



# **BLUE FIRE**

**Z. A. Maxfield**

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## **Z. A. Maxfield**

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
870 Market St, Suite 1201  
San Francisco CA 94102-2907  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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ISBN 978-1-59632-980-5  
Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Barbara Marshall  
Cover Artist: Anne Cain

## Dedication

*This one is for Patric Michael, who held my hand (online) the whole time I was writing it and sent me a virtual hug that made all the difference on a day I when I truly thought nothing could.*

## Chapter One

Adam's heart sank. *He had no water to fight the fire.* The arm beneath his fingers trembled. He gave it a gentle tug to pull its owner away from the building, and they watched helplessly as it was consumed by fire. He was already sick inside, afraid the loud *crack* he'd just heard indicated that the structure, fully involved now, was due for a roof collapse. Sparks shot up into the night sky, and what he feared became a reality. A tremendous roar echoed off the canyon walls as what was once a tremendously beautiful home collapsed in on itself.

The man beside him stared, uncomprehending. "That's my home."

"I'm sorry." Adam wanted to cover the man's eyes, to turn him away to keep him from watching. He wanted someone else, preferably from the police or the Red Cross to come and help him.

The man shook his head.

"What's your name?" Adam asked. "I put in a call for help."

"Jared Kenny." The man turned a bewildered face to him, and Adam wondered again how he'd gotten into this mess. They both had to shout over the roar of the wind and the crackling of the fire. "How did you find me? I would be inside the house if you hadn't come." At this, Jared's knees buckled, and Adam helped him to sit on the curb.

Adam kneeled in the street in front of him. "Your neighbor told me she knew you were inside when she saw your car through the windows in your garage door. She checked because she saw you take in your trash barrels earlier today, but she didn't see you leave." Adam wondered if anything he was saying made sense to the dazed man. "When you didn't answer the door, I came looking for you."

"I just got back from a trip to Singapore..."

When Adam had found a window he could crawl through on the ground floor, he'd already noticed flames leaping from one side of the street to the other, igniting the palm trees next to the back of the three-story home like roman candles. The way the wind was whipping up the flames, the structure was at risk, right in the fire's path. He'd located the man sleeping in his bed, a bottle of Ambien next to a glass of water explaining why he hadn't been easy to rouse. The man had been fairly docile, agreeing to come if he could take the time to bring a painting from over the fireplace mantel. Adam had grabbed the portrait and helped him to the door.

Now the two of them watched as what was left of his house turned to smoke and ash.

"You should have left me." The man swallowed hard and put his head down on his arms, which were folded over his knees.

"No way," Adam told him. He put the portrait against the man's knees and watched as his hands wrapped around the frame. "There's a patrol car here, and they'll take you to the shelter. If you'd like, you can—"

"That house is everything. The whole world. That's all that's left."

"Look, you're alive. I have to take that as a win, Jared." Although Adam had seen the home and the man had a point. It had been beautiful. Even as he'd torn through it looking to remove its sleeping occupant, he'd seen that it was no ordinary house. "I saw it was special. All custom, huh?"

"You have no idea," Jared told him. "The man who designed it was an internationally acclaimed architect. It's been in magazines. It's—"

"This the guy?"

"Yeah." Jared turned the picture and a handsome face stared back. Silver hair, patrician nose. Captain of industry pose on a royal blue background. Nice painting. "It was the last structure he designed before he died. To keep himself busy while the cancer..."

Adam took off the heavy gauntlets that he was wearing and picked up the painting again. They both looked at it for a while. "It was a nice house, Jared, but I'm sure this man would have been glad to know you got out safely." He could see Jared bore no obvious resemblance to the man but thought, given that he'd hung the picture in a prominent place, they might have been father and son.

Jared gave a harsh chuckle. "No, I'm pretty sure he'd be livid with me for not standing my ground and spitting on the fire if that's all anyone had left to fight it with."

*Sounded like a dad thing.* Adam looked down. "Yeah. Dads can be —"

"He wasn't my father. He was my *husband*." Jared stared at him, defiant maybe. Waiting for him to say something or get up and leave. And then he laughed. "That's rich. He was so careful, and he ended up flaming —"

"*Don't*." Adam stopped him, instinctively reaching for Jared's shoulders to pull him into an embrace. "I'm so sorry for your loss." For just a second, Adam felt Jared melt into his arms.

"Stop." Jared stiffened and pushed back at him. "Don't be kind; I can't bear it."

Adam didn't let go. "I'm not being kind. I'm sorry for your loss," he repeated. "All your losses."

Jared looked away. Adam tried to put his thoughts into words. Jared had said *husband* in such a way that it gripped Adam's heart with emotions he rarely allowed himself to feel on the job. The pain in Jared's eyes caught at him, and he couldn't help longing to lessen his grief. He squeezed Jared's upper arms where he held them, and pushed him back, leaning in so he could speak softly and still be heard.

"I am so sorry we couldn't save your house." Adam let him see the truth behind those words. Next to Jared, Adam felt younger than he really was, dumb and unsophisticated. He'd seen the way the man lived and knew that Jared was light-years beyond him in class and money. But Adam understood loss. He understood how much it hurt to lose someone you cared about and how sometimes that loss happened over and over again as each new and deeper understanding of the inevitability and finality of death brought one more piece of bad fucking news.

Adam watched shock play on Jared's face and simply took him in his arms again and sheltered him from the sight of his home. He stood and helped Jared to his feet, then walked him and his portrait to a waiting patrol car. Leaning into the car, Adam gave Jared his strength and his youth and his empathy until Jared was buckled in and ready to ride to the shelter.

Jared reached out and clasped his hand, and Adam almost lost control of his own emotions.

"Thank you," Jared told him as Adam shut the door between them. Adam saw him mouth the words, *Be careful*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam parked his Tahoe and carried an armful of plastic-wrapped flowers into the pricey rehab facility through oversize carved wooden double doors. He wondered if the fact that it looked like one of those arts and crafts art deco lodges from the twenties fooled anyone. Even if it looked a lot like the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite scaled down to a manageable size, perfect for maybe a few handfuls of the well-heeled to get a grip on their more pressing problems, it didn't make him like it any better. On the other hand, he supposed that the opulence was soothing for people who didn't want to see themselves as run-of-the-mill drunks and junkies.

The receptionist smiled and sized him up when he signed the guest register. He gave her a hint of a smile back, not enough for her to think he was interested in more



than the visitor's sticker she gave him, but enough to be polite. He stuck the badge on his warm-up jacket. At this time of day, Jared was sure to be in the room they called the solarium, where he could put together one of the endless picture puzzles he enjoyed unless he was outside, smoking in the courtyard. Jared had been in this place for almost three months, and he had never deviated from his schedule. Adam found him, as expected, alone at a large round table, running his hands over an almost completed picture of Monet's *Water Lilies*.

"Hi, Jared." Adam sat down across from him. He noticed the puzzle was incomplete, but there were no pieces left in the box. "Almost finished with this one?"

Jared didn't look up. "I am finished. I don't like the other pieces."

