



*Clare London*



*Footprints*

THE wind from the sea was unusually gentle, lifting the loose ends of my hair against my cheeks. The gulls screeched somewhere in the distance, and the waves slapped against the distant rocks, spraying gleefully over them on their tumbling journey towards the shore. There was the fresh smell of salt and damp seaweed in my nostrils. The beach had the same smooth, pale sand of other, prettier places, but this part of the coast was more famous for its rock pools and the deep caves set in its cliff face. We'd worked this area for over nine months now, and I loved it here, especially at this time of year when the holiday season was still early. Enough tourists to keep the place going, but not so many that every breath of air carried the shriek of a troublesome child or the stench of frying onions from the hotdog stands. I felt comfortable here; calm; secure. The sounds washed over me like the sea would itself, if I let it. The smells were sharp, rich and unapologetic; the air was crisp, the wind biting. Here, I swapped the frenzy and frustration of work for something more raw, more real. More poignant. It was one of my favorite places.

But then I had many reasons for feeling that way, some from nature and some from my own memories.

That afternoon, the four of us had come down to the beach for maybe the last time. A disparate group of men, looking for some company and yet strangely confused about what to do with our rare leisure time. It was the end of the

job; the end of nine months of hard, dirty work. It had taken its toll, both in months spent and emotions played. We'd been placed in a small team together, and that's how we'd stayed, twenty-four seven, until the job was done. *Nine months*. I'm not sure any of us had really taken in the fact that it was now over. Not only that, none of us had been reassigned yet. For the last week or so, we'd been adrift in this seaside town. We were somewhere between tension and taking it easy, and I for one was struggling to acclimatize.

Twenty-four seven, like I said. It had been intense but it had worked well. We were agents who wouldn't be marked as similar men in more civilian circumstances, let alone friends, yet we'd learned to cope well with each other. We were an odd collection of guys. Grady was my own age, with a young, sharp wit and biting words, but a fierce concentration when it was needed. Ramirez was older, a hardened veteran, a hulk of a man and useful when muscle was called for. He was quiet most of the time, but his eyes missed nothing. And me? I was one of those poachers turned gamekeeper. I'd been a misguided, awkward and often violent youth who was on course for drifting into much harder crime. But I'd seen sense—or been persuaded to. A couple of years of mentoring by a friend of the family and I did the complete opposite of what was expected, moving into law enforcement. Had some kind of a talent for being a cop, apparently. A couple more of those years and I was persuaded into intelligence. It suited me, operating just outside of public view, with orders that were never the same twice over, and a certain degree of freedom you didn't get in uniform. I kept my head down, learned a lot, caught some lucky breaks. It was a surprise when they asked me to join this specialist anti-terrorism

unit, but I guess I was flattered, too.

The fourth man in our team was Nolan. Adam Nolan—bright, fierce and determined, our appointed superior. Not much older than I was, but he'd been in the unit for many more years. Wiry as hell but strong when it was needed, mentally and physically. Dark and graceful and damned good-looking, too, not that he bothered acknowledging it. When I first joined the unit, he'd been my liaison. He'd been awkward about it at first—though I like to think it was because he disliked training new guys, rather than he disliked me specifically. He was certainly pleased when I made it clear I didn't need my hand held. Well, not for basic training, anyway. In those first few months, I didn't know what else he thought about. About my training; about the hand holding. About *me*.

But I thought a lot about Adam Nolan in return. I didn't admit it aloud. Maybe the other guys would understand: maybe they wouldn't. They were good men, good agents... but I'd been the last to join. The mission had escalated in importance shortly after that: things had moved fast and dangerously. There hadn't been much time to exchange family histories or work resumes. That's not to say there was any hostility toward me: there was tolerance in the group, among us all. There had to be, for us to work efficiently. But that didn't mean they'd be interested in my deepest thoughts and feelings. I liked them all, a lot.

But we were a singular bunch, like I said.

I WALKED slowly along the beach toward the cliff face and then back, at my own pace, alone with my own thoughts. I liked to spend time like that, unwinding at the end of the day. This morning's radio briefing had been even shorter than expected, but things had gone so well there was little left for us to do. The terrorist group we'd been shadowing for all that time had been taken down. All major activists had been taken into custody; the weapons cache had been appropriated and decommissioned. Or so the official documentation phrased it. Anyway, Headquarters had wrapped up the paperwork at last, and they'd be sending transport to pick us up and take us and our equipment back to base tomorrow. They'd also offered up a grudging offer for my team to take some more time in R&R. One more night in this seaside town, then they'd arrange some extra vacation for us. Grady had pumped the air with his fist; Ramirez had grunted his pleasure. I didn't remember what I said. Adam Nolan had already left the room.

As I strolled along, I looked out over the horizon, shading my eyes against the lowering sun. A couple of boats were far out, maybe fishing. The gulls hovered over the foam on the water's surface, then something startled them and they wheeled up and away in smooth formation. The sea lapped up along the beach, each successive wave a little closer to my bare feet, teasing me, making the sand damp and sticky between my toes. In the background, I could hear the sound of traffic from the town, just a distant hum, and the occasional throb of mechanical noise.

After a mission, agents usually took full advantage of any respite. If we were based away from Headquarters, some

of us drifted back in with the local precinct, seeking the company of cops who'd half understand what our life was like, even if their view was limited by a different daily routine. Not for them, the covert anti-terrorist work; the undercover surveillance. We faced different danger, despite being committed to the same cause. And some guys spent their time in whatever town we were stationed, easing off their particular tension in the bars and clubs. There'd been a couple of times I'd been called on to pick up some of our own men, making trouble among the civilians, driven just that little too far over the edge. It wasn't an easy role. That certain degree of freedom I mentioned could be a burden too: lonely and sometimes frightening.

But now we were the only ones left in place—everyone else on the job had been recalled. It could have been disorientating but I was used to the smaller group already. Preferred it, really. I wandered over to where the others had settled a blanket on the dry sand and stood over them, looking down. “Did anyone see which way Nolan went?”

Ramirez was stretched out with his shirt off, his broad chest soaking up the remaining rays of pale sunlight. He was flicking through a magazine and grunted in reply. “Get outta my sun, Riley. I will not have stripes across my manly body from your skinny ass shadow.”

I took a step to the side, my skinny ass shadow looping after me and out of his way. I caught Grady's eye, grinned at him, and spoke back to Ramirez. “So did your manly body see where your superior officer went?”

He grunted again, but he was half smiling. “Dammit, no. You know what he is like, every time we come down. He

arrived ahead of us, and had already gone for his walk before we settled here.”

*His walk. That’s what they called it.*

Grady scrambled to his feet, a can of beer in his hand. He held it out to me but I shook my head. “No thanks.”

He shrugged and peered at me, his dark eyes sharp and assessing. “These last few weeks have been the worst for him, Riley. For all of us. Everything coming together; everything at risk. Why don’t you just relax? We’ve been working our asses off, living on too little sleep and too much junk food. Nothing’s been more important to us than the mission. And no time off to speak of, you know that. But now it’s over.”

Ramirez was more vocal this time. “Yeah, now the whole damned thing is over, Headquarters is peeing its pants with delight at our success, and we can fucking relax and have some fun, no? Go anywhere; see and do what we like. And what does Nolan do?”

“Is that what they call a rhetorical question?” I said, dryly. Grady laughed softly beside me.

Ramirez frowned. “You are as bad as he is. Every week, for months now, he drags us all down here, this godforsaken stretch of coast, full of rough sand and nothing but rocks to stare at. God alone knows what pleasure he finds here. And even now—when we are about to leave this town at last, to return to some better, livelier place—even now, he is down here. You *both* are.”

“And so are *you*,” I gently pointed out. “If you want to go

someplace else tonight, I'm not stopping you."

Ramirez reverted to his library of grunts. I noticed he'd turned two pages of the magazine at once but he didn't seem to notice. "It is called taking stock, man. I am just deciding where best to take my manly body. No?"

Grady laughed. He was used to Ramirez's complaints, as we all were. "It's quiet here. Peaceful." I saw him and Ramirez exchange a quick look. "We need rest before the recreation. We're good with that."

"Speak for yourself. It's *too* fucking quiet here," Ramirez grumbled. "Too few honeys." He glanced over at me. "Hey, Riley, you like the party life same as I do, no? Maybe when Nolan gets back, we'll take a bus along the coast, find another town that feels more like a riot than retirement. Last chance to live it up before we get back to the sweat and toil. We will go look for some company: company with a shirt open to her navel and a skirt up to her ass...." He must have seen something in my absent-minded smile that I hadn't meant him to, because his blunt teasing stopped. And definitely more quickly than usual. He sighed. "Shit. That is not for you, I think."

I frowned. I turned to find Grady looking at me, his expression deliberately blank.

"I never kept it a secret," I said quietly. "I never thought you had any problem with it."

Grady's eyes softened. "Hey, don't get defensive. There's no problem at all. You like guys, we respect that."

"*He* does. I think you are insane," muttered Ramirez.

I started to laugh. Grady punched me in the shoulder with more affection than annoyance.

Ramirez appealed to Grady, who'd often joined him in the sea front bars. "You're up for some entertainment, no? We leave Nolan to find his shells, or whatever he goes looking for, and then later... eh? A damned good supper and a hunt for *real* fun."

"Whatever," Grady said. He was laughing aloud now, too.

I wriggled a foot in the pale, slightly damp sand, letting it trickle in between my toes. We'd all kicked our boots off when we arrived. Adam's sat neatly placed against the bag of provisions we'd brought with us. A bottle of water was missing from the pack; he'd obviously taken it with him.

Grady still hovered beside me. "Riley?"

"I'm good," I said. "If you two want to head on out, it's fine." I smiled at him. "Seriously."

Grady huffed out a breath. "Look, ignore Ramirez, talking with his prick as usual. We all know Nolan gets like this, now and then. Seems he just has to find the right place for himself, hide himself away and work it out. We don't mind coming down with him—we can work around the most anti-social bastard, right? I've known worse. We can't all be easygoing like *you*. Can we?"

