enough, but if it's all we have, I'll take it, baby. But I need you to promise me something."

Carefully, Mikel eased back and looked at him. "What?"

"If I start to seem different, if it seems like I'm changing, if you see anything in me that frightens you, anything that doesn't seem natural—"

"Slate—"

"You have to tell me and you have to call Drake."

"Please...."

"I need you to promise me this, baby. Please. I won't let this thing in me hurt you."

"You could never, ever hurt me and you would never, ever allow anything to hurt me, but I... I promise, if something happens...." He cupped Slate's face in his hands. "I know it will be really hard, Slate, but for the next two weeks, let's just pretend that this is forever and let's just be together and make the most of every moment that we have."

Nodding, Slate kissed him, long and hard, sealing the promise, that they would make a lifetime out of the next two weeks.

Fourteen short days.

It wasn't long enough and it wasn't fair that they couldn't have more, but Slate would grieve that ugly reality later.

For now, he was with Mikel, and that was a gift Slate wouldn't take for granted.

## VI

DRAKE left early the next morning, after promising he would be in touch. While Slate went to the attic to sleep, Mikel busied himself with tightly boarding up all the windows in the bedroom he had always shared with Slate. If he only had his lover for two weeks, they sure as hell weren't going to sleep in the attic and they weren't going to sleep apart. He wanted Slate in his arms, wanted to know he was close and real; he was still struggling somewhat, to understand everything Slate and Drake had revealed to him, but he was trying not to think about his questions too much, when he knew he and Slate were living on an unstable timetable.

Once the boards were in place and no sunlight could get into the room, Mikel called Mallory and explained he couldn't go to New York. He told her something had come up, something he couldn't really talk about, but he assured her he was fine and he promised to talk to her again as soon as she came back from seeing her artist friend.

Mikel easily sensed that she was worried, but he would have to deal with that later; he couldn't exactly explain to Mallory what was going on, that Slate had come back, but he couldn't stay.... It was best that Mallory not know the truth. He didn't need Drake or Slate to tell him that. He did understand that he was in the middle of a situation that went well beyond



complicated and he didn't want Mallory exposed to what he had learned. He would have to come up with something believable to tell her in two weeks; it never really left his mind that two weeks were all he had with Slate, unless the cure did come through, but Mikel hadn't even told Slate yet that Drake had talked to him about the possibility of a cure, because he didn't want that cloud hanging over them.

With Mallory taken care of, Mikel drove into town, deciding to stock up on everything he and Slate would need. It had been months since he had purchased any real food. Mostly, he had lived on takeout and frozen dinners, which had annoyed Mallory to no end.

Feeling truly alive for the first time in months, Mikel stocked up on all of Slate's favorites, including the imported beer he liked so much.

He fully intended to pamper his lover endlessly.

When he got back to the house, it was close to five, so he showered, put steaks on the grill, and went into the kitchen to make salad and loaded baked potatoes while the beer chilled. It felt strange, to be doing something so... normal. But it felt right too. He even caught himself humming, the bitter chill that had existed inside of him for so long thawing.

The man he loved was sleeping upstairs.

Slate was alive, and tonight they would have dinner, walk on the beach, make love, sleep in each other's arms and savor every precious moment.

*For two weeks.*

The thought tampered his emotion high slightly, but Mikel refused to let himself fall into a depression now.

There would be plenty of time for that later.

He had just brought the steaks inside when Slate came into the kitchen, shiftless and barefoot, dressed only in jeans. His hair was damp. He had obviously showered and Mikel could clearly see the love, the desire in his beautiful eyes, and he sucked in a breath. He had always thought Slate was beautiful, but it seemed now that “beautiful” wasn’t the right word; he was so much more than that. He was truly perfect and so insanely sexy it was almost sinful.

“Something smells wonderful, baby.”

“You look wonderful.” Mikel grinned, walking into the arms that Slate opened for him.

“Flirt.”

“Only with you.”

Slate’s arms tightened around him and Mikel rested his hand on the massive chest, listening to Slate’s strong, steady heartbeat.

“You’ve been a busy boy today, haven’t you?”

“Just a little. I ran into town. And I fixed it so we can sleep in the bedroom.”

“Saying you want me in your bed, Mikel?”

“You had better believe it.” He pulled back with another smile, and Slate’s lips came down on his, warm and demanding. Mikel stood on his tiptoes, tangling his hands in the damp hair, holding on and knowing—if given a choice—he would never let go.

They were both more than a little breathless when the kiss broke and Mikel had to resist the urge to drag Slate upstairs, or simply strip him right

there in the kitchen. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time they had made love there and they would again—Mikel would see to it—but for now, he willed his desire under control. He had an evening planned out for them and he wanted to make the very most of it. They settled down for dinner and while they ate, Slate asked him endless questions about what he had missed during the time he had been away.

He especially asked about Mikel's paintings, his showings, what he was working on now, and Mikel smiled. Slate's interest in his work had always made him feel good, but he had to admit that for a while, he hadn't painted anything at all.

For six months following Slate's "death" he hadn't so much as picked up a paintbrush; he hadn't felt the desire to do anything.

Mikel didn't tell him he had barely had the will to live; he knew that would only upset Slate and he didn't want that. He didn't want to take away from what they had right now, in this moment, because it was too precious.

After dinner, they walked down to the beach, hand in hand, just like before the world went to hell, and Mikel enjoyed every moment. He felt relaxed and at peace. Slate made him feel safe and warm. It felt so strange to laugh and talk about mundane little things, but it was obvious—beneath the surface—that they were both trying to avoid what they didn't want to discuss, and with good reason. Neither he nor Slate wanted to mention what would happen in two short weeks; it was a cloud hanging over them already and Mikel didn't want to make it any more real than it already was.

Reaching one of their favorite places on the beach, Slate stood with his arms wrapped around Mikel's waist, and Mikel leaned back against the strong chest.

*I want to stand here forever.*

A contented sigh escaped him when he felt Slate's lips on his neck and those big, strong hands slip beneath his shirt, sliding slowly up his stomach and chest. He was hard in an instant and eager for more. He loved Slate's touch, his determination, the way Slate knew how to touch him. It was all thrilling and intoxicating.

Moaning, his back arched when Slate teased his nipples with almost ghostlike touches, and once they were hard nubs, he tugged at them, pinched them, just enough to be shy of painfully, while his lips fervently devoured his neck.

"Slate...." Mikel gasped, reaching back an arm, to tangle his hand in Slate's hair.

"Love you so much." His breath was warm against Mikel's skin. "Never thought I'd be able to do this again... never thought I'd be able to touch you like this...." He moved one hand downward, firmly but gently squeezing Mikel's erection through his jeans and Mikel pressed into that warm hand, needing more, needing Slate desperately.