Adam tried to hide a smile. "Isn't the point of a jigsaw puzzle to solve it and complete the picture?"

Jared steepled his fingers, and Adam prepared himself for a lecture. "Adam, puzzles are a leisure activity. You undertake them because they please you. It pleases me to throw out the pieces that I don't like." Jared could be so fucking condescending when he wanted to, but for some reason, Adam enjoyed it.

"I see."

"Well, no, I don't suppose you do, Adam. There are things that people expect of us, like completing a picture puzzle. As if that is, in and of itself, enough of a goal that one should simply adhere to the admonition to do it. Keith always told me to begin any project by rejecting that which displeases me. He said that would be the only way to guarantee an end result I would like."

"Do you like this?"

Jared swept the puzzle to the floor. "You're not my therapist."

"I'm sorry." Adam sat quietly with his flowers still in his lap. Jared held his hands out for them.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. That was uncalled for. What did you bring me?"

Adam handed over the bouquet.

"Holy cow, all blue." He had tears in his eyes, and Adam once again thought how difficult it was to know what was going to set Jared off.

"I noticed you throw out the puzzle pieces that aren't blue."

Jared smiled. "Very observant. Technically, I throw out everything that isn't mixed with blue. Colors that are warm. Reds, yellows, oranges. I like the greens and violets just fine. I keep them as long as they're not..."

Adam remained silent.

"That's not a crazy thing, you know, just a preference."

"Is it?" Silence stretched between them.

"Come with me. I want to show you something." Jared rose, and Adam could see his jeans hung loose on his hips as he got up to follow him.

"Aren't you eating? My mom would have a cow if she saw you. And then she would try to feed you one."

"I eat all the time," Jared told him, taking him by the arm and heading for the courtyard. Once they got there, he came to a halt next to a shallow pool of tranquil blue water. "Do you know what this is?"

"Is that a trick question?" Adam looked down at the surface so clear and pure a blue it exactly mirrored the sky and the buildings around it.

"This is a reflecting pool. It's designed to inspire, as the name implies, reflection. You build them with the edges slightly deeper than the middle, to suppress wave formation. Here, it's used to reflect the pillars on the sides of the courtyard and the tower at the center of the building. I want you to come here."

Jared tugged Adam along to the farthest end of the pool.

Looking down the long length of it, Adam could clearly see the pillars on the sides of the pool stair-stepped like ribs beneath the benign face of the clock in the tower. He

didn't know if that was what Jared wanted him to see or if Jared even knew what he wanted. He didn't know if Jared was completely, entirely sane.

"If you look at it like this, when you look at it," Jared said in his ear, "can you look away?"

"What do you mean?" Adam turned to study Jared's face. It showed signs of anxiety and was shadowed by sleepless nights. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why he cared, but he did.

"That answers my question, I guess," Jared said, still looking at the pool. "Because I can't look at anything else when I'm here. It's like my life depends on what I see there. All the things that should be concrete shimmer and change on the surface, right before my eyes until nothing feels real. I can't decide what I'm supposed to do about it. I can't think."

"Jared, are you getting any sleep?" Adam asked. "Because it looks to me like you aren't. It looks to me like this place isn't helping you get a grip on the stuff you need to figure out."

"I like it here; it's cool and tranquil."

"I've been visiting you here twice a week for three months, and it seems to me that it's anything but."

"You only see what you want to see; how can you learn anything?"

"Look, do you have to be here? Do you have to stay in this place?"

That got Jared's attention off the water momentarily, and he looked at Adam's face for the first time since he'd arrived.

"Do you mean am I an *inmate*? No, I can leave whenever I want. I just —"

"What if I told you I have the perfect place for you to spend time, maybe just the next couple of weeks?"

"Me? Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. But my family has a cabin in the mountains just above Colorado Springs and I—"

"Do you think because you saved my life you're responsible? You know that's nonsense, right?"

"I know. It's not that. I don't know what it is." Adam slumped a little. "Tons of guys fought that fire. But I was the one on your street at the exact time when your neighbor decided to call for help, and then when your house came down, when we couldn't save it, I felt...welded to you in a way by the experience."

"My home was the one that got away?"

"Yes... No. A lot of them got away that night, Jared. That was a shitty fire, and the Santiago Booster Pump Station burned and interrupted the water flow to Hidden Hills. Your home burned because we didn't have water. I'm not going to forget that anytime soon."

Jared frowned. "None of that was your fault."

"I know."

"Then why am I your special project?"

Adam shot him a look. "How do you define *special*?"

"Why are you here?"

"Why can't you look away from the reflecting pool?"

Jared let out a sigh. "Fair enough."

"Pack your bags, Jared." Adam walked back the way they came. "I'm taking you away from all this."

"All this," Jared pointed out, "comes with maid service and a three-star chef if you're only clinically depressed and not... You know, on a twelve-step program."

"I'm a firefighter; I can cook," Adam called out over his shoulder. "And I'm sure you're a tidy guy. I'll be waiting in the lobby."

“There's an *inmate* here who is a pianist for a major metropolitan city symphony orchestra who entertains us nightly.”

“I have a CD player. Chop-chop. You won't find the answers here.”

Jared remained unmoved. “How do you know that?”

Adam turned. He stood at one end of the reflecting pool staring at Jared, who regarded him from the other side.

“Because you've been here for months, and you still don't know the questions.”

## Chapter Two

When they'd headed toward LAX, Adam worried that he was biting off far more than he could chew. He was armed with the number of Jared's doctor and his medications, including a mild antidepressant. He had a number he could call in Colorado Springs in case he needed help. But even Jared's doctor concurred that his depression might be helped by a change of scenery. They were seated in the small commuter plane with mostly business fliers, men and women in suits who carried briefcases and black rolling pilot bags going home at the end of the busy week. Adam had checked their bags, relying on his own lightweight laptop to keep himself busy while Jared flipped idly through a series of architectural and decorator magazines. After a while, Jared started murmuring, "No, no, no, no."

"What?" Adam looked over, only to see him paging through *Elle Décor*, tearing out glossy page after page of photographic layouts.

Jared leaned his head back and put one hand over his face. "I can't. I don't want to go." Jared's breathing became agitated, and the flight attendant looked over. "I need a drink."

"I don't think that's a good idea with the—"

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Jared grabbed up a handful of torn pages, crushed them, and stuffed them into the seat pocket in front of him.

Adam pressed his lips together and gazed beyond the seat in front of him to where the flight attendants were beginning to whisper. "Wherever they land this plane, I'm good, even if they have to take you off in cuffs, Jared. I'm trying to help, but you gotta meet me *somewhere*."

Jared closed his mouth around a curse. "I'm sorry."

"I was going to say maybe a glass of white wine."

"You're right of course." Jared looked out the window. "I don't like to fly when it's dark."

"Close your eyes," Adam told him, surreptitiously raising the armrest between them. He took Jared's hand in his. "Maybe you can picture the reflecting pool, you think?"

"You're being kind again."

"Shit happens."

"I can't understand why you're going to all this trouble." Jared gazed at Adam. "Is this just because my house burned down?"