I looked at the others, Grady's quizzical face and Ramirez's wry smile, and I nodded. "That's true," I said, because Grady seemed to expect an answer,

He laughed softly and clipped in his earphones, wedded as always to his music. He fiddled with the volume, frowning at it, then dropped back down to the sand beside Ramirez. They were both getting themselves settled on the beach. Whatever they might say, they welcomed this time out as much as Adam did.

“Evan?” Grady peered back up at me. His voice was gentler, using my first name. We rarely did that during a mission.

“I just wondered, that’s all.” I shaded my eyes again, looking over to the cliffs. “If he’s okay.”

“Nolan’s a bit of a mystery to us all,” said Grady. “All we can do is let him go where he chooses. He knows what he wants, just doesn’t tell us why.”

“It is the sea that draws him,” said Ramirez, thoughtfully. I turned my head sharply toward him. Adam’s friends—though bemused by him—knew him better than they realized. “She means many things to many people. She is a mistress. A vision, the awe of creation. A beast of enormous, immeasurable size.”

“Wet. Sinking. Drowning,” Grady listed, quite cheerfully. “That’s what *the beast* means to me.” He fiddled with the volume of his player, turning it up higher. “Sharks; stingrays! Salt in your hair; seaweed around your knees.”

Ramirez threw a towel at him, the tension snapped like a twig in a gust of wind, and things relaxed again.

FOR the next couple of hours we ate, laughed, talked in low, discreet voices about the mission and when the words ran out, played some cards. Other people crossed the beach behind us occasionally, but it wasn't a popular place for visitors when there was better entertainment further up the coast. Most of the time we were left alone. When the games were over, we settled back to solitary thoughts.

"Maybe he needs someone with him," I said, softly.

I sat on the blanket beside Grady, leaning back on my braced arms. Ahead of us, the sea lapped at the shore, no sound except for the occasional, soft splash. The evening was approaching and the tide was ebbing away. The sea's strength had also waned, its activity now just a slow, gentle rhythm. Grady hummed happily under his breath to his music, oblivious to me.

Ramirez lazily turned another page but he answered me, even though it hadn't really been a question. "Nolan? He has never asked. He likes his solitude."

"That's true," I said again. It was a useful phrase when you didn't want to be drawn into anything else.

Ramirez grinned, squinting up at the sky, the light fading slowly toward an indigo dusk. "Hey, man, you ought to have learned after all this time. Guess you mean well, but Nolan won't thank you for interfering. We see how he is always on your back, watching your every move, waiting for you to fuck up. Demanding to know the details of your

plans; challenging your strategies every damned step of the way.”

“He’s tough on us all,” I murmured.

Ramirez let out a sharp bark of a laugh. “Yeah. And has the least tolerance for *you*. Hey, I have talked to him about it; told him to lighten up on you. Seems he is determined to keep up the pressure.”

“That’s true, too,” I replied, calmly. Wondered if I was supposed to thank him for his kind intervention.

“Remember that time, six months back?” he continued. “When we thought we had a real break-through and ambushed that rebel cell? Whole unit was ready to go in.” We’d received a tip-off that the guys we wanted were holed up in a town further up the coast: their supplies were coming in by sea and there was a natural harbor or two that could be utilized. But when we got to the location, all we found was a small group of armed fanatics who’d broken away from the main organization—or maybe they’d been tossed out. Whatever the reason, we found ourselves in the middle of a local crisis. They’d barricaded themselves into a couple of empty rooms in a local hotel block. It was right in the middle of the civilian area.

“We secured them quickly enough.” The gun battle had been more of a skirmish.

“Yeah, but then what did we find?” It was another of Ramirez’s rhetorical questions. “Everyone is thinking it’s over, then we discover there are hostages tied up somewhere on the top floor. Not only that, but down in the kitchens,

there is a holiday souvenir from the perps. A home-made bomb ticking away to doomsday.” Ramirez shook his head at the memory. “Nolan went in to defuse it.”

“It’s his job,” I said quietly.

Ramirez wasn’t really listening. “He found the amateur wiring such a heap of crap, it could not be stopped. Not even by *him*. And it was gonna blow in minutes, take the whole hotel with it. So did he get the hell out, like the rest of us? No?”

I shrugged.

Ramirez shook his head, lost in the memory of that mad time. “Dammit, he still insisted on working on it, staggering the timing and all that other shit he does. He phased the collapse of the building so we got the hostages, the staff, ourselves *and* all our equipment out before it blew up around his ass. I told him what fucking insanity that was, no?”

“Yes, you did.”

Ramirez grunted. “He did not want to know. And when you offered to help him—that kind of insanity contagious, man?—he all but turned on you and told you to go to hell, he did not want you anywhere near him.” Ramirez sighed and settled back again into his warm sand cradle. “Don’t humiliate yourself further, Riley. Control freak like that, he does not need help.”

*REMEMBER that time...?*

But of course I did.

By the time our team got there, the place had been surrounded by the local force and the organization had been very tight. Like I said, it had been little more than a skirmish: the terrorists were weary and running out of resources. They were swiftly captured and taken away for further questioning and the police captain told us thanks, but no thanks—we weren't needed. Then Grady caught the eye of one of the guys being loaded into the police van and something alerted him to more going on. Ramirez stepped in, insisting the prisoners needed to talk to us. The police captain tried to take back control but no one argued with Ramirez in that mood. With me standing at his shoulder, the prisoners talked. The hotel was booby-trapped, it seemed. A group of hotel guests was still in the building, hostage to their cause. The minute a bomb was mentioned, Nolan turned and ran back into the hotel lobby.

It was the first time I ever challenged Adam Nolan outright. He yelled at us to get everyone out, to follow the police to safety. But I followed *him*, ignoring his explicit orders. I could hear Grady yelling at me to keep back; some smaller explosions were already starting, giving up soft, muffled thumps of noise and shock in the basement of the building. The terrorists had obviously set several rounds of preliminary explosives as well. People were screaming, the police shouting. It was going to be a close thing, whether we'd get everyone clear in time. I broke through them all, running into the building, nothing ahead of me except danger and the trail of Adam Nolan's determination. As I

dodged down the thin-carpeted corridors, I could feel the foundations shaking threateningly; I could hear the creak of the walls as they tried to absorb the impact. Whatever happened to us, this was going to end in all too familiar disaster and insanity. But I didn't want injury to Adam Nolan added to that catalog.

I found him in the kitchens, covered in brick dust, struggling to keep his foothold in a pile of shattered masonry. He wrenched in frustration at a mess of wires and mangled radio housing strapped firmly to one of the counters. Obviously, it was a hopeless task. He was attempting to recreate the tortured mind of a lunatic who'd wanted to cause the maximum damage and distress to the forces of law and order. I knew Adam didn't think that way himself. Outside I could hear the screams of the police sirens; around us, the crumbling of walls and the groaning of beleaguered joists, the structure already weakened. When Adam turned to me, his eyes were wide with shock and anger.

And fear.

At the time, it had stunned me. I'd never seen Adam Nolan at a loss, afraid of anything. His hair was whitened with plaster dust, and the cords of his muscles stood out along his arms. He was struggling to work on the bomb and at the same time hold up a wall panel, dislodged by an earlier explosion and drooping over the counter. He didn't have the room to work, or, let's face it, enough hands. From the exposed wall behind the panel, the raw ends of a broken electrical connection waved dangerously loose from its moorings.

“Riley?”

I didn't answer. There wasn't any need and there sure wasn't any time.

“I told all of you to get the hell out!” he shouted over the background noise.

“So should you,” I snapped back.

He shook his head. “I need to fix this enough to give us more time. It's set to blow any minute, you still need to get the hostages out.”

“It's in hand,” I said. “The others have got your back.”

“Dammit, Riley.” He grimaced. “You have no time to argue. No point in more than one of us getting hurt.”

I stepped forward and took a firm hold of the heavy panel, my hands beside his, forcing it back into place and holding it there. “No point in *any* of us getting hurt if we can finish this. I assume you've built in enough time for your own exit at the end of the sequence?”

His eyes flickered between me and the wires he needed to fix. “Get out. That's an order.”

“Whatever. Later.” I caught his furious gaze and stared back. I breathed heavily. The room was dusty and, besides, I needed my strength to hold the wall steady. “Get on with it, Adam. Time's kind of limited.”

“No, it's much worse than that.”

“What?” I stared at him. His expression was wild. For a second, I wondered if he'd been taking something; if the dust

had somehow affected his mind. But his voice was strong enough, just... anguished. "What are you talking about?"

"Time's *kind of* run out." He was still looking at me but his focus was unsteady. In his eyes was sudden, rare vulnerability. "We'll go up with it."

"Huh?"

"It's a mess; I've never seen anything wired so haphazardly. There's no way I'll finish in time." The words were odd, as if he were carrying on some other conversation; some other agenda. Maybe with some other person. Was it shock?

"You will," I said. When he didn't answer, I let go of the panel with one hand and grabbed his arm to get his attention. "You with me here, Nolan? You'll do it!"

"No." He shook his head vehemently, dust flying around us both from the motion. "Dammit, you don't understand!"

"So tell me." I kept my voice calm, partly because I needed my breath for other things, partly because the panic in his voice shocked me. I didn't expect him to listen to me, but it seemed he did.

"That's how I fucked up before, with the plane, I never left enough *time*. I thought I was God Almighty, I could defuse anything, whatever it was, wherever *I* was. I really was the very best, like they all told me."

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but I knew he needed to say it. I didn't move, just gazed at him. Listening to him; allowing him a much earned respect, while

our own Eve of Destruction creaked on its foundations around us. *So little time...*

“It was too complex, you see, I should have known that, allowed for that. But I was arrogant. The embassy called me—it was their staff on the plane—but I couldn’t get to the airport in time. They had radio contact, though, and I thought that’d be enough. I’d never heard of that kind of detonator circuit before, yet I still thought I could defuse it—even remotely.”

“A suicide bomber?” I guessed aloud. The wall panel creaked complainingly under my steady hands.

“The crew had overpowered him, but couldn’t get rid of the bomb. You see?”