Turning in his lover's arms, he claimed Slate's lips, eagerly opening his mouth to the demanding tongue, moaning again when Slate's hands moved down his back, to possessively cup his ass, grinding them together. It felt so incredible. Mikel wanted to beg Slate to take him right there, on the beach, but the weather was a little too cool for that, something Slate seemed to sense as well, as he broke the kiss and pulled back, struggling to catch his breath.

Wordlessly, holding hands, they walked back to the house, barely making it inside before Slate pushed Mikel against the door and kissed him, unzipping his jeans and sliding a determined hand inside, to wrap warm fingers around Mikel's aching shaft.

Mikel shuddered, gripping Slate's shoulders, lifting one leg to wrap it around Slate's waist and urge him even closer.

"Mikel...."

"Fuck me. Now! Please, Slate...."

"So very, very demanding, my love." He could hear the humor in Slate's voice, but the desire, it was there too, and Mikel groaned wantonly, aching for more contact.

The sudden echo of footsteps was the first indication they weren't alone and Slate pulled back, clearly ready for a battle, but instead, he found himself staring at Mallory, who stood just feet away, in the foyer, her blue eyes wide.

"Mal—"

"Oh my... you...." She shook her head, looking from Slate to Mikel, as Mikel zipped his pants, his mind reeling, knowing he needed to say something and he needed to say it fast.

God, this was a mess!

"You're... aren't you...?" Mal continued to stare and to Mikel's surprise, Slate smirked.

"Dead?" He shrugged casually while Mikel watched. "You should know better than to listen to such insane rumors, Mal. Now get over here and give me a hug, kiddo."

SEVERAL glasses of wine and an hour and a half later, Mallory looked pale and perplexed, sitting in a chair across from Mikel and Slate, while

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they sat side by side on the sofa. Not knowing exactly what was best said—or best left *unsaid*—Mikel allowed Slate to take the lead and explain the situation to Mallory and, to his surprise, Slate told her everything. From beginning to end. Even the parts that seemed so impossible to believe. And to her credit, Mallory listened, without interruption. But when Slate was finally finished, she was clearly in shock, and Mikel more than understood.

“I’m not really sure what I should say to all of this.” Mallory looked at both of them. “I do know that Mikel never could accept you were gone and clearly, he had a reason for feeling that way.” She managed a weak smile, but Mikel knew exactly what she was thinking. He knew Mallory was worrying about what would happen when the two weeks came to an end and Mikel couldn’t blame her for that worry. She had seen, firsthand, just how he had fallen apart when Slate “died” and now he had Slate back in his life, but it wasn’t forever; it was temporary and it would end all too quickly, leaving Mikel to again grieve and face life without the love of his life.

“I would have come back to him sooner, Mal, but....” Slate shook his head.

“You thought you were doing the right thing for him and I... hell, in your position, I might have done the same.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

“Well, understand isn’t the word I would use, because this situation....” She turned her eyes to Mikel, as he reached for Slate’s hand, in an obvious show of support.

“I’m okay, Mal.”

“I know you look happy.”

“That’s because I am happy and... it’s been a long time.” He didn’t have to tell her that. She knew it; she had seen him at his worst.

Mallory knew about the days he had spent in bed, the nights he had spent sitting on the beach, and the days on end when he wouldn’t eat; she knew just how dark a place he could fall into and how hard it was for him to crawl out.

*She knows it’s gonna happen again; she knows I’m gonna fall apart and it can’t be avoided, but falling apart seems a small price to pay, to have this time with Slate.*

Seeming to understand that Mallory and Mikel needed a moment, Slate stood, kissed Mallory on the cheek, and smiled at Mikel.

“I’ll be upstairs.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

They were silent as Slate went upstairs, but as soon as he was gone, Mallory moved to sit beside Mikel and he smiled.

“I’m okay—”

“The man you love—the man you thought was dead—is back in your life, but he’s only here for two weeks, because he’s been exposed to a souped-up virus that will turn him into some sort of monster, and you say you’re okay?” Mallory pinned him with a hard stare. “Baby, no one would be okay with that, so remember that I know you and I love you, so come clean and tell me what you really feel.”

“I’m thrilled and excited and confused and I...” He shook his head. “I know this situation is really insane and I know you’re worried, but I... Mal, the man I love more than life is upstairs and he’s alive and beautiful and I feel like I’ve been given the most amazing gift.”

“But—”

“But I know that this is just two weeks and I know that it’s going to hurt like hell, when....” He saw no need to actually say the words. “I thought he was lost forever and suddenly, he was here again, and I.... Mal, it will hurt like hell when he... when this ends, but I’ve been given an amazing gift and I will gladly suffer the pain to have this.”

Mallory reached for his hand. “I’m happy for you. I know how much you love Slate. And I want you to enjoy this time, but... when it ends, will you be able to pick up and move on?”

“Mal—”

“Don’t answer that. I think I know. But I’ll be here for you.”

“Thank you. And maybe....”

“Maybe?”

He hesitated a moment and then leaned closer, quietly explaining what Drake had told him, about a possible cure and how he hadn’t mentioned to Slate that he knew about it, because it was such a remote and maybe even unlikely possibility.

“You say that you aren’t getting your hopes built up, but—”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping and praying something can be done.”

“And if it can’t?”

“If it can’t, then I will just have to be grateful for having two more weeks with the love of my life and I will happily cherish the memories for the rest of my life.” He knew he had tears in his eyes, but Mallory did as well. “Don’t worry about me, Mal. I’ll find a way to survive. But for now,



I can't let myself worry about the pain that I'll feel, because Slate is here now and I want to make the most of that." It really wasn't too much to ask for and Mallory sighed and nodded, leaning closer, pulling him into a tight hug Mikel easily returned.

"I love you, Mikel."

"I love you too, Mal, and I promise, I'll be okay."

"I know you will, sweetheart," Mallory whispered softly. "I'll be here for you. Always. So you just be happy and we'll deal with everything else when the time comes."

DRAKE leaned back from his desk, looking at the two men standing before him, easily noting they were nervous.

*They fuckin' should be.*

He was still highly pissed that their last hybrid—their test subject—had escaped and been killed as a result, but the doctors were trying hard to get on his good side, by explaining to him that they finally had a major breakthrough.

They had found a cure.

*Maybe.*

"Explain this to me again."

"Well..." Dr. Kurt Morgan pushed at his wireframe glasses, clearly anxious. "We've found a drug and we tested it and that drug does successfully kill the vampire virus successfully and that's the good news, but... well..."

His cohort Dr. Jim Keller spoke up. “We don’t know what will happen to the human host, as we lost our last subject.”