"Right now? It's because I have two weeks off, and I need to feel the mountains under my feet. Can't you just leave the questions behind? For once just—"

"I'm picturing the pool," Jared told him. He was trying. Adam knew he was trying.

Jared's breathing seemed to slow as Adam watched him closely. He had his eyes closed and his free hand had ceased to fidget in his lap. He wore a simple gray pullover sweater and a pair of jeans. Both showed how much weight he'd lost despite the elegant cuisine at the rehab center. His cheekbones stood out in high relief under the rimless glasses he wore for reading. In the light of the airplane, his almost-translucent skin showed freckles that weren't ordinarily obvious. Adam was taken with his brown eyes,

mostly, and the way he blinked at times, as though he were trying to see something more clearly. Adam wanted to understand just what Jared could see and to soothe away the frustration and anxiety it brought him.

“Can you see the columns?” Adam asked quietly. “And the clock face?”

“You noticed that?” Jared's eyes popped open in surprise.

“Sure.” Adam gave his hand a warm squeeze. “I thought it looked like a person. The columns looked —”

“The clock rippled, and it reminded me of Dali.”

“Yeah,” Adam said. “I guess.”

Jared peered at him closely. “Do you know what I mean by that?”

Adam shook his head. “Not really.”

“You don't have to pretend to be interested.”

“I'm not.” Adam eyed the flight attendant as she came down the aisle with the cart. “Pretending, I mean. If you want to explain what that means, it won't piss me off or anything. There's lots of stuff I don't know.” Adam prepared to dazzle the flight attendant because she was looking at Jared like an unexploded bomb and he was holding the man's hand. In all his life, he'd never done anything like that in public.

Not with anyone.

“Can I get you something?”

Adam smiled and asked for a Michelob. Jared asked for white wine with a distinctish new lace of frost in his voice. She was polite and professional, and after Jared paid her, she moved on.

“Keith used to carry a flask.” Jared spoke in low tones as he poured the contents of his little bottle into his cup. “The TSA folks would never let him get away with that now.”

“No, probably not.”



“But you remind me of him. He could sure turn it on with the flight attendants. Every one of them thought they'd get laid by a famous architect, and then he'd have me blow him as soon as we got into the rental car.”

Adam said nothing.

“Why are you holding my hand?”

“I thought you might... I wanted to anchor you.”

Jared shook his head and sipped his wine. “You realize you're holding hands with a gay man on a commercial airplane, don't you?”

“Yes.” Adam swallowed hard. “Do you realize you are too?”

Jared's hand suddenly went clammy. It hadn't really occurred to him that Adam might be gay. The interest Adam had taken in him, the compassion he'd exhibited, the visits, the flowers... All those things Jared had put down to unfinished business and work-related guilt. He'd imagined that Adam had the world's most rigid work ethic and simply wasn't finished with him until he was settled in a new home. Now he didn't know what to think.

Surreptitiously, he studied Adam's profile. Adam's thick blond hair, cut short, stuck out at odd angles this morning. He'd obviously just gotten up and thrown his clothes on. Maybe he'd worked late the night before. Bed head looked good on him. He had high cheekbones and a straight nose, slightly larger than it should have been to Jared's eye, slightly disproportionate. It had sharp tip, which gave Adam an air of discernment, as if he were the type to look down it, although Jared knew that to be far from the truth. His brows were darker than his hair and feathered slightly upward, which added to the effect.

What was most arresting about Adam's face was the blue of his eyes, a color so extraordinary and changeable that Jared watched them constantly. They did nothing so cliché as to change with his moods; they were simply such a clean and glacial blue that

they tended to reflect any color around them and in different light looked like different eyes entirely.

Jared's current obsession with blue had its inception in his first glimpse of those eyes. It had to do with past pain and old regrets. With the raunchy marks on Keith's body when he cheated and lied about it, the noise and the heat of the crowds teeming in the streets of the Asian cities where they'd gone to do business for Kincaid International, the heat of the blaze that destroyed his home, and the association of all his losses with the colors of passion and fire and blood.

When he'd first seen Adam's eyes, when he'd first looked up from that sound, sound sleep and seen the young firefighter standing over him, exhorting him to move, to get up, to leave his home before it burned, he'd only seen the eyes and followed a cool blue tranquil color that made him feel safe. He had followed that color all the way to the plane on which they currently flew to a respite in another state and an uncertain future, even though he wasn't entirely certain why.

Adam's body was fit and strong, built lean from exhaustive physical training and hard work. His hand looked young in Jared's own—soft and unlined—with strong, square fingertips and short, clean nails.

Jared didn't know the man who allowed him to clutch at him like a lifeline, but he'd followed him, if only to see himself reflected in the cool blue of his eyes. In that moment, at least, it was enough.

## Chapter Three

Once they reached Adam's family's vacation home, Jared sensed an immediate lessening of the tension in Adam's body. Which seemed odd. Why had Adam moved so far away from someplace that so clearly made him feel good? The first thing Jared noticed was that the cabin itself was on a long rural road set well away from any other homes and nestled in what looked like an entire grove of aspen trees. The ground floor of the cabin was level with the street in front, but behind it, they'd built a deck on a hill that sloped away from it. On the other side of the wide wooden railings, a forest of trees and boulders could be seen, but no other houses. It would have been infinitely enticing for Adam to play here when he was a boy, and the cabin itself was wonderful.

Besides having the usual woodsy feel of a mountain retreat, this one had the benefit of old-fashioned craftsmanship in both the way the log cabin was built and in the things the family kept inside it. There were a number of homemade quilts around on the backs of chairs and couches, obviously intended to provide warmth even though they were works of art. Antique furniture was well positioned in the uncluttered space.

The windows had stained glass pieces in them, hanging from chains and mounted in beautiful wood frames that matched the walls. Over and around several of the doors there were transom or light windows containing exquisite glass mosaics in all different

shades of blue. In fact, Jared was surprised and delighted by the home's decor, which was mostly blue accented with shades of brown and green. It was subtle and aesthetic, yet richly organic and mimicked what he thought the outside of the home must look like in the spring, when the blanket of white that currently covered the yard leading to the woods was absent.

Keith would have hated it on sight, would have called it a load of sentimental claptrap and crafts that people used to make because they had nothing better to do. Its closed-in, cozy warmth would have seemed chokingly restrictive to him, and the country pieces, the pie safe, and the beautiful carved wood table would have been dismissed out of hand as so much trash, even though they were clearly valuable antiques. Jared could hear Keith's voice inside his head, *Pie safe, dear heavens, that's what Junior's is for.*

Jared clenched his teeth together to keep himself from saying anything. He didn't want Keith's voice in his head anymore—like an old tape mocking everything that didn't have him at its center—but there seemed to be no way to get him out of there. He made himself sit still at the table, no matter that he was panicking, no matter that he was ice cold and hadn't brought one thing with him that was warm enough to wear in a place like this. He sat without smiling and willed himself to look natural. Whatever the fuck *that* was.