I nodded, though he wasn’t looking at me. *I see, all too well.*

“He’d *sewed* it into his skin, for God’s sake. Fanaticism knows no half measures. They asked me to talk the pilot through it. To defuse it in the air.”

I knew Adam had been on many missions before he joined the unit, and I knew the rumors of his skill, even before I met him. He *was* the best—but even the best couldn’t make miracles. “If anyone could do it, you could.”

He shook his head again. “I couldn’t get my thoughts together,” he muttered, eyes blinking hard, his focus drifting to someplace far beyond the building that crumbled around us. “I couldn’t explain clearly enough. The pilot was no expert, but he was smart, he could have done it—”

“He would have been scared,” I interrupted. Adam’s mouth opened to continue, then shut again. The swirling dust made me cough; my lungs were starting to hurt. The seconds were ticking away behind my eyes as if I had a clock in my head. “You said it yourself, you didn’t know the materials, you couldn’t see what was happening in the plane. There may *never* have been enough time.”

He still wasn’t looking at me, but he’d heard every word. He was just in denial. “He ran out of time. No, *I* did. I was too slow. I needed another three minutes, minimum. We both ran out of time.” His tone was intense, his voice rising in volume.

“Adam, don’t.”

“I heard his cry as they fell. The plane exploded as it passed over the tower. It overshot the airfield and fell into the sea.”

*The sea....* That explained a lot.

“They drowned, Riley, all of them. The whole crew and the passengers. And it was my fault; my fault alone. They’d relied on me—and I’d failed them.” He looked across at me at last, the dark blue irises bleeding into the black pupils. Night-black, despair-black eyes. “I won’t fail you, too, Evan.”

I saw a different man that day. I knew nothing about any plane crash, nor any other horrors that might lurk in Adam’s past. Guess none of us knew anything like that. Our files were a private matter and our lives a similar thing, even when we worked together in such industrious intimacy. It made Adam’s desperate agony all the more poignant. And I

wondered what had provoked him to tell me today.

I coughed, only partly to clear my throat. “Get on with it, then. This one. You hear me?”

Puzzlement flickered in his eyes.

I spoke slowly, fiercely. “That won’t happen today, Adam. You hear me? We’re not going up with this, I promise you. You have time—I’ll *make* you the time. Use my hands, my strength as well: tell me what help you need.”

He was only half-listening again. “Too late. Not you as well,” he repeated. “Not you, Evan.”

I stared at the wires, one of them still dangling ominously close to my face. I had no idea how critical it was; it wasn’t my area of expertise. “I won’t let you fail, Adam. And certainly not alone.” I coughed again and made sure his gaze was still on me. The tone of my voice became sharper, louder. “Hey, can you do something with this sparky little thing before it singes my nose hairs? We’ll finish this discussion later over a beer or something. But let’s mop up this mess first and get the fuck *out* of here, okay?”

He stared at me, astonished; angry. Bemused.

“Like, *now*?” I grunted. “You *want* us both to die here, in this shit?”

His eyes focused properly on me at last and he frowned. And as I took the full weight of the wall panel on my arms, he shifted across and swiftly twisted up the loose connection. A small red light on the bomb casing flickered once, then went out.

Well, obviously we did get out of there. Adam finished off the wiring with lightning speed, like he was working on autopilot. Perhaps I'd shocked him into that. I kicked aside the last hunk of fallen plaster and we ran like hell for the exit, the explosions coughing into life behind us, dogging our trail like falling dominoes. He couldn't stop the bombs going off, but he'd bought enough time for us all. By the time the building started to crumple in on itself, everyone was clear. *We were clear.*

We stopped, panting heavily, at the far perimeter of the danger zone, roped off with hastily erected barriers and tape. I listened to the sirens of the emergency response vehicles, watched the clouds of billowing smoke through the flashing blue lights. It was already starting to settle. I waited for the reverberations in my ears to calm. For a moment, Adam's body leaned against me. He was exhausted.

"You okay?"

"Yes," he replied, a little hoarsely. "Thanks."

"Sure. No problem." I didn't turn to face him, still watching the frenzied activity in front of the ruined hotel.

I didn't expect Adam to say anything more: I suspected he was probably already regretting what he *had* said to me inside. He'd never talked to me so much—so *openly*—before. But of course, I'd always been told he wasn't a guy who showed weakness, wasn't a guy who needed support or invited interest. Of *any* kind. So far, there hadn't been much opportunity for me to find out otherwise. But after this.... I hoped he knew he could trust me.

He grimaced. “Riley? You with me?”

It startled me from my thoughts. “Yeah, I’m with you. Guess we’re back on the case. Back to the files.” My voice sounded shaky. I nodded toward the wreckage. “Not a hell of a lot of clues left in *there*.”

He shook his head. “No, the bombers will talk. There’ll be a new lead to the organization. This will take us a step forward.”

I nodded. “Yeah.” *Another small step.*

When he touched my arm, I nearly jumped. “Couldn’t have done it without you, Riley.”

“Huh?”

He looked flushed, despite the white dusting still over him. “Cool head.”

I grinned back. “Cool hands, Nolan. It was a good partnership.”

“Yes,” he said, the last frown of worry melting away from his expression. He looked a little startled himself. “Yes, a good partnership indeed. In the end. You’re a persistent bastard, Evan.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the marvel in front of me; at Adam Nolan, alive and frowning. At his suddenly bright eyes; at his unexpected familiarity with my name. “I am.”

We saw our rescue vehicle screeching around the edge of the block and started our weary way over to meet it. As Adam moved away, I looked down at the dust that had been

gently falling from our clothes and hair, his in particular. It had shaken down around us where we stood, around our feet and the width of our bodies, like the markings around a fallen corpse; like the halo of an iconic saint.

I only had a moment to stare at it—at the dusty portrait of Adam’s steps—and then I was called away by the medics.

ON the beach, the afternoon was wearing on. Ramirez had wandered back to the town for a while, to make some calls; Grady was snoring lightly. I sat beside him quietly, though I knew he wasn’t really asleep: if there were any danger, he’d be alert in seconds.

“It’s been hours, now,” I said. “He’ll be hungry. I could take him a hot dog. Or an ice cream.”

Grady laughed, not unkindly. “You mean Nolan? Stop worrying. He can survive on far less than us poor mortals. And he doesn’t have a sweet tooth.”

I sighed, and leant back on the blanket. “So you tell me.”

“Sometimes I marvel at your tolerance, Riley.” Grady sighed. “Damned if I can match it. He’s a great guy but hell, there are times I want to swing at him! He has that *look*, right? Cool to the point of ice. Makes me feel like a school kid all over again.”

I smiled.

Grady snorted. “Yeah, he insists he doesn’t do it on purpose. But he’s so fucking precise in all he does—so strict with everything he expects from the team. And you always seem to take the brunt of it.” He nudged my shoulder, sympathetically. “He never relaxes with you around. He leaps down your throat at every joke and gives you all the shit duties, even when you’ve got leisure time scheduled. Hell, I don’t think Adam Nolan *does* leisure time, right?”

I smiled, gently. “I don’t think so, no.”

“Remember that time, couple of months ago, when there was a traveling fair on the pier? We all came down for the night. Had to physically drag Nolan around all the fun.” Grady was grinning at the memories. “And *shit*, when you turned around suddenly and your cotton candy got tangled in his hair....”

He was laughing heartily now. Grady cared enough about us all to know where the boundaries were, but his sense of fun was highly developed and he saw amusement in most of life. It was his way, I guess.

“Sorry, Riley.” He grinned, looking anything but. “It was damned funny to watch! But I expect you took a truckload of abuse and you didn’t deserve it. So don’t go inviting any more, will you? Nolan doesn’t need entertaining the same way we do.”

*REMEMBER that time ...?*

But of course I did.

That was the time I insisted Adam accompany us into town for the evening, despite Grady's rolled eyes and Ramirez's frown. Oh, and Adam's own resistance. It was the time I thought I might get to see the young guy underneath the agent; might reach any bubble of naïveté trapped inside a body matured early by violent conflict and the other pressures that surrounded us.

For a while, I thought I'd be better employed banging my head against a brick wall.

It had been an intense time for us. We were moving toward conclusion of the mission, and the unit had received final confirmation of the central terrorist headquarters. It was on the coast, as we'd guessed, so our decision to locate the team in the seaside town had been an astute one. There were rumors of a scheduled shipment, due in the next few weeks, bringing them more arms and supplies. We were going to make sure that didn't happen. In the meantime, tensions were high, and we were supposed to blend in with the local tourists so as not to draw attention to ourselves. I persuaded the rest of my team that meant we could stroll along the promenade.

And that's what we did. Grady had his headphones on but his eyes never left the road; Ramirez scowled every step of the way, though I knew he was enjoying the warm, early evening breeze from the sea. And Adam? I made sure he walked a few steps ahead of me, all the way. Maybe I thought he'd bolt if I didn't, back to our safe house, to sit in front of

the radio for another night, awaiting orders. I cared as much as they did that this was a success—but I couldn't take another day of waiting for the call. We were ready and we'd mobilize at a moment's notice. The rest of it was about four healthy, fit young men about to tear each other's heads off if they had to sit through another day of re-runs of *The Young and the Restless* on the rental's TV.

So we strolled along the pier, watching the other day trippers enjoying themselves. The daylight was fading but the pier was illuminated by gaudy, neon lights. Traffic had slowed and the tone of people's chatter was softening. The air was warm and smelled of fast food and candy.

I stopped to buy cotton candy. I was going for the whole summer vacation experience, and I love the stuff. Ramirez had already eaten half a dozen hot dogs and even Grady was chewing gum. I guess I'd forgotten Adam was ahead of me. When he realized I wasn't right behind him any more, he turned and jogged back. I turned as well, at much the same time, holding my cotton candy in front of me like some kind of trophy. He ran right into it, its sticky center directly in his face.

"What the hell—?"

"Adam, God, I'm sorry." I reached to help him; he was wiping it out of his eyes. "Look, let me—"

He pushed me back, then started clawing lumps of the stuff out of his hair. "It's disgusting! What the hell have you done? Dammit...."