“So you’re saying we could give Agent Quinn this drug and it could cure him, or kill him, or we just let the virus run its natural path, in which case, Agent Quinn will certainly die?”

“I’m afraid that’s the situation.” Morgan looked relieved at his understanding and Drake sighed as he considered the options.

“Sir, we know that the virus is getting stronger and Agent Quinn is having more cravings and he has been working harder and harder to remain in control—”

“Spill it, Keller.”

“The sooner we give Agent Quinn the vaccine, the better the odds.”

“Agent Quinn is currently away for two weeks.”

“We understand, sir. But—”

“I get it, Morgan. Now, both of you, get out. I’ll handle this.”

The doctors were more than happy to scurry from his office—and away from his temper—, leaving Drake alone with questions he didn’t want to answer.

Yes, the sooner they gave Slate the possible cure, the better, but what if it killed him? Would it be best to leave him where he was, with Mikel, for the two weeks, as planned? Or did he cut into their time, drag Slat back here, and give him an injection that could easily cut short the time he did have? Either way, it was a gamble and Drake hated it; he hated not having definite answers and really, he supposed it was Slate’s decision to make.

*Whatever he decides, I’ll respect.*

He would call Slate and Mikel tomorrow and tell them everything and leave the proverbial ball in their court.

Drake couldn't say he envied them.

## VII

JUST before sunrise, after a night of energized and intense lovemaking, Slate slipped downstairs to give in to the craving he hated. It truly disgusted him that the creature inside of him demanded blood and he had resisted for as long as he could, but he knew he couldn't completely deny the urge; giving into it at least silenced the monster cravings for a time and, really, that was all that mattered at the moment. He had to keep the monster at bay, he had to fight for this time with Mikel, and if the blood could do that, he was willing to suffer through the unpleasant ordeal.

After the sickening consumption, Slate thoroughly rinsed his mouth, drank down some orange juice, and went back upstairs to find Mikel curled on his side, sleeping soundly. He made such a beautiful—such a damn alluring—vision that Slate was tempted to awaken him, but ultimately, he decided to allow his lover to sleep for a while. Even if Mikel wouldn't admit it, Slate knew he was tired, physically and most certainly emotionally, considering all that had been thrown at him. All things considered, Slate was actually relieved that Mallory had surprised them and now knew everything. It would at least ensure Mikel someone he could open up to, when the inevitable happened and Mikel was left alone once more, to deal with grieving for him.

Crawling into bed, he wrapped an arm around Mikel. He had just dozed off when his cell phone rang. Slate grabbed it quickly, sighing to see Mikel hadn't stirred.

Slipping from the room, he quietly stepped into the hall, answering the call. It was Drake, just as he had expected it would be.

The news he got, however, wasn't what he expected and after Drake explained everything to him, about the *possible* cure and the *possible* outcomes, Slate slumped heavily against the wall, not certain what to think or say.

"Drake—"

"I'm not going to push you in one direction or the other, and I trust you to pass this on to Mikel, because I promised him an update—"

"What? You told Mikel about looking for a cure?"

"It just sort of came out, Slate. I figured he would have mentioned it to you."

"He.... Damn, he didn't, but I get why." Slate dropped his head back, closing his eyes. "I think he didn't want something else hanging over our heads and he didn't want me to think he was getting hopeful for more than two weeks."

Drake was silent for a moment and Slate sighed again; he was confused and he was afraid, but he wasn't afraid for himself. He had known from the start what would happen, he had prepared himself for the reality that the virus—the monster—inside of him would eventually overtake him and result in his death, but now, a possible cure had been thrown into the mix, leaving him wondering what to do, what would be best for Mikel. What would hurt him the least? If Slate took the cure now,

he could easily die—in fact, he more than likely would die—but if he held off, at least he and Mikel could have their two weeks together.

He couldn't take that away from Mikel.

He couldn't take that away from himself.

"I'll wait. I have.... Drake, I need this time so much. I need to be with Mikel and this so-called cure, it could just as easily kill me and... please, I hope you can understand...."

"Of course I understand, Slate. Hell, I expected this to be your decision."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. Ever. I just wish—"

"I know. But you've done everything in your power, Drake. And I am grateful. I... you have no idea, what it means to me, to be with Mikel again."

It was a dream come true, a dream that would end too soon, but Slate didn't let himself think about that as he went back into the room and quietly crawled into bed again. He wrapped an arm tightly around Mikel, holding him close, and Mikel sighed in his sleep, a soft, content sound, that made Slate smile as he buried his face in Mikel's hair. He really did understand why Mikel hadn't mentioned knowing about the cure. Their situation was already complex and complicated enough, without adding more tension and, for that reason, Slate decided to hold off on telling Mikel about what Drake had revealed. It would just upset him and he would spend too much time wondering if waiting was or wasn't the right thing to do. Slate was already confident in his decision to wait to take the possible cure at the end of his two weeks with Mikel.

Holding Mikel, he fell asleep. When he awakened again, he knew the sun had set, and the sound of the shower running made him smile.

Jumping from the bed, he slipped into the bathroom and, already naked, he opened the shower door and stepped inside.

The stall was filled with steam, the water was perfectly warm, and Mikel was a vision as he turned to look at him, that perfect body wet and those beautiful eyes dancing with love and desire that reflected everything Slate was feeling.

With a smile, Slate stepped closer and Mikel came into his arms and Slate kissed him slowly, simply savoring the moment. It felt so good to be holding Mikel as the water rained down on them, and it didn't take long for the passion between them to ignite. It never did. He couldn't get enough, not when it came to Mikel, and Slate moaned as Mikel's demanding tongue tangled with his and he found himself pushed back, until his back was pressed against the warm, wet wall.

The kiss broke and Slate dropped his head back against the wall, gasping and closing his eyes as Mikel began teasingly kissing each and every inch of him; his neck and shoulders, down his chest, sucking at his nipples eagerly. His tongue danced over the nubs until they ached and the playful nip of his teeth made Slate cry out in pleasure. He loved it when Mikel played with him, when he teased him. For someone who could come across as so reserved, Mikel transformed into a wild man when it came to sex, and Slate found the transformation sensually intoxicating.

Gasping Mikel's name, Slate opened his eyes, watching as Mikel moved down his stomach, finally kneeling in front of him.

Mikel smiled up at him—an impish, knowing smile—, his hands confident, as they moved over Slate's legs at a lazy, teasing pace that had

Slate's heart thundering by the time Mikel's hand wrapped around his straining erection.

"Mikel...."

"Yeah, baby?"

"Stop tormenting me, damn it!" He tried to look stern, but he knew he failed miserably when Mikel only grinned at him.