Adam watched Jared out of the corner of his eye as he moved around, familiarizing himself with where his mother had placed all his favorite cooking gear since she'd had the kitchen remodeled. He'd been pleased to find a new set of hard anodized cookware, and even more pleased to discover she'd kept his favorites: the deep-sided cast-iron skillet and the Dutch oven. She'd been true to her word and come up sometime during the previous the week to leave a ton of food in the fridge and the pantry.

Jared's hands were clasped tightly together, and he seemed to be looking at them. Adam could see that he had dark smudges under his eyes from the long night.

"I just want you to have a little breakfast, and then maybe we should both get some sleep. I need to sack out for at least a couple of hours, and then if you want, I'll show you around. Outside, I mean. It's beautiful here."

Jared seemed to hesitate. "I don't think I'm prepared for the kind of weather you have here. I didn't realize it would be so cold."

"We have a ton of shit in every size in the mudroom." Adam stopped what he was doing and looked up. "Are you cold right now?" He uttered a curse, pulling the pan he was using to make eggs off the heat, and walked to where Jared was sitting. Up close, he could see that Jared was pressing his hands together because they were almost blue with cold and shaking.

Adam whipped off his sweater and pulled it over Jared's head. When Jared's face emerged he began to push his arms through the long sleeves, Adam told him, "Say something if you're cold or... Am I supposed to read your mind?" He got a shrug from Jared and went to the front hall turn up the heat. When he returned to the kitchen, Jared was looking into the pan.

"I usually skip breakfast," he murmured. "Or I eat toast. Tea. Maybe some fruit."

Adam smiled at him and started the fire under the eggs up again. "We have that. You can get it, if you like."

"I can?" Jared blinked up at him.

"Sure. Make yourself at home."

"Home," Jared repeated.

"Look." Once again, Adam killed the heat under his eggs. They were probably cooked anyway, but he doubted they'd be worth eating by now. "This isn't going to work if you keep staring at me that way and repeating everything I say. Do you need me to spell everything out? There's this concept, hospitality —"

"Yes."

"Pardon me?"

"Yes," Jared said. "Yes, I probably do need you to spell everything out. I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why you're taking the time or the trouble or the interest in me that you —"

"Whoa. *Stop.*" Adam caught both Jared's hands in his and rubbed them briskly. "I've got the kettle on, and I was going to make coffee, but you need something less caffeinated, I think, and maybe a long rest, okay?" He dropped Jared's hands to reach for a mug and found a tea bag. "Here. Do you like it sweet?"

When Jared said nothing, Adam made tea the way he liked it. He walked Jared to the guest room on the first floor and showed him in.

"I know it's small," he said. "But there are clean linens on the bed."

"Thank you." Jared placed the mug on the nightstand.

"I'm going to have breakfast, then sack out. I'm using the room upstairs farthest down the hall. I'm exhausted, but I'll just need a couple of hours."

"I'll see you then," Jared told him, still eyeing the room warily. Adam had chosen it because it was entirely blue, right down to the leaded blue art glass his sister had made for the window transom over the door to the attached bath, but he worried that being on the first floor and not the second would cause Jared some anxiety. Jared didn't move. Adam wondered if he should hug the man or something. He seemed small and indecisive, even in that tiny space.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask." He closed the door behind him, leaving Jared alone. On his way back to the kitchen, he found himself flexing his shoulders as if he'd been carrying a heavy load.

Not for the first time he questioned his decision to bring Jared to Colorado. He was beginning to think that it had been more his needs than Jared's that had brought them here. He worried that he'd needed his mountains after a year of battling wildfires

and homesickness and that he'd only brought Jared here because he'd been unable to leave that unfinished, unresolved rescue behind him.

Adam ate his breakfast without tasting it, really, which was a damned shame because he was sure it was good, and instead of drinking coffee, he'd had a cup of hot chocolate and gone to bed. He'd been dreaming something pleasant, something deep and good that had to do with aspen trees and leaving footprints in the snow, but looking back and seeing they were sparkling like blue diamonds in the morning light, surrounded by the prints of every imaginable animal, when he woke to the sound of someone screaming.

He'd only ever heard a sound like that once, when he'd seen a man run from a building with his clothes fully engulfed in flames, and his immediate response, then and now, had been a surge of terror that caused his heart to slam into his ribcage and jolted his otherwise stunned body into immediate action. He tore off the blankets covering his body and leaped out.

Somewhere in the distance, Jared was cursing violently, "Fucking... Damn... Fucking... Damn it... How the *fuck*...?"

Adam was prepared to run. Footsteps thundered up the stairs, and then Jared tore open his door and jumped on Adam's bed. In seconds, the man was standing on tiptoe with his back to the headboard wall, staring down at Adam with eyes so wide Adam had no trouble seeing the way the whites surrounded the brown irises.

"What?" Adam demanded. "What the —"

"There were mice," Jared told him, running a shaking hand through his hair. "Plural, *more than one mouse*, running across the guestroom floor like it was the fucking Serengeti and I—"

"Come down here, Jared." Adam stood next to the bed, aware that he had nothing on but his shorts. Adrenaline was coursing through his body, making his hands shake.

"I only opened the closet to hang up the suit I brought," Jared said, panting. "But suddenly they were everywhere. Running. Their feet were so loud I could hear them batting against the floor."

"You heard mouse feet?" Adam tried to calm his racing heart.

"Yes! I heard mouse feet." He covered his ears with his hands. "I can still hear them."

"No, you can't, Jared, that's my heart." Adam sighed and rotated his shoulders to loosen the tension he was feeling. "That happens when someone is sleeping and you scare the *crap* out of them. Come down here."

"I can't do that, Adam."

"There are no mice up here."

"How do you know that?"

"It's a physical impossibility. They can't climb stairs." Adam hoped Jared would ignore him, because that was a bald-faced lie.

"You are so full of shit." Jared's mouth curled into a snarl, and it was so incongruous, so irredeemably out of character that Adam laughed. "What's so funny?"

"You snarl badly." Adam held his hand out, but Jared stayed where he was. Jared wore only jeans, and now that he could see it, his body was as thin as Adam had feared it would be. He could see the hollows inside Jared's hipbones where they barely caught hold of his jeans enough to hold them up, and it made him look younger than he was.

Actually, Adam thought, swallowing hard, it made him look fucking hot. Jared's skin was creamy and pale, and either he waxed or shaved; he was almost hairless everywhere else except his pubes, clearly visible above the top button of his well-worn jeans. When Adam's eyes traveled back to Jared's face, he caught a hint of embarrassment, maybe even a blush high on his cheeks. Without his reading glasses— with his hair mussed—he looked less like a businessman in his late thirties and more like an underwear model.



Adam leaned over and gripped Jared's hand, pulling him to the edge of the bed. But instead of pulling him down off it, he pressed his lips to the skin just above the hair on Jared's lower abdomen. He dropped Jared's hand, wrapped his arms around that slim frame, and glided his fingers over Jared's hips and thighs and around to the back, where he could cup Jared's perfect ass in his hands. He opened his mouth and started to lick the skin he could reach, while breathing in the scent of man and fear and sex.