The others were suddenly noticeable by their absence.

Grady melted into the laughing crowd of tourists that quickly gathered. My last image of him was his hand clamped to his mouth to hold in his laughter. I grabbed Ramirez's arm before he, too, could escape. Grumbling, he borrowed a damp cloth from a stallholder and we untangled the worst of the candy from Adam's head and neck. Then Ramirez also, miraculously, found somewhere else to be. Adam Nolan and I were left alone with our—literally—sticky situation. I hardly dared look at his face, the disgust in his eyes. The tourists dispersed to find other entertainment. I apologized again—several times—and waited for the storm to break on my small square foot of promenade.

It didn't happen that way. As soon as I stopped wiping down his hair, Adam pulled back and strode away, following the steps down to the beach. I watched him vanish into the shadows of the sea front wall, blending in with the purple-darkening sky. The sea was calm that night and over the noise of the people around me, I could hear the fringes of its waves lapping at the sand.

I followed. My boots scrunched on the shells on the beach and the sand caught in the treads. I stopped a few feet away from where he stood, staring out to sea. His body was silhouetted against the dim light.

"Sorry." I'd already apologized to excess, but it probably needed repeating. "It was a genuine accident. I didn't know you hate the stuff."

He had his back to me, and he shook his head. "Forget it."

"Adam...."

“I mean it.” He snapped at me, but then made an effort to calm his voice. “Dammit, it was an accident, like you say. I overreacted. It’ll wash out, for God’s sake. It was just....” He sighed and his head dropped forward for a moment. “Just leave me be, Riley. I need to be down here, by the sea. By myself. Okay?”

I didn’t back off. I’d thought a lot about Adam Nolan since the last time we talked about the sea. “It’s not good to brood, Nolan. Everyone needs to move on.”

“Fuck you know about it,” he growled.

“Sure,” I said.

I saw his shoulders tense up. “Okay, right. You *do* know about it. And so you should understand I need to work that through.”

“If that’s what you’re doing, fine,” I said. “But not wallowing in memory. There’s plenty of life to live, Adam. It shouldn’t leave you any time for that.”

He laughed, bitterly. “I can do what I damned well please with my life.”

“Sure you can. Seems to me you offer up your life, many, many times, Adam. Without conditions; without negotiation. Sometimes without enough care. Usually fate welcomes your offer, but sometimes it turns against you.” *Draining you dry in the process.* “We all have failures. Successes, too.”

“You’re way out of line,” he growled. “Amateur psychology; empty comfort.”

“No,” I protested.

He shrugged angrily. “My past is my own, too, right? Go play your games and leave me to....”

“To what?” I asked.

He bit off anything more he’d been about to say and sighed instead. The sea whispered behind us, a soothing rhythm for those who wanted to listen. His words seemed to be wrenched out of him, like tangled threads from a rich carpet. “Sorry, Riley. All that about empty comfort. That was uncalled for. You mean well, I guess.”

I shrugged, too, though he couldn’t see me. “So apologize properly.”

He turned then, startled, and stared at me. I could see the emerging moon reflected in his pupils. “What the fuck?”

“Relax a little,” I said, softly. “Allow yourself that.” I’d forgotten I was still clinging to the remnants of the candy stick, some soft pink spun sugar blowing in the sea breeze. “Here.” I held it out to him. “Try it yourself.”

“For God’s sake.”

I stared back. “You owe me an apology, remember?”

He started to laugh, a sharp, harsh sound. He stopped it abruptly. “Goddamn fool.” But he came a few steps toward me and reluctantly took the stick. His tongue curled around the puffed cloud, licking it into his mouth. There was a flicker in his eyes that I couldn’t see properly. The evening was warm, but I was warmer. “Happy now, Riley?”

“Not so bad, eh?”

He frowned. “I never said I hated it, just....”

“No time for it?”

He nodded slowly. “Riley, I....”

“How is it?” I interrupted.

His eyes widened. “What the hell do you mean?”

“Is it sweet?”

He shook his head at me. “It’s good. Yeah, it’s okay, what more do you want me to say?”

“Only okay?”

He shook his head again, an expression of his frustration. But there was a smile teasing at the corners of his mouth, if he’d only let it loose. “Dammit. Why do you push me like that? Yes, it’s sweet.”

“And....”

“Yes,” he interrupted this time, thinking he was anticipating my questions. “Yes, I suppose it’s fun, *yes*, I should learn to relax and be a better companion, but....”

“But?” I let my voice drop low. “Tell me. Is it the sweetest thing you’ll ever taste?”

His eyes glittered in the half light. His voice came out in a rush. “*No*, I don’t think it’s the sweetest thing I’ll ever taste, though I’ll never get to compare it....”

“With what?” He was a foot from me now, gripping the

stick like a weapon, the skin at his throat glinting with a thin sheen of sweat. *Why was that?* My heart was beating faster than usual. His breath was heavy, with the slight aroma of sugar; I wondered if some of the candy still clung to his lips. “What could be sweeter?”

He shook his head again and this time the smile broke through. “I don’t think it’s as sweet tasting as you would be, Evan.”

There was a short, stunned silence between us. The sea splashed on to the sand; someone yelled at their friends, back up on the promenade.

“You said that aloud,” I murmured. I smiled too.

Adam laughed, sounding bemused. “Yes I did, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t know.” I wasn’t sure how to go on. I knew so little about him that way. I’d never seen him date, in all this time; I’d never talked to him about his preferences, even though I was sure the team had guessed mine. But it was still our own business. Guys didn’t always want to chat about that stuff.

“I don’t talk about it at work,” he said. His voice was low.

“So... you want to try?” I asked, softly. “Try a taste of me?” My body leaned instinctively toward him.

“It’s...? You....”

He was looking at my mouth and the tentative hunger made me shiver. I guessed what he was asking. “Yeah, it’s fine by me.” *Very* fine.

He looked shocked, but at himself, not me. He lifted his face to the sky and the reflection of the fairground lights in his pupils was as sharp as it would be on a blade. “I didn’t know what you’d say. How to ask you.”

“You just did,” I replied.

We took a step or two together, hands reaching for each other’s arms, grasping where we should probably have caressed. He was clumsy at first—we both were, unfamiliar with holding each other, nervous of what was happening between us. We bumped noses, laughed ruefully. His lips pressed on mine and his tongue followed swiftly. He groaned into my mouth. I slid a hand around his waist to hold him to me, feeling every clench of muscle, every flex of strong limbs. I think I assumed he’d run if I didn’t, just like on the promenade.

He didn’t run at all. His hand gripped the nape of my neck and tugged me even harder against him, tilting my head so that he could consume more of me into his taste. His tongue plunged into me from the very start—his lips moist with a depth of desire I’d not even suspected. I could taste the salt on him from the sea spray; his teeth knocked against mine as his mouth jostled to get closer than two bodies had a right to be. We were both panting—it sounded like I moaned aloud, or maybe that was the cry of a sea bird on its way to nest for the night. Adam thrust into my mouth with an enthusiasm that was a close cousin to desperation, and I welcomed every nip and suck like I’d never been kissed like that before. Which, of course, I hadn’t.

So *very much* sweeter than cotton candy.

I pulled us further back into the shadows of the breakwater wall until his back rested against it. No point in inviting attention, those were our orders, right? Then we leaned back into each other as if we wanted to fuse into one single, streamlined body. After a while, I didn't know if the sounds of soft lapping were from Adam's lips or from the sea itself; I didn't know if the sounds of drumming were from the merry-go-round music or from our combined heartbeats. We never let go of each other, never let up from tasting. It wasn't because we couldn't get enough—it was because we didn't *want* to.

My lips felt numb. Our hands pawed gently at each other's body, seeking the slightest touch of warm skin. I stroked at his neck, following the cords of his throat, brushing the hollows of his collarbone. His hands tugged my shirt impatiently from out of my jeans, his fingers crawling across my waist like a lost man searching his map for direction.

The clouds drifted aimlessly across the moon, sending silhouettes across the sand of the town's chimneys and spires. We sank down on to our knees on the beach, clinging to each other like drowning men, and still we kissed for as long as it took for the wind to drop and the clouds to settle, and the night's darkness to creep across the entire town.

He grunted and pulled away for breath. He gave a shaky laugh. I'd never heard him so nervous. "This is living life, like you said, right?"

"Right," I murmured. I pushed him gently on to his back on the sand, sheltered by the breakwater, then I dropped down beside him, cocooning up against his side. I leaned

over him and licked lazily along his bottom lip. He still tasted of sweet sugar and salty air, and now there was an additional savor—a passion freed, a lust unleashed by the last, sweet minutes together. Astonishing. *Fabulous*. My tongue felt rough along his raw lips. When I kissed him, I could feel his throat convulse, and the lashes of his hooded eyes brush against my cheek. When my hand nudged against his groin, he shuddered, but he didn't pull away. My own heart was thudding against my chest and my cock ached, swelling tight inside my jeans.

In the background, there were the sounds of shrieking, overtired children on their way home. There was a sudden flare of jukebox music. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the neon lights from the fairground flashing colored stripes on the steps down to the beach.

“It's time to go back,” Adam said. It was almost a whisper—I hadn't often heard Adam speak in anything but a firm, clear tone. “To find the others.”

“Yes,” I said. “In a minute.” My tongue teased again at his lips, nudging his teeth, asking to be let back in. His mouth opened around me and our hungry tongues flickered against each other for a while. For much longer than that minute I mentioned.

“Evan.” I could feel tension in him again. “The others... the team. I know they're our friends... but *this*...”

“I won't be telling them anything.” I sighed into his mouth. “Except what you want me to.” I felt his body relax again against mine.

He reached up, tentatively stroking my neck. One of his fingers caught against my ear. “Sorry, sticky fingers.” He laughed softly.

I grasped his wrist and lifted his hand to my mouth. His eyes widened, pools of fervor staring at me, inches away from my own face, wild and wary all at the same time.

“Hush.” Gently, I licked at his fingertips, cleaning the stray sugar crystals from them. My tongue traced the lines of his knuckles; slid along the whorls of his fingerprints. Tasting the unique flavor of what Adam Nolan was.