"Tormenting you? How am I tormenting you?"

"Try the innocent act with someone else—"

*Holy shit!*

Mikel's lips wrapped around the head of his cock and Slate's knees nearly buckled. The sensation was pure pleasure.

His eyes closed and he tangled one hand tightly in Mikel's hair as Mikel's tongue went to work; he licked and teased with intense enthusiasm. He knew exactly what he was doing and Slate heard himself cry out when Mikel began sucking his balls with eager intent. God! It was amazing. He felt on fire, and the desire, the longing, made his blood boil and his knees again nearly failed him, when Mikel's lips went back to his cock and he was taken deep, into the warm, wet mouth that consumed him completely. *Wow!* How had he forgotten just how good Mikel was at this? He was so damn eager and passionate and it didn't take long and Slate felt himself falling over the edge.

Dazed, riding out the waves of pleasure, Slate melted into Mikel when Mikel's lips were suddenly on his in a warm, soothing kiss.

His arms locked around Mikel and he pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, more confident than ever that he had made the right decision.



This time was for him and Mikel and when it was over, Slate would face reality.

He would take the so-called cure.

He wasn't expecting a miracle recovery, but for now, he had a miracle in his arms.

THE next two days passed in a blur of delight for Slate; he and Mikel were as in tuned to each other as always—in bed and out—and they enjoyed each moment they spent together. Each seemed to make a conscious effort not to mention what would happen at the end of their blessed two weeks; it was a subject best left untouched, but the reality still hung over them. Slate especially couldn't ignore it, when he felt the cravings and urges he hated becoming stronger; he could no longer go days without blood. Now he needed it daily to maintain control and all he had to do was look in the mirror to see his color wasn't the same and he looked pale.

He knew exactly what that meant.

The monster was getting stronger and the man was getting weaker.

*Please, God, please, just let me hold out until the end of my two weeks with Mikel.*

Because Mikel was damn intuitive, Slate knew his lover sensed the changes and he knew Mikel was worried about him. He could see the worry in Mikel's eyes and he knew Drake had called Mikel directly to check in. Slate wasn't offended; he understood Drake's reasoning. He was actually grateful that Drake cared enough to worry about not only his

safety but Mikel's as well and he hoped Drake would be willing to keep an eye on Mikel once he was gone.

Mikel tried not to talk about just how lost he had gotten in his grief before and Slate didn't want that to happen again.

He tried to tell Mikel that, late one night, in Mikel's studio, and the subject obviously made Mikel tense, but Slate forged ahead.

"Mikel—"

"Let's not talk about this. Okay?" He sounded almost desperate, and Slate nearly relented, but his concern for Mikel's well-being wouldn't allow him to.

Standing, he crossed the room, wrapping his arms around Mikel's waist, and after a brief second, Mikel relaxed against him.

"You put your life on hold when you lost me."

"Slate—"

"I can see it when I look at you, when I look at this house. Hell, my stuff is still here; my clothes are hanging in the closet, my aftershave is in the bathroom and... Mikel, I love you more than anything in this life and I am so damn grateful for having been able to know you and love you—"

"Slate, please."

"I need to know you won't get lost in your grief again, baby. I need—"

"You need what?" Mikel pulled away from him, spinning around to face him, his eyes filled with angry tears. "God, Slate, do you want me to promise that I'll just go on with life like my heart isn't broken? I can't do that, damn it! I can't. It hurts too much. I can't just slap some smile on my

face and act like I'm not dying inside when I can't even breathe." He shook his head and tried to turn away, but Slate caught him in his arms and pulled him to him, holding tightly as the tears boiled from him, causing his body to shake from the force of his sobs.

Slate buried his face in Mikel's hair, allowing his own tears to fall, knowing, if the situation were reversed, if he were losing Mikel, he wouldn't be able to make the same promise he was asking Mikel to make him, but he couldn't back off.

*I need to know he will be okay.*

With little effort, he swept a startled Mikel into his arms and carried him across the room, to the ragged, old sofa Mikel kept in his studio. When he sat down, he kept Mikel in his lap, enjoying the intimate closeness.

Mikel didn't need any prompting to snuggle against him and Slate smiled, kissing his temple, wishing this could last forever.

Damn it, they deserved forever.

They sure as hell deserved more than two fuckin' weeks.

For a long time, they sat in silence and Slate was fine with that. He knew he had pushed too hard, but he wasn't sorry he had. He knew Mikel needed to cry, he needed to release his emotions, he needed to face the pain, and Slate wanted—needed—to help him with that; he wanted losing him to be bearable for Mikel this time around, because Mikel was young and smart and beautiful and he deserved to move on with his life and live it to its fullest.

"I couldn't breathe, when they first told me, and I couldn't believe it; I felt like I was in a dream, and I kept waiting to wake up."

“Mikel—”

“The light went out of the world when you left, Slate. It was dark. It was cold. I didn’t feel warm again, until I woke up and saw you sitting beside me on the bed and I... I know you’re worried and I love you for that, but please, don’t ask me to promise that I’ll just move on, because it’s not that simple.”

“I just don’t want you to give up on life, baby.”

“I won’t. But I won’t be the same person I am with you here. I’m only that me with you.”

Slate tightened his hold for a moment. “You know, I... every day, Mikel, I regret agreeing to that last mission.”

“Slate—”

“I should have said no. If I had... if I had said no, we wouldn’t be in this situation now.”

“I don’t blame you for this, Slate.”

“Maybe you don’t. But I blame myself.”

Mikel lifted his head to look up at him with a sad smile. “I wish we could have forever, but we did have three amazing years and we have this time now and I... Drake told me about the possible cure for this and I know the risk, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hopeful for a miracle.”

For a moment, Slate was tempted to tell him that a cure had been found but whether or not it would work remained to be seen; he didn’t want to build the hope Mikel had admitted to feeling when he wasn’t so hopeful himself.

“Mikel...”

“I know the odds aren’t great, but you came back to me once, so maybe you can do it again.”

“Maybe.”

With a smile, Mikel kissed him and slipped from his lap and Slate stood to follow, knowing the bedroom was their destination.

They had just stepped from the studio when the first pain seized him, and Slate doubled over, gasping. It felt like a dozen sharp knives were simultaneously stabbing his chest and stomach and he went to his knees in agony.

“Slate!” Mikel was instantly at his side, kneeling beside him, hand on his back.

He heard Mikel’s fear and he wanted to reassure him—he wanted to say he was fine—but he couldn’t. What was happening was obvious to him and he cursed that this was happening now, as he tried to suck in a breath.

Trying to focus through the pain, he gripped Mikel’s hand. “Call... call Drake....”