"Oh. Hey...wow," Jared stammered. "No."

Adam backed away, lifting his hands. "Sorry." He caught his breath and looked up into Jared's eyes. There was something unreadable in there, always had been, and he'd been drawn to it from the very beginning.

"Why?"

Adam looked him right in the eye and told him. "I want you. I guess I always did."

Jared gave a little headshake, as though he didn't believe what he was hearing. He put out a tentative hand and barely grazed the side of Adam's face. "You are a beautiful, beautiful boy, Adam."

Adam leaned into the touch, savoring its sweetness. "I was thinking the same thing about you. Kiss me."

"You don't have to keep me; I'm not a stray cat."

"I know that." Adam pulled Jared off the bed and into his arms, forcing the smaller man to wrap his legs around him or fall. "If you were, it would solve our mouse problem."

"*Shit.*" Jared laughed against the skin of Adam's neck.

"Come here." Adam pulled Jared in for a kiss. He pressed his mouth against Jared's without pressure at first, trying out the fit, exchanging murmurs for puffs of air, and finally touching a tentative tongue to Jared's full lower lip and asking for entry. He gained access and found that when the man surrendered for a kiss, he surrendered his

entire body in a way that few men ever had in Adam's experience. It made Adam's heart beat faster. He liked a contest in bed, sometimes, sure. But Jared touched something primitive and protective inside him and he wanted to explore it. He broke off the kiss, and Jared's head dropped back, exposing the delicate skin on his throat where his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. Adam caught the back of Jared's head and threaded fingers through his wavy hair.

"Geez." Jared sighed. "You probably ought to know it's been a while."

Adam carried Jared to the bed and knelt with Jared's legs still wrapped around him. He knee-walked and nudged Jared's unresisting body toward the pillow, moving him with strong thighs and grinding against him.

"You're supposed to say, 'For me too,'" Jared informed him.

"Am I?" Adam stopped what he was doing.

"Yes," Jared whispered. "Lie to me." Jared's gaze didn't leave his eyes.

"I can't." Adam frowned.

Jared cupped and held Adam's face between his hands in a way that made Adam feel as uncomfortable as it made him feel precious. "How old are you?"

Adam lowered his gaze. "Twenty-four."

"*Twenty-four.*" Jared studied him. "I'm thirty-seven, Adam. I don't want your honesty."

Adam pressed his lips together to keep from saying anything.

"I want your strong, young body and your lies," Jared continued. "Does that insult you?"

"Does it matter?"

"No."

Adam pushed Jared back onto the pillow and began to undo the button on his jeans. "Shut up, Jared."

"Ad—"

Adam put his hand on Jared's mouth. "I said, *shut up.*"

Jared's eyes widened, and Adam almost, *almost* took his hand away, worried that he'd frightened the smaller man until he felt Jared's erection tent his jeans. Adam processed this information. He tested it by pressing slightly harder, leaning a little, letting his large frame and his muscles do his talking for him, until Jared melted against him like wax and gave up a sigh that Adam could almost feel, like vapor. A breath that wrapped around him and licked at his skin.

"Strip," he told Jared as he lifted himself off him. He slid from the bed then walked to the window, where he drew the blinds against the vast snowy landscape. When he closed the bedroom door, the only light in the room came from the transom above the door to the hall, another of his sister's blue glass creations. The effect cast eerie shadows from the rustic furniture onto the walls and wood floors and bathed the entire room in dim blue light.

Adam turned to see Jared's mouth open on a tiny O of surprise as he pushed out of his jeans, breathing in an erratic way Adam hoped was from arousal and not fear. Or arousal *and* fear. Because that worked just fine as far as Adam was concerned. The adrenaline rush was wearing off, and he felt another kind of urgency altogether. He returned to the bed where Jared sat naked, his back to the headboard and tried not to overthink things as he tossed his shorts onto the floor with Jared's jeans.

For once, Jared was utterly silent. His tongue swept out to moisten his lips, and before Adam thought about what he was doing, he straddled the man, cupped Jared's head in his hands, and then pressed his throbbing cock into his mouth. Jared's hands came up behind Adam's hips and he pulled him in, farther and deeper, humming until Adam's toes curled against the mattress and he had to hold himself back to keep from pushing Jared's head through the headboard.

"*Jared,*" Adam said on a sigh as Jared's tongue swiped along the length of his erection. It teased and tickled the delicate skin there, slick and subtle, the suction on his dick strong and sure. Jared swallowed around Adam's cock, then flicked at the sensitive

head with the tip of his tongue when he pulled back, until Adam was fucking his mouth and it was everything he'd hoped for and nothing he'd imagined.

Pure need and hot, wet pleasure engulfed Adam as the muscles of his ass bunched, which sent his cock deeper and deeper into that sweet heat. Jared groaned and caressed Adam with his mouth, all the while running soft hands over his skin, yielding to him, and urging him on. A gentle finger slipped into Adam's ass crack and teased at his hole.

"Oh fuck, Jared," Adam whispered, and when he would have pulled his cock from Jared's mouth and spared him that first fuck swallow, Jared held him fast and took him as far down his throat as he'd been in any man's, ever. With a hard jerk of his hips, Adam blew like a geyser, and Jared swallowed every bit. Jared soothed Adam's hot flesh with his tongue and let him go with a *pop*, only to reach up and pull Adam's face down to snowball him, passing Adam's own cum into his mouth while kissing him like the act was sacred.

Adam slid down and, lying next to Jared, kissed him back, having come but feeling nowhere near satisfied yet. They rubbed and bumped and ground against each other until Adam's need was urgent again. He reached into the nightstand drawer and found a tube of lube and a foil-wrapped condom. When Adam would have fumbled with the condom, Jared pushed his hands away, pulled it from the packet with graceful hands, and placed it on Adam's dick, rolling and smoothing it in place.

"Is this what you want?" Adam asked, watching him.

Jared's brown eyes met his. "Do you want me?"

"Yes," Adam hissed. "*Fuck yes*. What do you want?"

Jared clutched Adam's hips in both hands and whispered, "I want to feel you in me. All around me. So far inside you can't find your way out." He drew up his knees and locked his heels behind Adam's thighs.

"*Jared*." Adam carefully lined up and nudged against Jared's tightly puckered hole. He pressed forward, and even as Jared's body gave way beneath him, Adam

leaned in and kissed him tenderly on the lips. He went slowly, and they remained locked together, rocking against one another quietly as the passion gathered between them.

Adam exhaled a pent-up breath next to Jared's ear and whispered, "All right?"

Jared's hands slid up his back and clung to his shoulders. "Yes. I knew..."

Adam rose to his knees and sank into all that heat, which drove the breath from Jared's body. He began a rhythm they both slipped into like a dance, and with every push and pull, Jared uttered tiny cries that Adam wanted to swallow inside himself and hold onto forever.

Adam's hips snapped harder, each powerful wave causing Jared to moan and shake beneath him. Holding Jared's hips in his hands, Adam worked his way up the bed to get traction. He poured his effort into gliding in and out of Jared's body and grinding Jared's cock between their bellies. Adam held Jared fast while Jared's body squeezed and rippled around his cock. He felt a warm splash of cum hit his skin, and he was unaware that he was chanting Jared's name with each surge of his body until the last explosive moment when he shouted "*Jared*," a final time and soared into his own release.