“Why do you do that?” He sounded astonished. “Why do you take such care with me?”

I never got the chance to answer. The noise of the fairground broke once again into our mood, the loudspeaker announcing the very last rides. One of the main neon lights flickered a couple of times and went out. And over the sound of the sea, we could hear Ramirez, bellowing out along the pier, looking for us and calling us to join him at some late-opening bar or other. Calling us back.

BACK in the present, the sun was sinking into a deep orange and crimson bowl, and the glimmer on the waves stretched its fingers to the sand where we stood. The other daytime visitors had gone by now, packing up their picnics and their ball games and their modest bids for escape. Ramirez had come back from town but was restless, ready to move on. He was grumbling about finding somewhere new for supper.

Grady slung his bag over his shoulder and threw Ramirez's to him.

"Time to go," he said. I saw his gaze flicker to Ramirez, then back to me.

"No sign of Adam yet." I knew I was stating the obvious. "Perhaps he's lost." My gaze was pitched over their heads, searching the entrance to the caves in the rock face.

Ramirez grunted. "Riley, how fucking likely is that? Nolan knows this place better than any of us, the amount of times he has come here. And if he is not ready for supper yet, he can find his own way back. We all have our own keys to the house."

"I should go find him."

Ramirez didn't exactly sigh, but the way he shrugged his shoulders was the equivalent. "You say this every time, no?"

"And he always just turns up," Grady added.

I nodded. I took a step toward the rock face. "It just feels different this time."

"It's the end of a case—it's always unsettling." Grady frowned. "This time next week we could all be someplace else, right? No more listening to Ramirez snoring every night."

Ramirez growled back, "No more listening to that stuck-pig wailing you call music. No?"

I turned away from the half-hearted banter. The top of the cliffs was in shadow by now.

“Dammit, Riley!” Ramirez sounded more frustrated than angry. “Who knows which direction he took? Those caves are a maze. And the sands are full of footprints, all the visitors today. Any one of them might be Nolan’s.”

“And then again, might not,” Grady murmured.

“And to be honest—do you think he would welcome you coming after him? Like he needs some kind of rescue mission?” Ramirez shook his head, weary of me by now. “Man, the way he acts, you are the *last* person he wants in his way.”

Grady frowned at Ramirez and lowered his voice, looking for a softer tone for what he probably perceived as my delusion. “Sorry to be so blunt, Evan, but it seems every time you two are in a room together, the irritability ratio raises several notches. Sure, you work well enough together, but your personalities clash. You’re so damned different. When he’s concentrating on something—like he was at the end of the case—he winces every time you speak.” He glanced at Ramirez. “You’ve seen it, right?” Ramirez shrugged. Grady turned back to me. “You’re a lively guy, Evan, but he acts like it exhausts him.”

“That’s how it looks,” I murmured, apparently in agreement.

“Remember how he was, when we finally rounded up the terrorists? Nolan wouldn’t let it go—wouldn’t go back to Headquarters for de-briefing without staking out that last night, for any of the gang we missed. And when you said you’d take the other watch... shit, I thought he’d spontaneously combust!”

Ramirez grimaced and nodded, agreeing with his fellow agent. He was watching me with more interest now, his eyes glinting like the flames of a log fire with the reflected sunset. I wondered what his thoughts really were, behind that gaze. Wondered what they thought of me and my inexplicable fussing.

“His standards are high, that’s all.” I kept my tone mild. “He applies them to himself as much as everyone else.”

Ramirez gave that shrug of pure muscle again. “You are a fool, *is all*. You are just giving him more ammunition in his personal vendetta against you, man. Must have been tough, spending that time alone with him; he was coiled as tight as a wire from the mission. He sees every misstep you take; every word that disagrees with his; every inch of you that’s not *him*.”

“Because he watches so closely,” I said, softly.

“Huh?” Ramirez’s eyes narrowed. “Guess that is true, too. Don’t push your luck, though.”

“I never do,” I said. My tone was firmer this time, and Ramirez’s mouth twitched. Somehow I didn’t think he bought into my passivity as much as before. “But I think I’ll still go find him this time.”

I looked down at the shadows on the sand at my feet—the criss-cross maze of beach shoes and bare heels and dragged buckets and spades. I breathed a few times, deeply, carefully. Then I wheeled around to my right, and started to walk towards the cliff face. My left leg dragged a little behind me but it was no problem. Ramirez was still watching me—I

could feel his gaze on my back as I set off.

“We’ll see you later, okay?” Grady called.

I nodded and kept walking.

“He is fine,” came Ramirez’s growl of resignation. “Both of them. No?”

Like I said before, Adam’s friends understood a lot more about him than they realized.

A COUPLE of weeks ago, we’d finally—officially—completed the mission. One of the original bombers at the hotel had eventually talked about the organization. He was scared of us and equally scared of his previous leaders: he realized at last he had nothing to bargain with except the truth and the hope of some clemency. Coupled with the surveillance we’d been carrying out, we pinned their location down once and for all and intercepted the radio messages we’d been waiting for about the coming shipment. When they broke cover and moved in to collect their goods from an unregistered ship moored just beyond the harbor, we were waiting. For one long, wild, dark, frenetic night, we’d struggled across the beach and the shallow water, rounding them up and taking them in. It was a success all ’round, as the leaders had been arrogant enough to accompany their team and were arrested alongside them. We sent men to sweep the house where they’d been staying, but there was no further resistance.

We didn’t escape without injury. Grady had taken a

knife cut to his arm, and I'd narrowly missed a stray bullet that skimmed my leg too close for comfort: a sudden clap of noise and then a hot, greedy flame that passed me before I even saw it arrive. I'd thrown myself to the side instinctively, but I'd been lucky. A surface wound, that was all.

Then Adam insisted that someone had to stay in town to watch overnight. One of the perps had been heard talking about members of the gang who'd escaped capture; who might come back for salvage. We still had our safe house and the coastline could be watched from there, with support from the local police. Adam said he'd stay. It was obvious he would—he'd been team leader on the mission. He saw it as a personal failure if loose ends remained untied.

And it meant he stayed the night by the sea, on his own.

No one challenged him on it. The rest of the team appreciated his tenacity, but no one wanted extra duty. Sure, they'd come back to the house in a day or so to start cleaning up the operation, but in the meantime they were going to travel with the prisoners back to Headquarters to continue the interrogation. There were decent bunks there, good food and friends' company. And no one wanted to miss the excitement of the final stage.

When I volunteered to cover Adam, there was nothing more than an eyebrow raised and a murmur of sympathy. No one welcomed that kind of end to this exhausting day.

"I can do this alone," he told me, as I set up the surveillance equipment.

"But you don't need to."

He stared at me, his expression a mixture of frustration and a jumble of other stuff. His look told me without words to back off—that I wasn't to think I knew what he needed.

I didn't remind him that he was the one who'd called me a persistent bastard.

In the end, it was over much sooner than we'd imagined. We identified a couple more camp followers—just kids, really, full of arrogance that they'd escaped, but just as full of stupidity in that they came back for the pickings. All it took was a radio call to the local police to round them up, and the beach was deserted again, the job satisfactorily closed. We returned to the house for Adam to make his report. I found some canned supplies and spent time playing chef in the kitchen. It was always good to have warm food.

By the time we had confirmation back from the police that everything was clear, it was too late to bother going on to Headquarters to join the others. We'd catch up in the morning with everyone, but until then, we settled for the night. We were used to the house, anyway—it was comfortable enough. Ramirez had fixed the heating a while back, and Grady had left his music system. There was no hardship involved. Adam said gruffly he was sorry I was missing out on the team celebrations. I didn't bother answering.

But I couldn't sleep. Perhaps it was the excitement: the tension. Whatever the reason, midnight came and went, finding me sitting silently on the edge of the bath in the tiny, antiquated bathroom. I was dressed in nothing but my T-shirt and boxers, waiting for the throbbing in my leg wound to subside. I'd been clumsy with the bandaging, but I didn't

want to draw attention to it.

The moon was high and clear, seeping through the less grimy slats of the blinds, painting black and white stripes on the tiled floor. The roads outside were silent. There was quite a wind that night: the waves of the sea whispered and groaned over the rocks and slapped relentlessly against the shore. I could hear it all through the walls of the building.

There were other noises too, inside the house. And when they started to get more urgent, I let myself into the room where Adam was sleeping.

He woke suddenly, sitting bolt upright in his bunk, his reactions sharp even when saturated with his exhaustion. “Fuck it, who—?”

“It’s me,” I said quickly. I didn’t move from the doorway. Close enough to show him it was only me; far enough away not to spook him further.

“Evan?” He let out a sigh and ran his hand back through his tousled hair. “Hell, don’t go creeping about like that. What’s the matter? More trouble?”

“The nightmares are bad, aren’t they?” I said, softly.

“Huh?” He looked at me, startled. His eyes were half lidded with sleepiness but the habitual wariness was there, too. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I shrugged gently. “I heard you. The house is quieter than usual tonight. And I’m only in the next room.”

He grimaced. “Shit.” He didn’t apologize for waking me. He didn’t make excuses as to why he might be particularly

restless tonight. I didn't expect any of that from him. And it wasn't as if this was the first time I'd heard him at night. I was the only one of his housemates who hadn't developed the art of sleeping through the soft, anguished cries from his room. But I didn't tell *him* that.

"It's worse, recently. I can't shake them off." He shook his head impatiently, angry with himself.

"Seen the doc?"

He grimaced. "Leave it."

I nodded, understanding. "Maybe when we're back at base, they'll stop. When we're assigned somewhere else, on the next job...." At the thought of that, my words seemed to stick in my throat.

Adam grunted. "That's the *last* thing that'll help."

I shifted off the door frame and stepped into the room. "What do you mean?"

"Too late," he muttered, though I think he was talking about the hour.

"No," I said, my voice echoing sharply in the room. He looked up at me, startled again. "Tell me."