“Slate—”

“Now, Mikel! Call him and I... get me to the bedroom and... leave me....”

“Leave you—”

“Please... just do as I say.” Slate looked up at him. “Please, baby. I’m afraid and I....” The pain, in greater force, began again and he cried out, well aware that Mikel didn’t need him to say the words for him to know what was happening.

It was obvious.

The monster was finally winning.

## VIII

AS SOON as Slate was in the bedroom, Mikel called Drake and told him what happened, but he didn't return to Slate's side, because Slate had told him not to. He seemed sincerely afraid, which made the terror Mikel felt even more intense as he sat alone in the hall outside the bedroom, listening for any sound that his lover was in distress—more distress. If he had heard Slate cry out, Mikel would have ignored the demand that he keep his distance for safety sake. Mikel didn't care about himself. Already, Slate had hurt and suffered enough without him there. He wouldn't be pushed away now, something Mikel made clear to Drake, when he and two doctors arrived two hours after Mikel called him.

The doctors rushed immediately to Slate's side, while Drake stayed with Mikel, asking him questions about what exactly had happened. Reluctantly, Drake explained that he had already called Slate to tell him a cure was available, but they had no idea if it would work. Lab tests proved that it could kill the vampire virus, but what was unknown was what the cure would do to the human host, and that was the problem. It was likely what would kill the virus would kill Slate as well, but without the cure, the virus would take control and Drake didn't explain again just what that would mean and what would have to be done under those tragic circumstances.

Mikel struggled to take it all in and it was seriously overwhelming. He was losing Slate all over again, and he hated it, because he was completely powerless; he was unable to do anything but listen and then wait while Drake spoke with one of the painfully nervous doctors that came downstairs to offer up an official report.

The look on Drake's face when he came back into the living room told Mikel it was bad, even as Drake sat down quietly on the opposite end of the sofa.

"Just tell me."

"The virus is getting stronger and I... Mikel, I'm sorry but—"

"The timetable was off, right? We don't have two weeks before we lose him, do we?"

"I'm sorry."

"What... what now? What do we have?" He couldn't fight the tears. He was likely losing the love of his life for the second damn time and it wasn't fair.

"Right now, Slate is still in control, but the doctors don't suspect that will last long, because he's already fought this for... well, he's fought for a long time and he's weak, Mikel. And the virus is stronger so the doctors think maybe another day or two before—"

"Before Slate's gone and the thing inside of him takes over."

"Basically."

Mikel brushed at his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to focus, to think. He couldn't—damn it, he wouldn't—fall apart, because Slate needed him to be strong; Slate needed someone he could lean on now and Mikel was determined to be that person. He had to be. If he fell apart after



Slate was gone, so be it. He didn't care about himself; Slate was all that mattered now and Mikel was determined to do what was best for his lover.

"So what else do the doctors have to say?"

"Well, Dr. Keller seems to believe that if we give Slate the cure, the drug they've come up with, before the transformation is complete, the odds that it will work will increase somewhat."

"Somewhat being?"

"Mikel—"

"Just tell me, Drake. What are the odds Slate will survive?"

"Maybe twenty percent."

"God." Mikel leaned forward, burying his face in his hands, fresh tears falling.

"I'm so sorry, Mikel." Drake placed a comforting hand on his back. "I shouldn't have promised you two weeks."

"No. No, this time with Slate, it's been so amazing." Mikel looked at him with a sad smile. "Even if it's not two weeks, it's been the most wonderful gift and I am grateful for it." He always would be, no matter what, but the pain was still there. He was still struggling with what would happen next, as he sighed heavily and brushed at his eyes again.

"The doctors already explained the situation to Slate."

"So he knows... he knows he doesn't have long before..." *Before he dies.* Mikel couldn't say those words, not yet, but Drake nodded. "Can I go up and see him now? I really... I want to talk to him." There were things they each still desperately needed to say before it was too late.

Drake nodded and stood with him, each of them remaining silent as they walked upstairs.

Drake knocked on the door and sternly ordered the doctors out. They hesitated for only a second before obeying and Mikel managed a smile.

*Drake scares the poor bastards.*

“The socially awkward ones and I will be downstairs if you need us.”

“Thanks, Drake.”

He shook his head. “Don’t thank me.”

The guilt the man was feeling was obvious, but Mikel didn’t have time to deal with that. He had to focus on Slate.

*I have to be strong for Slate.*

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the room, to find Slate sitting on the bed. Mikel forced a smile he didn’t feel.

He could see that Slate was pale, he looked tired, but he still opened his arms when Mikel sat down beside him, and Mikel melted into the embrace. He could feel heated tears burning his eyes, but—as much as he wanted to—he refused himself the right to cry, not when Slate needed his strength. But it was a damn hard battle. His world was falling apart. Again. Slate had just come back to him and now he was to lose him again, forever this time, if the cure didn’t work. There was an eighty-percent chance that it indeed wouldn’t work and Mikel didn’t like those odds.

“Mikel—”

“It’s okay, baby. Drake told me.”

“I’m... I’m so damn sorry.... I’ve been fighting this thing for so long and now....” His voice broke and knowing Slate was crying made it suddenly impossible for Mikel to hold back his own tears. “I wish so much that I could give us our full two weeks....” He buried his face in Mikel’s hair and Mikel held on to him, even more tightly, knowing this could very well be one of the last times he would ever get to be in Slate’s arms. The knowledge was soul-shattering.

“I love you, Slate, and no amount of time would ever be enough with you, but I thank God for every second we’ve had together.”

“Me too. I just wish... I wish we could have had a lifetime.”

“Maybe we will.”

“Baby—”

“I know the odds aren’t in our favor, but the impossible has already happened for us once. You came back to me when everyone said it wouldn’t happen, so maybe, just maybe, you’ll come back to me again and we’ll get our forever.”

Slate held him closer and Mikel knew he wasn’t as hopeful, but he understood; Slate had been preparing himself for this moment for a long time, and he couldn’t afford to let himself hope for a better outcome than the one he was prepared for. But Mikel could hope. He could pray. Damn, but he and Slate deserved forever. They deserved the chance for a normal life—a life without mysterious missions that took Slate away for months and a life without the threat of a painful death—and Mikel wasn’t ready to give up on that possibility.

He wasn’t ready to give up on Slate.

Pulling back, he looked at the man he loved, again noting how pale he looked, how tired. He had been fighting for so long and with that fight had come great suffering.

“The doctors think if you take the possible cure they’ve come up with before the virus takes complete control, your odds of survival improve so—”

“Mikel—”

“You have to do it.” Fresh tears fell. “Not for me, but for you; you have to take the chance, and see if it works, because if you don’t... well, we know what will happen.” Slate would become what he most hated, the monster would win, and Drake would have to step in and kill his best friend. Mikel didn’t want that for Slate or Drake.