Jared remained silent, clinging to him even as Adam reached between them to pull out. He rid himself of the condom, tossing it over the side of the bed, and pulled Jared in for a deep kiss. They broke apart a while later. Even in the wash of faint blue light, Jared glistened with sweat and goose bumps rose on his skin.

"Back in a sec," Adam told him, getting up. He padded to the bathroom and got a damp towel and a dry one to clean Jared up. When he returned to the bed, Jared's teeth were chattering, and Adam knew that it wasn't from cold. Adam cleaned Jared's cum from his skin and dried it before wrapping the man in a cocoon of crisp linen and a down blanket as carefully as if he were a child.

"Adam?"

"Hm?"

“You're being kind again.”

Adam brushed his lips across Jared's forehead and gave a little laugh. “Sorry, my bad.”

## Chapter Four

Jared lay rigid beneath the weight of the arm Adam had slung over him as he'd drifted off. He could get so used to Adam's care. He could lean into it and soak it up like sunshine. He could allow it to cover him, then smother him, and then he could watch himself drift back into a life in which he made not one single choice for himself.

Not that Adam would consciously control him or that his choices would be like Keith's, which had solely been based on Keith as the center of the universe and everyone else adjunct to that. No. Far worse, Adam would base all his choices on Jared's needs, on trial and error, wondering and worrying about what was best for *him*, and Jared would drift along in the glow of that without ever thinking for himself.

Jared pressed his face into Adam's skin. Even when he was damp and musky after making love for half the night, Jared loved his scent. He inhaled it and stored it, making a memory that he'd take out like a treasure later when he was alone. He knew Adam was all he'd ever wanted, but Jared couldn't allow himself to keep him. Gently, he crept out from beneath Adam's arm and unwound himself from the covers – and the man – that kept him warm, leaving Adam there to sleep alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Adam woke up, Jared was gone. He slipped on a pair of jeans and a sweater and followed his ears to some noises from the mudroom. What he found there made him smile.

"Going somewhere?" he asked Jared, who currently wore snow boots and a number of articles of winter apparel that made him look like he was planning an arctic ice-breaking mission on foot. He noticed that Jared fit neatly into his sister's things, and as a consequence, he wore nothing but the royal blue she favored. At least it would make him easy to spot in the snow.

"You told me I could see if things fit," Jared said from under a hat with earflaps.

"Certainly. I'm glad you found something." He walked to where Jared stood uncertainly and took the fur-lined hat off his head. "I don't think you'll need a lot of this, though. It isn't that cold."

Jared looked at the toes of his boots. "What will you wear?"

"I'll probably put on my snow boots. Did you find socks?" Jared nodded as Adam rummaged around in a basket. He picked out a pair of socks and hopped into them, then stepped into his black boots. He pulled an old olive-colored parka on, even though he knew his black and red one hung on a hook on the opposite wall, and dragged a knit watch cap over his short hair. He picked up another knit hat and set it on Jared's head. "There. I think that's going to be all you'll need for now."

"All right." Jared stepped out of the way, and Adam strode to the door.

"Ready to see what I've been missing so badly?"

"Yes," Jared looked...resigned.

"Come with me." Adam took Jared's hand and led him out into the late Colorado afternoon.

Powdery snow covered the ground and crunched beneath their feet like broken glass. Adam led Jared away from the cabin, into a dense stand of aspen trees now bare of leaves and silhouetted black against an indigo sky. Winter leached color and life from



everything, although sound would carry miles farther than on a summer day. The air was taut, and any sound rose like a tap on a perfect piece of crystal or a tuning fork. The very crispness of the air made everything so beautiful and pure that it made Adam's heart hurt, and he'd formed the idea, back in L.A. as he'd watched Jared tear open boxes of puzzles only to throw out the noisy red and orange pieces, that he could share this with him. Maybe he could even give this very moment to Jared like a gift.

Once the idea took hold, he'd decided to see it through. Jared might understand what Adam was unable to say with words. Perhaps he could wrap this around Jared as he'd wrapped the down blanket around him, and he'd see through an inarticulate boy's actions to his heart.

Now, having reached his destination, his heart pounded with the fear that Jared would find his gift shabby. The artistic equivalent of cowboy boots and spool tables and the country music that he knew Jared deplored. That he'd be unable or unwilling to understand.

Adam clasped his hands together, sorry he'd forgotten to wear gloves, and forced himself to stay silent. When he chanced a glance at Jared, the man had his gloved hands pressed over his mouth. Adam thought—from the way he looked if nothing else—Jared was pleased with the beauty that surrounded him, and he felt absurdly proud.

Jared shook his head and Adam's heart sank.

"I still don't understand... Why would you do this for me?"

Adam pulled Jared's back to his chest and reached around to sink his hands into Jared's jacket pockets. "Because I *can*," Adam told him, willing Jared to shut up so he could get it all out. "Because it's the purest blue I've ever seen and I wanted you to have it. Because I want you to look at me, just once, the way you looked at your portrait of Keith."

Jared choked back a laugh. "You think...?"

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm sorry." Adam started to pull his hands out of Jared's pockets, but Jared stopped him. "I know Keith was—"

"Keith would *never* have let me have this. He fed me color and noise and travel and life until I was sick with it. He insisted every minute of every day be spent in chaos."

Adam didn't know what to say to that.

"But you know I like blue."

"Yes," Adam whispered.

"So you simply brought me to the purest, most beautiful blue you've ever known."

"Yes."

Jared shook his head again and said nothing further. Adam pulled the watch cap down over an exposed bit of Jared's ear and stayed where he was, holding Jared in his arms as they took in the silent beauty of winter. At some point, snowflakes began to fall again, drifting around them and sifting to the ground. The dark blue turned gray, and cold seeped through Adam's clothing to his bones. Finally, Adam tugged on Jared's hand and led him back the way they came.

Jared broke the silence. "Keith's eyes were the color of Russian amber. They were brown but light and golden, and the hue itself was warm."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. It's all very mysterious. His eyes were warm, and his heart was cold, and your eyes are so pure and clear a blue they remind me of ice chips." He pulled Adam to a halt before they got to the cabin door. "Yet I've never felt anything warmer than being with you in the snow."

\* \* \* \* \*

Murmuring, Adam rummaged around in the cupboard in the mudroom, while Jared divested himself of his wet things.

"She keeps them here, humane mouse traps. You catch the mice and release them, and hopefully they don't come back for more. Ah." He pulled a small green Plexiglas

house out of the cupboard and reached in again to bring out two others. "We'll bait these and check them often because my mom will kill me if I let an animal starve in her cabin."

Jared picked one up and followed him to the kitchen, where he watched as Adam searched around in a large pantry. "Your mother buys houses for mice?"

"Well, it beats trying to catch them by hand; the little suckers are quick."