He sighed. He dropped his gaze, not meeting mine. "I thought about what you said, Riley—about moving on. You're right, of course, in theory. And this felt like the right place. I was keen to come on this mission, to stay here on surveillance. A kind of therapy for me, I reckoned." He sat up properly and swung his legs out over the side of his bunk. A sliver of moon crept in through a split in the window frame

and zigzagged across his bare chest. His hair was loose and ragged over his forehead.

“But you still see it? Hear them?”

He nodded. His voice was hoarse. “In with the waves; with the wind over the cliff face. Don’t ask me to explain it. It’s in among the sound of the sea, in among the sea spray.” He didn’t have to say any more to me; I could imagine. *The plane crash; the dying men; his failure.* “I hear it, Riley, I smell it, I taste the salty water after the plunge. It’s part of me, too, now. It’ll be with me for ever. This place hasn’t helped me erase it. It’s an obsession. Nothing soothes it.” He peered over at me in the half light, brow furrowed. He looked a heart-wrenching mixture of fury and fear. “Why don’t you say something? Dammit, I don’t need your pity.”

“You don’t have it. You’re doing what you have to.” I watched the wariness flicker in his eyes. “I’m thinking maybe this is the worst they’ll get—the nightmares. You think? It’s a process of facing the memories, then passing beyond them.”

He gave a thin smile and his teeth worried his lower lip. “Do you really believe that? Breaking through the trauma? Some kind of psychotherapeutic babble?”

“You want to see the shrinks instead?” I grinned at him, knowing the answer to that. “Yes, I believe it.”

“Maybe it’s true,” he said, and the bleak tone of his voice tugged at my heart. “I wish I had your confidence.”

I was silent.

“I don’t talk about it, you know. Well, I expect you

guessed.” He sounded defensive. “Only to you. *Shit.*”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I understand.”

He shifted, stretching a little, and the thin sheet fell away from his lap. He was in boxers, too, and his bare, muscled thighs were pale, his flesh looking like marble in the moonlight. The room was chilled from the sea air; the heater had only masked it, and the warm air had dissipated by now. “You know who they were, Riley? That gang we just caught? They were a branch of the same terrorist group....”

*Who targeted the plane.* I took a new, deeper breath. “No, I didn’t know, not before now. It must be hard to see them still in business. But we’ve got them now, Adam. We stopped them.”

He shook his head slowly. “It’s just a local unit, just one branch. That kind of fanaticism stretches over continents—over generations.”

“But that’s what counter-terrorism is, Adam. A series of steps; building blocks. Undermining them in the same way they try to attack us. And hey—we’re some of those local guys, aren’t we? We’re pretty fanatical ourselves, in a different kind of way.”

He gasped. It was like he laughed, then swallowed the sound back down his throat. He must have been cold, but he didn’t pull the sheet back up around him again. I walked over to the bunk and crouched down on the floor in front of him. His eyes watched every step I made but not with any hostility. “I didn’t want you here tonight, Riley. I wanted to be alone.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

He did laugh then, softly, his gaze on mine. “Dammit, for a guy who seems to know just how to express himself, how do you annoy me so much with a monosyllable?”

“Do I?” *I don’t mean to.*

“No that’s hypocritical,” he murmured, answering himself. His hand could reach my shoulder if he stretched out. I think he wanted to; I could feel the smallest flex of muscle in the still air. “I’m not annoyed. But you disturb me, you know?”

I frowned. “Hey. Sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. You always have disturbed me.” He sighed. “In all sorts of ways. Ever since you joined us. I never know how to react to you.” He made a sound of frustration. “It makes me... it confuses me. I know the other guys think I’m always harassing you, that I’m harder on your case than anyone else’s.” He sighed. “I just don’t always deal with you the right way.” The cool palm of his hand settled on my shoulder. *At last.* The wash of warmth was generated entirely from within my body; from the reawakening of nerves; from the rush of blood in my veins, wet and dark in my imagination and pumping life and energy around my limbs.

“That works for me,” I whispered.

He smiled but his expression was troubled. “Why do you think I feel that way, Evan?”

I shrugged carefully, so as not to shake off his touch. Was that a genuine question? “I’m a disturbing guy?”

He laughed again. The tension between us eased, just a fraction. “And maybe that works for *me*.”

I think I held my breath: I know my chest hurt for some reason.

“I never said....” He sounded surprised at himself. “I never said, but I’m *glad* you know about my past, Evan. I should tell you more.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Oh, I *need* to!” He laughed again, but more bitterly this time, and his grip tightened on my shoulder. “But I’m not ready to, I guess.”

I grinned again, and gazed fully into his face. It was only inches away: skin glowing pale in the night light; eyes meeting mine, with no fear. Or at least, not of *me*. “Then don’t. I know enough. Right?”

“Right,” he murmured back. I reached out and put my hand on his waist to steady myself. He shivered.

“You’re cold. Damned heater doesn’t work past midnight.” My voice felt thick and clumsy in my mouth. “You want me to get in there with you? Sleep beside you.”

I felt him tense up. “What is this, suicide watch? The nightmares are over now.”

“No, not that, of course not. I... it makes operational sense, doesn’t it?”

He was smiling, I could see; his teeth were white and sharp in the dim light. “You mean to conserve heat—to

protect team members?”

“Yeah.”

He snorted. “This isn’t the Antarctic, Riley. And we’re no longer on watch. We’re off duty, remember?”

I nodded. “Well, that’s true, too.” I watched the light play on his face, the slow blink of his eyelids. “So maybe I have another, selfish reason.”

He sucked in his breath. I knew I was taking a risk—but reaching out for something, too. I didn’t know if I could keep things hidden for much longer. I kept staring at him, hoping he wouldn’t look away—wishing he felt the same. He’d never touched me after the kiss that evening on the beach. Not *that* way, anyway. Admittedly, there hadn’t been much chance for time alone together, and he’d been the same as usual toward me, there’d been no extra tension. But there’d been no positive mention of it, either.

I sighed. “Adam, okay, forget it....”

Then he nodded to me, just the once. I bit back my words—I didn’t need any more.

I scrambled to my feet and went to fetch another blanket from my own bunk. When I came back in, he’d scooted over to the far side of his bed and left the sheet turned back for me. I did some wriggling as I slid in beside him. Half of me was trying not to crowd him, the other half was desperate to be close. Another part of me that blew the hundred per cent equation was my cock, hot and swelling by now, even though I was trying—probably unsuccessfully—to keep it closeted in my boxers in case he thought I was

coming on to him in all the wrong ways. Or the right ones. Whatever.

Adam lay back down again, arms behind his head, the muscles of his torso shaded in the dark room like the sand dunes at the beach. The sheet lay pooled around his waist, hugging the shape of his hips and thighs. It wasn't as cold in the room any more, or so it seemed to me: I dropped the extra blanket on to the floor and stretched out beside him. The thin mattress creaked from our combined weight and Adam let out a small, soft breath. I propped myself up on my arm and turned to face him. I could breathe in his smell from there; hear the slightest whisper. The sliver of moonlight missed most of our faces and lit up the curved edges of our bodies, making parts of us look like sinister shadows from a black and white movie. My cock shifted impatiently at my groin, tugging at the fabric of my boxers. I fiddled aimlessly with the hem of my T-shirt.

“Evan.”

It didn't sound like a question, but I knew it was. “Only what you want, Adam. I'd never ask anything more.” *And I'd settle for less, if I had to.*

He relaxed and nodded. He was smiling again. His voice echoed softly in the still air. “On the beach that time... you remember?”

I smiled at how ridiculous that question was, and then I reached for him

IT ALL just flowed from that moment, from the first time I kissed him again. His lips had a familiar and yet a wonderfully *new* taste. It was like a gate had swung open; a lock had snapped apart; a dam had burst at the seams, slowly at first but with increasingly ferocity. It was all about the here and now. All about *us*. My heart beat so hard I thought it'd bruise the inside of my ribcage. I felt stupid and clumsy at the same time, desperate for him but scared of... what? Of hurting him? Of scaring him? Whatever Adam said about himself, I never saw him as a man who was helpless.

I peeled my shirt up and over my head because I couldn't bear not to feel his skin against mine. We pushed the sheet completely off the bed and I slid my leg over his, clinging to him. Rolling gently together, we were like a four-limbed creature, kissing, touching, his knee nudging between my thighs, my hands sliding down his back, not feeling any chill at all in the air because of the heat rippling through me. His palm pressed against my chest like he was finding his way in the dark. I couldn't help the gasp as he brushed across an erect nipple.

“*God... Evan....*”

All I could hear was the sound of my name in his whisper—that, and his soft panting. I fell to my back, the thin sheet on the mattress creasing up underneath me. But above me, there was Adam's body, Adam's skin, the smell of him in my nostrils, the taste of him on my lips. And smiling, all the time, the pair of us.

He slid down my body, his mouth trailing between my nipples, over my ribs, his tongue lapping hungrily at my

flesh. The mattress was hard and uncomfortable under my back but I never gave things like physical discomfort another thought. When his mouth reached my belly, I let him grip the waist of my boxers between his teeth and tug them down to my knees. Dammit, I lifted my hips and helped them on their way. I felt him shift about on the bed, pulling off his own boxers.

“Your leg?” he asked, hoarsely.

“I’m good,” I gasped. The blood and nerves of my body were otherwise engaged—the pain in my leg was no longer a priority. He whispered something I didn’t catch, then his head dipped to my groin. His breath warmed the base of my cock and the tip of his tongue ran along its length.

Adam going down on me was someplace between a dream coming true and the attainment of Nirvana. As presumably impossible as that—but as ecstatic. He sucked hard and on the first down stroke, his teeth caught the sheath, making me jump. When he halted, I put my hand on his head and nudged him to continue. There was no pain in it, only pleasure. He was fierce, as if he’d held himself back for so long that it *hurt* and he needed relief. But like his kisses, his sucking was a miraculous mixture of tenderness and raw, hungry passion. My cock was shamelessly hard, weeping its need, rearing its shining head out of my groin to greet him. On each upward stroke, he paused at the end and licked me, balancing the crown on his rough tongue, then plunged back down to consume it inside the hot, wet sanctuary of his mouth.

I came, embarrassingly quickly.