“Not the best scenario, is it?” Slate forced a smile.

“Baby....”

“I either die as a monster or try to save myself and die as a man, and frankly... I think I’d rather die as a man, on my own terms.”

“So you’ll....” Mikel didn’t finish the thought, but Slate nodded.

“I’ll take the so-called cure.”

“How will this work?”

Shifting them, until they were laying stretched out on the bed, with Mikel’s head on Slate’s chest, Slate stroked a hand down his back.

“Dr. Keller seems to think that the odds will be better if they administer the cure or antidote or whatever you want to call it, over a period of three days.”

“That long?”

“They don’t know for certain how much of the drug it will take, and they want to monitor my vitals and make certain....”

“What? Make certain what?”

“That the drug doesn’t cause heart failure or something like that.”

“Jesus.”

“Tell me about it.” Slate chuckled. “Keller is very much a ‘worst-case scenario’ kinda guy, which is good in some cases, but honestly, it’s damn depressing most of the time.” He was trying to be flippant, but he couldn’t quite pull it off, which Mikel more than understood, all things considered, but he admired his lover for trying to hold on to his sense of humor.

“Slate—”

“You can’t.... Mikel, I need you to stay here—”

“What?” Mikel stared down at Slate in shocked surprise.

“Baby, I don’t know how I will react to this drug, but I do know one thing: this monster virus inside of me won’t die without putting up a hell of a fight.” Slate’s eyes reached into his and Mikel wanted to interrupt, but he couldn’t. “I love you, Mikel, and I don’t want you there, to see just how bad it gets. I might end up losing my damn mind! I don’t want you to see me that way. I don’t want to know you’re watching me die—”

“You might not die!”

“But odds are, I will, and even if I don’t, Dr. Keller and Dr. Morgan are pretty certain it won’t be pleasant for me.”

“Slate—”

“Please, Mikel. Please. I don’t want you to see me fall apart and I... God, I sure as hell don’t want you to watch me die!”

“And you think I want to stay here? Slate, I want to be with you! Don’t you get that? I love you, damn it! The kind of in sickness and health, in good times and in bad times kind of love! And you want me to do what? Just stay here while you....” Mikel jumped up from the bed and began pacing. “What should I do exactly, Slate? Just sit by the phone and wait for Drake to call and tell me if you’ve lived or died? Do you honestly think I can do that?”

“Baby—”

“Stop trying to protect me and let me be there! Let me love you!”

“Mikel....” Slate stood, but doing so obviously required a great deal of energy and without being asked, Mikel moved back to his side.

“Sit down.”

To his relief, Slate did so without argument, but Mikel knew their current argument was far from over, as Slate rested his hands on Mikel’s waist and held him in place in front of him, looking up with worry-filled eyes.

“This so-called cure could be a disaster and I... Mikel, I don’t want your last memory of me to be of me dying or me losing my mind.” Tears came to his eyes and he reached up, stroking Mikel’s cheek with such tenderness Mikel nearly cried himself. “I want you to hold on to the good memories, the nights and the days we shared, the laughter, the.... I know you love me and I love you for wanting to be at my side, but please, Mikel, please, love me enough to let me do this without worrying about what kind of horrible things you might see.”

Mikel closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around Slate's shoulders, as Slate leaned against him and he considered everything Slate had said.

Slate was asking him—begging him—not to be a witness to his possible nightmare come true and as much as Mikel hated it, he knew he couldn't continue to argue; he had to give Slate what he wanted, because he loved him too much to do otherwise.

“When do you... when exactly do you have to leave?”

“It's nearly dawn now, so the doctors said we could wait until tonight.”

“So we have just a few more hours?” God! How was that possible? Hours? Hours to what? Say goodbye for what would, in all likelihood, be the very last time? How could he? It wasn't fair! “Tell me what I need to do, Slate? Tell me what I can do, and I'll... tell me how to help you with this?” He would do anything—or everything—in his power, to make this easier for Slate. Slate's eyes reflected his love, as he pulled back and looked up at Mikel again.

“Does that mean you... you'll stay here?”

“I don't want to, but if that's what you want, how can I refuse?”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, for coming back to me.” His tears fell and he didn't try to stop them.

“It wasn't enough. A lifetime with you wouldn't be enough, Mikel.”

“Maybe—”

“Maybe.” But he didn't look hopeful. “I wish... God, I wish I had enough strength to make love to you one more time, but I...” He shook

his head sadly and Mikel understood; he knew how weak Slate was feeling and he hated it, but there was nothing he could do but accept that their time together had once again been cut short.

“How about we just hold each other?”

“I’d like that.”

Mikel stepped back from him and Slate stood, just long enough for both of them to strip and then, naked, they crawled into the bed, curling around each other. Mikel laid his head on Slate’s chest, listening to his heartbeat, while Slate stroked gentle fingers through Mikel’s hair. It was cool and quiet in the room, and it seemed they were truly cut off from the rest of the world. Mikel decided to savor that feeling for a while, for as long as it lasted.

*Please, God, please don’t let this be the last time I hold him. Let him come back to me. Please.*

THE act of actually saying goodbye to Slate was even worse than Mikel had imagined and Drake was kind enough to give them time and space to handle their emotions privately. It was obvious that the two doctors were eager to leave—they wanted desperately to start the drug regiment—but Slate wouldn’t be rushed by anyone. He still didn’t believe for a second that the drug would work. In his mind, this was the end for him. It broke Mikel’s heart, but he did his very best to appear stronger than he felt, as he and Slate stood alone in his studio.

They had already discussed everything: Drake would call Mikel with updates and Mikel had assured Slate that, no matter what, he’d try to move on with his life, but he refused to promise to try to find someone else he



could love, because it wasn't possible. Not for him. Slate was the love of his life. There could never be anyone else. Mikel had accepted that a long time ago, but he reassured Slate that he would do his best to not cut himself off from the world again. And he would turn to Mallory for support and if he needed anything, he would call Drake; it was all discussed calmly and rationally, but Mikel felt far from calm or rational as they stood, holding on to each other. Mikel cursed fate for not having at least allowed them their full two weeks together.

"Do you want me to call Mal for you?" Slate asked in a whisper and Mikel shook his head.

"I'll call her later. Don't worry. I'll... well, I won't be okay, but I can be on my own."

"Mikel—"

"No one can make me feel better, Slate."

"I know. I guess I... I don't exactly know how to say goodbye."