Adam returned with a box of Ritz crackers. He felt Jared's eyes on him as he opened a jar of peanut butter and spread it on several crackers. He broke them up and placed the tempting bits into his traps. Adam froze when he caught a sparkle in Jared's eyes, so arrested by the sight of Jared almost smiling that his hands stopped what they were doing and drifted to the counter.

Jared's eyebrows rose. "Let me get this straight. Your mother buys houses for mice, you make canapés for them, and after it's all over, you move them to the country."

Adam looked down at his hands. "Yeah, I guess that's about right."

Jared grinned then, a genuinely happy expression blooming on his face, and Adam smiled back.

"And I thought I was the one that needed therapy."

Adam pushed one of the traps into the corner of the kitchen and placed the other two, one in the guest room, although he had no intention of letting Jared sleep there anymore, and another in the living room, next to a recliner. "If we don't get any takers, we can move these around."

"You know what they say: Real estate is three things, location, location, location."

Adam returned to the kitchen and washed his hands. He stepped aside and let Jared in so he could do the same, suddenly shy.

"Tell me about blue."

Jared looked up at him. "Blue?"

"Yeah." Adam pulled a clean kitchen towel from a drawer and wiped his hands. "I want to know." He handed the towel over and Jared used it, placing it carefully onto the towel rack of the oven when he was finished.

"I admit it might have gotten a little out of hand."

Adam thought back to the looks on the faces of the flight attendants as Jared tore pages from his magazine. "Ya think?"

Jared folded his hands on the table and stared at them intently for what seemed like a long time. "It's all right if you don't want to talk about it." Adam came around and handed him a bottle of white wine and an opener. "What do you want to eat?"

Jared grinned again. "Anything but peanut butter crackers."

Adam reached around and, cupping the back of Jared's head, brought him in for a kiss. Even though he seemed surprised, Jared opened for his tongue and let his own out to play. When Adam broke off the kiss, Jared's face was unreadable.

"Is that okay?" Adam asked. "If I kiss you?"

"Sure." He rested his head on his hand, which was propped on the table, and wore a sleepy, freshly kissed face.

Adam shook his head.

"What?"

"Tell me what the mystery is, Jared." Adam pushed Jared's chair back so he could kneel between Jared's legs. "Tell me how I can make you happy."

Jared remained silent but leaned over to wrap his arms around Adam.

"At least tell me if you like shrimp."

Jared relaxed slightly. "I like shrimp."

"Good." Adam pushed him back and got to his feet. "That's a start."

Adam poked frozen shellfish around his superheated cast-iron skillet with clarified butter and pepper flakes, and once that was done, he assembled a quick Greek salad. He made the dressing fresh, and garnished the greens with feta, Kalamata olives,

and grape tomatoes. He wished they had a great artisan bread, but he'd have to buy it fresh or make it. That might be fun. Nothing smelled better than bread fresh from the oven. His childhood memories were inextricably intertwined with that homey, yeasty aroma, and he wondered if Jared could say the same.

Adam placed the food on the table and called to Jared to come and eat, but he seemed to be captivated by something outside the window and didn't turn right away. Adam didn't call him again; he enjoyed studying him as he watched the snow fall.

Eventually, Jared came to the table and sat. While Adam ate his salad in silence, Jared used his fork to slide the peppers flakes and tomatoes to the side before taking a bite of the shrimp.

Jared grabbed his wineglass. "Oh, shit. That's fucking *hot!*"

Adam eyed Jared as he waved his hand over his mouth. He said, "Sorry," but he wasn't very. When Jared drained his first glass of wine and would have poured himself a second, Adam put his hand out and stopped him, giving him a water bottle instead.

"I can't believe you made it that hot." Jared's eyes teared up. "Shit, shit. *shit.*"

"That's how it's supposed to be made."

"I think I'll just eat the salad part." Jared pushed the shrimp out of the way and attacked his lettuce.

"I'm sorry," Adam told him, truthfully this time. It was one thing to tease, but Jared seemed to have a very sensitive palate.

"It's all right; you didn't know. Keith always said I was too Irish."

"How can you be too Irish?"

"Keith thought I was rather limited in my upbringing. My father was a builder on one of Keith's massive projects in Boston. They hit it off and stayed in contact after it was finished. Eventually he got me a job at Keith's office as a summer intern during high school and then again while I was getting my degree from U Mass."

"Yeah? In what?"

"I have a BFA in design."

"That's some story. You worked there as a high school kid, and then what? Later you fell in love? Did you always have a crush or something?"

Jared laughed bitterly, and it stung Adam because it felt distinctly like he was the butt of a joke. Jared's next words bore that out. "You are one truly wholesome son of a bitch, Adam."

Adam's fork clattered to the table. "What?"

"I can see you don't live in a world where middle-aged men catch office boys and fuck them on the copy machine, but Keith had no scruples as to age or class. He didn't mind letting me know he'd fire my ass if I didn't give it up. Or telling me that he'd be sure to let my mother know I took the Lord's name in vain when he fucked me."

*"Jared."*

"And I didn't mind it, either, really. He was old, sure, but he was hot. And he was so fucking brilliant. It was like grabbing onto a shooting star. I never looked back."

"Didn't you?"

"Nope." Jared picked up the wine bottle, and this time, Adam didn't stop him. "I got to fan the flames of his great fucking ego for twenty years. And he treated me better than he ever treated anyone else."

"Did he?"

"I was his boy." Jared fussed with the salad and finally put his fork down. "You have no idea how good it felt to be chosen by someone like him."

"I think I do. I can imagine what it's like to be chosen by someone brilliant who sees something special in me. So then what, you moved in after college?"

"Yes. We worked together, traveled."

"Did you marry?"

"Not legally." Jared looked down at the hands he'd clasped on the table again.

"You called him your husband."

“He called himself my husband.”

“Then what did he call you?”

Jared picked up his wine and took a long sip. “He called me his boy.”

## Chapter Five

Adam woke and slid a hand across the bed. The sheets were cold where Jared had fallen asleep, and Adam got up, wrapping the blanket around himself, determined to find out where he'd gone. It hadn't taken very long to find out that Jared didn't sleep well. He got two hours most nights before he'd wake and wander restlessly through the cabin. On their second night in the place, Adam had shown Jared the room that had been his sister's bedroom, which she now used as an unofficial workshop when she spent time with their parents in the summer. It had a bookshelf full of books and her equipment: glass cutting and grinding tools and the foiling tape and leading comes that she worked with when she was here.

It had really been a stroke of good luck that his sister Ana worked almost exclusively with blue glass here, in keeping with his mother's color scheme. She kept drawers and boxes full of all shades of blue, and Jared had been attracted to them like a magpie. For several nights, Adam had woken to find Jared arranging and rearranging bits of blue glass on the worktable and looking at them through the light, excitedly pointing out the striations, bubbles, and imperfections that enticed art glass lovers. Like Ana, Jared had apparently caught glass fever, and it was a revelation to Adam who had barely seen him smile.



Ana's room remained dark and quiet, so Adam continued on down the stairs, listening for sounds. He found Jared in the mudroom, putting on what had become his winter uniform.