I clutched at his thick hair, my fingers pale in the dim light against the black locks. Tears pricked my eyes, though there was no reason to cry except in delight. My legs tensed underneath his hands, and the soft liquid noises from his mouth mingled in with the sound of the waves outside. His grip was relentless, pressing me down on the bed, making me take it all. I bucked and thrust up into him, and spewed out the best of anything I ever possessed, in between his impatient, greedy lips.

I groaned and wiped the moisture from my eyes, and bent my sore leg back down to a more comfortable position. He didn't stop licking and kissing or moving over me, lithe as any sea creature, his tongue flickering over my skin. Goose bumps ran along nerves I hadn't even known I possessed before that night. I was a thrumming, shuddering mess of desire in his hands. As he moved, I took the chance to stroke back at him—to touch the taut skin; smell the salty sweat of his body; feel the delicious shock of different limbs tangled in against my own. He was magnificent. My own dreams had been hopeful and needy—and now they were reality.

When he shifted his body around to place his head at my groin and his legs astride my shoulders, I was able to take my turn. I stretched up, licking hungrily at his cock, taking my own taste of pleasure and thick, swollen flesh; knowing—agonizingly—just how much I wanted more of it. His mouth was still working, licking between my ass cheeks now, probing at my entrance. I couldn't believe the delight of it—the slick muscle of his tongue darting against me, teasing at the puckers of skin as they flexed in shock and stimulation. I could feel the welcome wetness and the promise of more to come.

His words against my warm flesh were no more than a whisper, no less than a plea. “Want you, want you, Evan... so good... *want you.*”

I rolled away from him then, on to my belly. The sheet was damp underneath me from sweat and our own leaking fluids. My cock was over-sensitive, trapped underneath my body but I could cope with that. I spread my legs, clenching my buttock muscles. The air was cool again on my skin. Adam moved, kneeling up on the mattress at my side. With one hand he traced the knotty bones of my back and spine, the other still drifting against my ass as if the skin was precious to his fingertips. I let him caress me, running his hands down between my legs, stroking the soft hairs on my inner thighs, his knuckles brushing against the wrinkles of my sac. A dribble of his warm saliva ran aimlessly down under the crease of my left buttock and I wanted to scratch it away. But wanted to keep it there, too. I was a maelstrom of emotions.

I couldn't bear it any longer. I leaned my head down on my arms and lifted my lower body up off the mattress, supporting myself on my elbows and knees. I was facing away from Adam and my ass was up in the air, the skin flushed and quivering so much that I could feel it. My cheeks were almost literally in his hands, in the roughened palms of his strong, sensitive hands.

“Yes,” I groaned, though he hadn't asked a question aloud. “Take me. Fuck me.”

He tensed up, suddenly still. “I can't do this.”

I grimaced, though I suppose he couldn't see. “You

know what you're doing. I'm perceptive that way."

He snorted softly. "Don't be so damned literal." His voice was hoarse. "I mean... I shouldn't. I'm not... I can't give you what you need."

I didn't bother stating the obvious, for I was beyond banter or bargain. I just needed him and so badly, it was like a thread running through my whole body, a hot new vein of desire. "Adam. There are supplies in the first aid kit. *Please.*"

"Evan... *shit.*"

The bed sank under me as he swung himself off the side. He crossed the room and I heard him rummaging in the kit box. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and carefully. My control was following my breathing: I held it in on the inhale, then felt it slip toward escape on the exhale.

Adam scooted back over and the bed dipped again as he got back on beside me. His breath skimmed over my ass, making the small hairs stand on end.

"Do you trust me?" I whispered. I opened my eyes and peered back over my shoulder at him. My legs ached and my dick was hot and heavy between them. *God*, I needed him.

His eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. In his hand were a couple of condoms and a small bottle of lube but he wasn't paying them any attention. He tensed as if surprised at my question. "Yes," he said. "Yes. That's what it's about, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I sighed. I started smiling again.

"I never realized before. I...."

“Shut up.” I wriggled my ass at him, only half playfully. “*Adam.*”

He put his hands back on my ass. His touch was firm and determined, and I never surrendered more happily to a hand’s demands. I sucked in my breath as he popped the top of the lube bottle and squirted some on to his fingers. Then he peeled my clenched buttocks apart with his thumbs and slid a single digit into me. I heard the sharp intake of his breath. Yeah, he knew what he was doing; I was damned glad about it. He slid another finger in beside the first. I groaned and my mouth felt suddenly dry.

“Soon,” I whispered. I couldn’t make a more coherent sentence. I needed some preparation, but every time he twisted his fingers, slowly and carefully, reaching into me, nudging at the spot inside, my cock twitched up, reaching for my belly. I was aroused again, desire coiling in my groin, goose bumps running along my skin. He removed his fingers and I bit back a moan. The bed bounced beneath us and I could hear him tearing open the condom packet and the slick sounds of lube as he prepared his cock. I wanted to turn around and watch every move he made, but I didn’t want to distract him. I was struggling to focus, anyway, my heart beating so hard with anticipation. Maybe there’d be another time soon; we could take more time, I could watch his dark pupils dilate, his tongue moisten his lips, the muscles tightening on his thighs as he spread my legs and settled between them.

The cool tip of his cock pressed very carefully against my entrance, perhaps cautious of not enough preparation. My thoughts abandoned words and settled for pure

sensation. He'd never been timid in anything he did, so I didn't expect it to continue that way. Sure enough, he grunted and pushed in, slowly but firmly. When the head of his dick burst fully into me, it made me gasp. He paused, allowing me to adjust. He was panting. "Evan... if it's...."

"More," I gasped. "*More.*" It was a physical shock, but one I'd welcomed, so I didn't have any patience with my nervousness. Dammit, I didn't have the time or the tolerance for *adjusting*; my body sobbed for something more satisfying—more proactive. Adam started to move, and I shuddered along with him. He pulled out gently, then thrust back in, again and again. I cried softly with long-distant feelings and a fresh, keen passion. His hands were damp with sweat, the palms clammy where he gripped my hips. I rocked with him, my knees pressing deep into the mattress. My head pressed hard on my arms and my legs began to tremble with the tension.

Neither of us lasted very long—I guess there were other forces at play that night than lust alone, with its usual single-minded pragmatism. When he cried out with his climax, it ended on a sob. I didn't know what else was in his mind, whether *I* was or whether he dreamed about other times, other lovers. I wished I knew more about him; could get closer to him. But then, that was only the first time, and the night was still young. I'd never been one for praying, but I did then. I prayed that the night would be long and hot and be allowed to develop exactly as our hunger dictated.

It was more incredible than any prayer of mine could ever have imagined.

WHEREVER my mind and memories may have been, my body was back in the present time. The noise of the lapping sea was in my ears, the tang of salt air in my nostrils. I'd climbed nearly to the top of one of the steeper rock faces, and now I was trying to catch my breath and ease my aching muscles. My leg was healing okay, but the skin still tugged around the wound after exercise.

I was resting on an intermediate platform in the cliff, a ledge that was deep enough for a man to stand and with access to a couple of small, shallow caves. This was higher than I'd ever climbed before. At the very top, I knew, there was a rough-hewn path to another town along the coast. From the ledge, I could see far along the coastline and back up through the rows of beachfront houses. I could also see a solitary figure back on the beach—Ramirez, packing up the last of the belongings and setting off for home without me. Without *us*.

Someone cleared his throat and I turned around slowly. Adam sat on the ledge, a few feet away from me at the entrance to one of the caves. No casual beachcomber would have climbed up there and found him—unless they'd known where to look. From his vantage point, he could probably see Ramirez, too, but he didn't seem to be watching anything on the beach. His feet were bare, his pants rolled up and stained with salt water and green sea moss. There were grains of sand and droplets of water glistening between his toes.

“Evan.” It was a sigh, not exactly the greeting I'd been

expecting. At least it wasn't hostile.

I picked my way over the uneven ground and sat down beside him, glad of the rest. "Hey, Adam. This isn't your usual place, right? It's a more challenging climb this time. Maybe I need to go into training."

He didn't smile at my feeble joke. "I'm trying to think things through. *I* need to be left the fuck alone."

"Not a good idea," I said, cheerfully enough. He bit his lip but didn't argue. There was silence between us for a while. The wind had dropped as the evening approached; a few stray gulls wheeled and dipped over the darkening sea. "You know what time it is?"

He shrugged. "I just forgot. There's no need for me to get back to the house early. We're all packed up."

I nodded. My throat felt tight. "The transport is coming tomorrow morning at eight. Back to base. Back to routine."

He didn't comment on that. "Go to the house with the others. I'll come back in my own time tonight. On my own."

"You don't need to now." When he tutted, but with little vehemence, I persisted. "So is that what this is all about, Adam?"

"What are you talking about?" He frowned down at his hands, resting in his lap.

"In your own time. On your own. Like that's how your life has to be."

"Maybe it does." He wouldn't meet my eyes. "Just go,

Evan.”

I stared up at the darkening sky. “How much longer will you come here for *this*, Adam?”

He shook his head, trying to deflect my words. He knew, of course, what I was talking about. “I don’t have any choice—we leave tomorrow.”

“But you’ll still be *here*, won’t you? Here in your heart.”

“Leave it.” He sounded very weary. “The sea is my fate, Evan. The reminder of my failure.”

His voice echoed in my ears: I was assaulted suddenly by the sensuality of my own memories. The loud, gaudy music of the fairground; soft sticky cotton candy; hot tongues; eager hands. A warm, shocking, thrilling night, bodies clinging and heads thrown back, cries echoing off the bare walls of the beachfront house, drowning out the hungry gulls. I recalled Adam’s burning eyes and the sweat slicked hair on his forehead. Everything was exaggerated—I was conscious of the sand under my own feet; the sea breeze at my throat; Adam’s hunched body; his careful, careworn words. Lists of stuff, layers of memory, traces in everything I saw around me, making up my life today. Waking in the cold morning, warm in his arms, still huddled in that miserable single bed, his expression one of relaxed, trusting desire and happiness. *Never happier.*

“It’s the reminder of other things too, Adam.”