"Then don't." Mikel stepped back from him, looking up, into the eyes he loved. "Just... say you love me and that you will try and come back to me." He blinked the tears aside as best he could and Slate nodded before pulling him into a long, intense kiss that left Mikel clinging to him. He didn't want this to end, he didn't want Slate to leave, but he had to; if he wanted a chance at life—even a remote chance—he had to take the injections and Mikel knew he had to let him, just as he knew he had to honor Slate's request that he not be there.

When the kiss finally ended, Slate cupped his face and Mikel cried openly. He couldn't help himself; as much as he wanted to be strong for Slate, the reality was, his heart was breaking and the pain was almost unbearable.

“I love you, Mikel; you are the love of my life and I... you are the best thing that ever happened to me and I never want you to doubt that.”

“I love you too. I always will, Slate. Always. And I... Come back to me.” He whispered the last four words, but he knew Slate heard them.

“I’ll try. If I can, if there is any possible way, I will come back to you.”

“Slate....”

“My heart is yours.” Slate leaned down and kissed him again before stepping away from him and Mikel choked back a sob.

“Baby—”

“Just stay here, okay? I can’t.... I like seeing you in this room.” He managed a smile, but it was sad, at best, and Mikel nodded.

“Be careful and I... I love you.”

“I know.”

With that, Slate turned and walked to the door, looking back over his shoulder once, and then, without another word, he was gone.

*Gone.*

The odds that he would come back were slim, a reality Mikel couldn’t ignore as he sank heavily to the floor alone in his studio—seemingly alone in the world. He buried his face in his hands and he openly sobbed, knowing no one could hear him, because he was indeed alone.

NO ONE spoke when Slate got into the car and he was grateful for that; he wasn't in the mood to make conversation and he didn't want anyone offering up reassurances he didn't quite have the strength or the will to believe.

*I'm sorry, Mikel. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I ever left you. I'm sorry I did this to us. I'm sorry.*

He felt a hand on his shoulder and Slate looked at Drake, working to keep his emotions under control, knowing that falling apart wouldn't do him or anyone else any good; he had known, after all, what the end would be.

Unfortunately, the end had really shitty timing.

"Slate—"

"He can't be there, Drake. I know what you're going to say and I... I don't want him to see me."

"I guess I can understand that."

"Just promise me, if I... we both know what will likely happen and I... please break the news to him in person and make sure he's okay."

"I will."

"Thank you."

They fell silent again and Slate closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and did the only thing he could do to keep himself sane.

He thought about Mikel and what it would be like if maybe, just maybe, they could get their miracle and have their life together.

*I swear, Mikel, if I make it back to you, I will never, ever, leave you again.*

## IX

THE first call from Drake came early the next morning and he explained that Slate had undergone the first round of treatment and, as expected, he had suffered something of a violent reaction. Drake didn't go into graphic detail. He only said that the virus—the monster—was fighting back, but Slate's vitals were still strong and he was mostly coherent. And that was good. At least Drake thought it was good. He made an effort to sound positive, something that Mikel did appreciate, even if he wasn't convinced Drake was as hopeful as he pretended to be.

After talking with Drake, Mikel called Mallory and she came right over to sit with him. She didn't ask a lot of questions, she didn't force him to talk; she simply remained at his side and Mikel was grateful to have her there. It did help, not being alone. And Mallory understood. She knew what Slate meant to him, she knew what he was praying for; he had told her about the mere twenty-percent chance, but Mallory agreed with Mikel that if anyone could overcome supposedly insurmountable odds, it was Slate. He was truly a fighter. Giving up wasn't in his nature, and Mikel clung to that hope, as they waited for the second call, on the second day, and when it did come, it was basically more of the same and Mikel noticed that Drake sounded less confident.

That terrified Mikel and he demanded to know more.

“Mikel—”

“However bad it is, tell me. I have to know,” he whispered into the phone as Mallory sat at his side, a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“At this point he... well, he’s no longer lucid.”

“What?”

“We have him restrained, in a secure unit and he’s.... Mikel, there’s no easy way to say it, but he’s not Slate, at this point.”

“The thing inside of him—”

“Seems to be winning and I’m afraid....” Drake trailed off and Mikel knew he was crying, but so was he and he could see the tears in Mallory’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Mikel. I’m glad you... I’m glad you decided to not come, and Slate... he was right, not to want you here.”

“Are you giving up hope, Drake?”

“We have one more injection to go, but... I think you need to be prepared for a bad outcome.”

Feeling sick, Mikel hung up the phone and quietly related what Drake had said to Mallory. Then he went upstairs to the room he and Slate shared. He hadn’t taken the boards off the windows and it seemed the darkness perfectly suited his mood as he fell onto the bed, sobbing, holding Slate’s pillow as tightly as he could. He felt like he was suffocating. The hope he had held on to was slowly fading away and he knew—fair or not, and it most certainly wasn’t fair—the next call from Drake would likely be the last and it would end with Drake telling him that Slate had died and that would be that; his world would crash and burn again.

*And then what?*

Slate wanted him to move on, to find a way to go on living and maybe even love again, but loving again wasn't a possibility.

His heart belonged to Slate.

Making no vain effort to control the tears, he cried until he finally fell into a restless sleep and when he woke up, he went downstairs, to find Mallory asleep on the sofa. He knew she was tired—she had to be—and he insisted that she go home. Naturally, she argued, but Mikel insisted he needed some time to himself and she finally relented.

Alone in the house—the house that was too large and too empty—Mikel took the phone with him into his studio, where he sat alone with the lights off. He knew it was only a matter of time before the phone rang, and all he could do was sit and wait. It was out of his hands. He didn't even have enough faith or strength left to pray; he wasn't certain anyone was listening. He wasn't certain of anything, other than the pain that seemed to grow more intense with each moment that ticked by.

He didn't bother looking at the clock, but somehow, he instinctively knew when the time that Drake was supposed to call came and went without the phone ringing, and he knew exactly what no phone call had to mean.

Slate was dead and Drake wouldn't tell him that over the phone. He would do it in person, likely at Slate's request.

*Face to face or over the phone, either way, it doesn't matter, because Slate's gone and this time, he's gone for real.*

Finally, he dropped the phone to the floor, lying down on the old sofa, the tears returning, but not in wild, frantic sobs, this time. He cried quiet tears—he had an endless supply—and while he cried, he thought

about Slate and what should have been; he thought about what his last moments must have been like and he wondered if Slate even remembered him, at the end. Or had the damn monster taken complete control, leaving no trace of the man?

*“Nothing can pull us apart or come between us, Mikel, and when I leave, I promise that I will always, always come back to you, because I love you.”*

The pain in his heart knew no equal; this pain would never dull. He didn’t care what anyone said: this pain would be with him for the rest of his life. It was consuming. How could it not be? The love of his life was gone, for the second time. Slate was gone forever but he was still alive and it didn’t seem fair, but life indeed wasn’t fair. If it had been, then Slate would be alive. Hell, if life was fair, Slate would never have been exposed to the manmade, souped-up virus that took his life. But despite it all, despite the pain, Mikel knew he had been lucky to have ever known and loved Slate at all, because too many people never experienced the kind of love he and Slate had shared.

At some point, he dozed and when he did, he dreamed about Slate, standing on the beach, in the sunlight, laughing and smiling, waving at him. Mikel waved back, running toward him, but just before he happily reached Slate’s open arms, the dream ended.

Groggy, mind still sleep hazed, it took a moment for Mikel to realize someone was knocking on the front door. He ignored it.

He knew who it would be.

Drake had come to tell him Slate was dead, but Mikel didn’t want to hear it. He knew he couldn’t deny the reality this time, but he still didn’t have any desire to hear those dreaded words spoken out loud—by the same man—yet again.

*Just go away! Please! Let me be alone!*

The knocking continued for a few minutes and when it finally stopped, Mikel sighed and closed his eyes again, wishing to fall back to sleep, to recapture the dream. He wanted to be with Slate in any way he could and if dreams were all he had, then so be it; he would take what he could get and make the most of it. Anything to avoid facing reality just yet. Was that so bad? Was he asking for too much? He didn't think so, all things considered, but to his shock, the persistent knocking began again, this time at his studio door. He sat up, wondering how in the hell Drake had gotten inside.

*Slate must have given him a key.*

Agitated, he raked a hand through his hair and cursed under his breath. "Go away! Just go away and leave me alone. I'm fine! Okay? I don't need you to tell me...." He cursed again, knowing it wouldn't work. Drake was a damn stubborn bastard and he wouldn't just leave because Mikel told him to. He would stay until he saw him.

Standing, he stomped across the room, flipped on the light, and jerked open the door, expecting to see Drake standing there, looking sorrowful and apologetic, but it wasn't Drake. For a moment, Mikel could only stare.

He had finally lost his mind.

Finally.

Sagging against the open door, Mikel closed his eyes and opened them again, yet he was still there—Slate was still there—and Mikel was afraid to breathe, afraid to move. He was certain he was dreaming again and this time he didn't want to wake up.



Almost unconsciously, he reached out and, to his amazement, Slate reached back, taking his hand. Mikel sobbed, hurling himself forward into Slate's arms, which wrapped tightly around him, holding him with strength just shy of painful.

Mikel didn't care.

Slate was warm and solid and Mikel could hear the beat of his heart, he could feel Slate's hands on his back and feel those warm, wonderful lips brushing over his temple, and then that wonderful voice was whispering his name and telling him he loved him.

"Slate—"

"It's okay now, Mikel. I swear it, baby. It's over."

"Over." He didn't move from Slate's embrace. He couldn't, not when he was exactly where he wanted to be.

"It worked, baby."

Trembling, Mikel finally forced himself to step back, to look up at Slate, who looked tired and a little pale, but was smiling.

"The injections worked."

"But Drake said—"

"I know. And he was right. It was bad. Really bad. I thought...." He shook his head. "I was sure I was going to die. It was even worse than I expected and I'm damn glad you weren't there to see it, to see me, but...."

"Slate...."

Taking Mikel's hand, he walked the across the room, back to the sofa, where he sat down, pulling Mikel into his lap.

“It turns out that only two injections were needed, rather than three.”

“But Drake said you were.... He said you were nearly out of your mind and....” Mikel winced at the thought, the image making his heart ache.

“I was. But somehow, I.... Well, Keller and Morgan are still not sure how, but I just about died and then when it seemed like it was just about over,” Slate pulled him close, burying his face in his hair and Mikel was content to be held, “Keller ran about a dozen tests and there’s no trace of the virus; the drug did kill it. It nearly killed me in the process, but according to Keller and Morgan, I’m in pretty good health, aside from being weak and nearly exhausted.”

“Does that mean...? God, Slate, are you actually telling me...?” He could say the words; the idea was too precious as he lifted his head, to look at Slate, who smiled.

“Looks like we beat the odds, baby.”

“You beat the odds.” Mikel cried openly, touching Slate’s face, and Slate leaned into the touch.

“I had a reason to, didn’t I? I knew you were waiting for me.”

“Slate—”

“I made you a promise, Mikel. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“Nothing can pull us apart or come between us, Mikel, and when I leave, I promise that I will always, always come back to you, because I love you.” Slate repeated the words he had always said before leaving and Mikel nodded. “Of course, I have to amend that promise now, baby, because I am never, ever leaving you again. Ever. No missions or

injections. It's you and me. Got that? Just you and me; no FDA or monsters or killer vampire-virus...." He actually smiled, despite the tears in his eyes, and Mikel laughed. He couldn't help himself. It felt like someone had just turned the light on in his world, and his heart, which had felt dead, was suddenly alive again.

"So you're really going to be okay?"

"The doctors want to keep an eye on me, run some more tests, but yeah, I'm as good as can be, Mikel, and you are stuck with me."

"Forever?"

"Forever, baby." Slate intertwined their fingers and Mikel grinned. "I love you and I... I mean it, Mikel, it's just us, from here on out."

"So we get the entire happily ever after, for better and worse—"

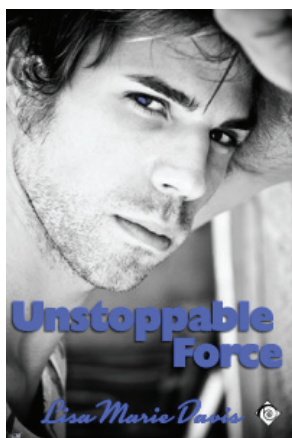
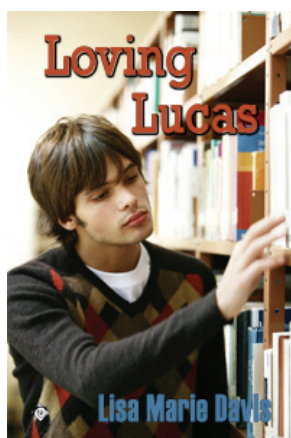
"Darlin', we've already faced the worst, so that means we've got the better waiting for us."


Sighing, Mikel nodded, melting back into Slate's arms, knowing he could stay there, forever.

Maybe life wasn't so unfair after all.

Born and raised in Florida, LISA MARIE DAVIS spends her time writing and babysitting her nearly three-year-old nephew, Zach. A night owl, most of her writing gets done well after one in the morning when the rest of the world is happily sleeping.

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# Come Back to Me | *Lisa Marie Davis*

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