“So it is.” He turned his head away from me, as if deliberately avoiding me. But there was a thread of warmth in his voice and his hand reached out and briefly cupped

over mine. “I don’t forget *them* either, Evan.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. My body had relaxed from its exertions, but my emotions were settling, too. “So come back with me now.”

He shook his head, then turned back at last to meet my gaze. “I told you, I can’t give you what you need.”

“And what about what *you* need?”

He looked incredulous. “God, you *are* a persistent bastard, aren’t you?”

The strange, flickering hope in his eyes told me he didn’t really mean it. Not as an insult, anyway. “The others...” I sighed. “They think you’re tough, they think you’re cold. I’m sure that’s exactly what you want them to think. You’re a mystery to them, right?”

He stared at me. “But it’s *you* that’s the mystery,” he blurted out.

I stared back. “Me?”

He started to laugh, then bit it off. The evening breeze ruffled his hair and he pushed it impatiently back off his forehead. “You are—to me. I’m always conscious of you, more than anything else. *Anyone* else. But I can’t let that happen. I can’t let....”

“Can’t let me in?” I murmured. “No such problem, you know.” My fingers itched to touch him again but this was all about moving slowly. Carefully. Until he was ready.

“Shit.” He shook his head, but at himself. “You know

what I *really* need?”

“That’s why I asked,” I said quietly.

“It’s you.” His voice dropped so low I could hardly hear him. “I need you. I’ve been needing you—admiring you, *despairing* of you, trying to protect you—ever since I met you. I didn’t even realize it myself. Until...”

He didn’t need to finish that sentence. I smiled gently, my heartbeat racing again and not from the climb. “Hey, I don’t need protection. We chose our job—we’re well trained. We’re all tough bastards, at the end of the day.”

He laughed softly. “I know. But that doesn’t stop the emotion nagging at me—and it confuses me.” He looked up now, and his pupils looked as darkly blue as the deeper reaches of the evening sea. “When you were shot... it could have been so much worse. If you’d died....”

“It wasn’t your fault, Adam,” I said, a little grimly. “None of it.”

“And that’s what I’ve had to work out for myself,” he replied, his eyes gleaming. His voice was stronger now. “I can know that something isn’t my fault—yet I still feel the pain.”

I wanted to hold him, but all I dared do was put out my hand and curl my fingers around his. “That’s how we all feel, you know. It’s not just you.”

He grunted. “Sure. So I’m being selfish. But I have to learn to reconcile those two sides of life. And if you’d died....”

I laughed. It sounded very harsh in the still air. “It’d take more than some punk with an illegal gun and a crappy,

doped-up aim.”

He frowned. “It would have been my greatest failure; my greatest loss.” He wasn’t listening to me. “Whether I could have prevented it or not.”

“Adam? It’s just a job. *Our* job.”

“Shit, Evan.” His smile was a little sad. “That’s what it *was*. But not any more. I kept it under wraps before. That’s what I was all about. The tough, cold act, you know? But now... now it’s about *you*.”

I swallowed hard. “So we’ll find some way around. Some way to reconcile it all. Two heads are better than one, yeah?”

He started laughing, but there was proper warmth there now. “We may all be tough bastards, but you certainly *are* the most....”

“Persistent. Yeah, you said.” I laughed with him: I still held his hand. I ached for him, even while his courage made me proud. “So let’s get back.”

He still hesitated. “The others, Evan.... They don’t know how things have been for you—for *us*—do they?”

“I’ve never said anything.” I wondered if he’d feel me tense up. I remembered Ramirez’s dark, flickering pupils as he spoke to me on the beach. “Though they’re far from stupid.” I started to withdraw my hand but, to my surprise, Adam tightened his fingers and held on.

“Don’t pull back. Not now.”

“I won’t,” I said, shaking my head. “Never.” *Not where it*

*matters.* “But if you’re not sure....”

“I am,” he said, sharply. “You misunderstand me.”

It was a reminder of the harsh Adam Nolan the others saw. He must have seen my eyes narrowing in response because there was a sudden flicker of panic in his eyes. “Evan, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s fine.”

“No.” He rushed on, talking where before he would have clammed up. “You’re the only one I can bear to have standing beside me, do you know that? The only one I want there. Why couldn’t I tell you that before? I’ve been holding back the feelings, tormenting myself, agonizing over the meaning of it all—*watching* you—all this time. Now it’s so much clearer. How stupid I was; how dishonest.”

“No....”

“Yes.” He leaned over and slid his arm around my shoulders, startling me. I knew he was going to kiss me a split second before his mouth touched mine. I hadn’t realized how cold my lips were until his warm ones covered them. We kissed slowly and with the taste of salt and fresh air. The gulls grew silent in the sky.

He pulled back at last, reluctantly. “You’ve been there all along, I just never saw it. You’re so different—and that’s just right. Just what I need, and you knew it. But you know what else?”

“What?” I smiled. His breath was still warm in my mouth.

“I’d never have had your patience.”

I laughed and pulled him to me, my thigh pressing against his. For a moment his head rested on my shoulder. “Adam... what happened between us last week. Do you regret it?”

I felt him snap to attention against me. “Not for a second. You?”

I grinned, and nuzzled my chin on the top of his dark head. “Never.”

He took a deep breath. Maybe he thought I wouldn’t notice, but he was pressed against my own chest; I felt every movement. “So you want them to know?”

“Yes,” I said. I hid the vibration of my excitement, my face pressed against his thick, tangled hair. “I do. But only when you’re ready.”

He wriggled against me, his lips pressing against the lobe of my ear. I felt the goose pimples rise along every thread of nerve I possessed. “Okay. I’m ready now. I’ve never been more ready. We’ll go back now and catch up with the others, and you can take bets on how long it is before the novelty of teasing us wears off.” He sighed with something that sounded like contentment, a warm rich breath along my neck.

“And the sea?” I didn’t want to disturb this moment, but I had to know.

He shrugged, but he didn’t tense up. “How I feel isn’t going to change overnight, I guess. The obsession; the pain.

They're still in me. Maybe this won't be the last time I have to come here to brood."

"But we'll sort it out," I said.

He nodded and laughed softly, as if surprised. "Yes, I think we will. One persistent bastard and one...."

"Selfish one," I teased.

He grinned. "You know how that is. And, selfishly, you know what I want now?" When I shook my head, he leaned in again and whispered into my ear. "Stay with me tonight."

WE didn't speak again until we were back down on the beach, rescuing our shoes which Grady had thoughtfully hidden back up against the wall, out of the sea's clutches. As I stretched back up, Adam caught at me, arms around my waist, lips against mine for a swift, hungry kiss. It was a lighter, happier touch. There was still passion there, but a familiarity, too. "This extra vacation time we've got...."

"What?"

"Spend it together?"

"Sure," I grinned. "Try and stop me."

He grinned back. "Then I'll fix it somehow with Headquarters; make sure we're based in the same place for the next assignment."

"At least in the same state." His excitement was

infectious. Had he known how much I was dreading being apart again? “We’ll see how it goes.”

“No,” he said, firmly. “It will happen.” He gripped me more tightly. “So tell me now.”

“What?”

“How did you do it? Find me up there?”

“Does it matter?” I murmured, just wanting to relax into the fresh taste of his lips, dry from the wind, moist from the spray and the onset of a damp evening. I was still savoring the thought of staying with him that night. And many others in the future.

“It does to me,” he said, simply.

I nodded, though I paused before I replied. Perhaps I’d never been able to put it into words before. “The guys? They think you watch me all the time—to catch me out, to punish me, to scorn me, or so they assume. They’re concerned about your reaction to me; your apparently unfair treatment of me; my poor victim status. You’re ‘always on my back’; always dismissive of me.” His eyes widened with protest and regret; a frown appeared between his brows. I ignored it and continued. “What they should be noticing is that I study *you* just as much.”

“Sounds like some kind of stalker.” The dark eyes narrowed with bemusement. “Is that true?”

“Oh yeah,” I grinned. “That’s *very* true. Not the stalking thing: nothing sinister, you know? But the watching. I’ve been doing that for a very long time—since I first knew you.

Just to see how you are; just to care for you as a friend.”  
*Waiting for a moment when it might be more.*

“So you think you know me....” He didn’t look intimidated in the slightest. In fact, a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. I wanted to kiss it into place.

“I know enough, Adam Nolan. I know the way you drink your juice; the way you slice an apple with a knife. Your favorite shirt; your daily exercise routine. Which color pen you use for diagnostic diagrams; which music you listen to when you can eject Grady from his monopoly of the equipment. How you cook rice; how you make your tea. Lots of stuff. Domestic, trivial stuff maybe. I like watching you, learning about you.”

“You’ve been close to me all along,” he breathed. It wasn’t a question.

I stroked gently at his neck, admiring the way he arched up against me, his breath quickening. “I know which towel you prefer after a shower—and I know the shape and size of your wet footprint on the floor of the bathroom.” I looked at the trail of shallow prints behind us on the sand, recording our path back from the cave to the beach. They were shades of grey in the dusky light, but earlier in the day, any footprints had been clear impressions in the sand. And out toward the rocks, there were few trails to distinguish between.

“Crap.” His eyes sparkled with amusement now. I loved to see that happiness in him. “It’s a good story, though. You’re quite the detective, Evan Riley.”

“That I am,” I murmured. “I found you, didn’t I?”

He stared back, suddenly still. The amusement stalled. “When I didn’t think I wanted to be found. Yes, you did.”

I shrugged. I took hold of his face and brought his lips back to mine. “And I always will find you. That’s the one truth you can be sure of.”

I watched as the panic and nervousness faded from his eyes. I held him as his body relaxed back against me; as his strength and confidence returned. His lips were already seeking me out again, lips that curved in a broad, vulnerable, *joyful* smile. A heartbreaking smile—a smile of homecoming.

That was all I’d ever wanted.

CLARE LONDON took the pen name London from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant.

She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic, and sexy characters.

Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter three stage and plenty of other projects in mind... she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home.

Visit Clare's Web site at <http://www.clarelondon.co.uk> and her blog at <http://clarelondon.livejournal.com/>



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