"Did I wake you?" Jared frowned. "I'm sorry."

"No, I..." Adam reached into the hamper and found a pair of jeans. "Where are you going?"

"I wanted to see the trees at night when there was a moon."

Adam smiled and hopped from one leg to the other to pull on his pants. "Can I come too?"

"Sure." Jared didn't smile. "Are you afraid I'll wander off and die in the snow without you there to rescue me again?"

Adam stopped what he was doing. "If you want to be alone, I can—"

"No. Shit. I'm sorry." Jared fidgeted with his jacket zipper. "What a crappy thing to say. I can't seem to stop being—"

"Stop apologizing."

Jared shut his mouth for a minute, then opened it again. "Did you really want to come?"

"Yes." Adam pulled on a sweater, then a jacket and his watch cap. "Let me get my socks and boots." He rummaged around until he found something suitable and turned back to Jared, who already had his hand on the door.

"I saw it was a full moon tonight, and relatively clear. I wanted to go outside so badly. It was like an obsession. That's weird huh?"

"I don't think so. I lived here most of my life, been here in every season, and it still kind of calls me." Adam followed him into the dark. "I brought you here because I needed to be here, but I didn't want to leave you behind."

"The unfinished rescue." Jared huffed out steamy puffs of air. Even though he'd gone out first, it was Adam who took the lead within minutes, following a path into the

stand of trees behind the cabin that would eventually lead to a clearing where they could stand with trees all around them.

"I wish you'd stop saying that," Adam said tightly. "I'm not obsessed or compulsive or codependent or any of the other things you think I am. I found you in that house, was touched by the situation and the way you said, 'my husband.' I found you attractive. Brilliant. All sharp edges. A mystery."

"I'm none of those things."

"Whatever." Adam continued walking.

"No, really! I'm none of those things. *Keith* was brilliant. *Keith* had sharp edges. *Keith* was a mystery, a paradox. Cutting and kind. Larger than life but two-dimensional. Blisteringly sexual but locked in the closet."

"Can we have just one conversation in which we don't discuss *Keith*?" Jared trotted along beside him, panting, but Adam didn't feel like slowing down.

Jared stopped where he was and bent over to get his wind back. "I'm sorry."

Cursing under his breath, Adam stopped until Jared could catch up, and then he helped him over a slippery fall of rocks. "Maybe I just don't get it. Why the past can't be past."

Jared let go of Adam's hand and looked around and up to where the moonlight filtered through the trees to paint blue shadows on the snow.

"I don't get it either." Jared reached for Adam's hand and took hold of it again.

The night was clear enough that the trees seemed to sparkle with stars. A wave of powerful emotion washed over Adam, drowning him in longing and homesickness, even as it filled up all the hollow places in his heart with a sense of home he'd live on in L.A. until the next time he made it back here.

He must have made some sort of noise, because Jared turned to him and wrapped his arms around his waist. "I've never seen such a beautiful thing, Adam."

"I always forget until I'm home again."

“What made you leave?”

Adam shook his head. “I don't know. Blowing off the 'rents, maybe. At the time, I thought I had something to prove. Getting away from all the Wild West crap. Sometimes it felt like a small town.”

“Folks know you're gay?”

“Yeah. That's never been an issue. I guess they wish I weren't. Sometimes I wish I weren't.” Adam slid his hands under Jared's jacket and shirt until he found bare skin. “Not when I'm with you, though.”

Jared bit his lip and sighed when Adam scraped his nipple with a gloved hand. “You know, I've committed this to memory.” He pressed himself against Adam and kissed him.

Adam's breath came in shallow pants. “So we can go back to bed?”

“I'll race you,” Jared offered, turning around and pulling on Adam's hand.

“You're like a little kid, get them all dressed up in a snow suit, and no matter how many times you've asked if they have to go...”

“I don't have to go.” Jared brushed up against Adam again and even through the layers of clothing he felt hard and hot. “I have to come.”

Adam snorted. “Dude. Why didn't you tell me?” He gripped Jared around the waist, hefted him up, and walked to the center of the clearing, Jared muffled screams and laughter behind his gloved hands.

Adam set Jared down. He whispered, “Look up,” fell to his knees, and pulled at the waistband of Jared's jeans until the button came undone and Jared's cock fell, glistening and hot, into his hand. He breathed a puff of hot air onto the delicate skin and wrapped his mouth around the velvety soft shaft, teasing it with his tongue even as he pulled it into his mouth. He used his body to shelter and warm the exposed skin of Jared's abdomen as his head bobbed and his mouth worked. He chanced a glance at

Jared's face, saw that he was looking up at the sky and that his breath came in short puffs of vapor, forming a cloud around the O of surprise and pleasure on his lips.

Adam worked Jared's cock and watched his face, taking in the way his jaw went slack, watching as he swallowed back a small noise deep in his throat that might have become a cry. Then Adam closed his eyes and kept on until he felt the muscles under his fingertips tighten and Jared started to fuck his mouth, clasping the sides of his head tenderly. Adam gripped his hips harder, just as he felt Jared's cum hit the back of his throat.

"Fuck... *Adam,*" Jared murmured as Adam held on and pulled him over the waves of his orgasm, waiting till he was oversensitive and soft, then lovingly tucked him back into his clothes. "That was...incredible."

Adam got stiffly to his feet. He pressed a kiss against Jared's mouth, and when Jared opened for him, he knew he'd taste his own cum.

"That was awesome," Adam said honestly. "Your face against the sky like that. Out here in the dark."

"You must be freezing."

"Not really." Adam's voice was thick. "My knees are cold."

"Come here." Jared wrapped his arms around Adam's waist and held him there, even though the knees of Adam's jeans were wet enough to soak through his own. Adam pulled back and started toward the cabin, holding Jared's hand firmly in his.

They entered through the mudroom, shucked off their clothes, and made it almost to the middle of the living room before Adam kissed Jared and pulled his naked body into his arms. Jared wrapped his legs around him and held on. Adam took the stairs carefully, cupping Jared's ass with one hand and holding the rail with the other. Jared's head rested warmly on his shoulder in a way he liked very much. All the while Jared ground his cock against Adam's belly and made soft noises that Adam wanted to swallow, just as he'd wanted to swallow the whole man when he'd blown him that

night. Adam's knees hit the bed, and he crawled in, still carrying Jared in his arms, as together they clambered toward the pillows.

Adam kissed his way to Jared's chest, while Jared reached his hand under the pillow.

"Here." Jared handed over his find, a bottle of lube, and pulled the pillow up over his head. He swept a number of the foil packets toward Adam's hand and arched his back when Adam flipped the cap open one handed and dripped lube on the skin behind his balls.

"Cold," came a muffled growl.

Adam smiled against his skin. "But it's okay for me to kneel in the snow to give you a blowjob."

Jared jumped when Adam bumped a lubed finger against his hole. "Um... Yes."

"Okay, just making sure." He pushed his fingers into Jared's tight heat and brushed a knuckle over his prostate.

"Oh, shit!" Jared arched again, this time nearly choking on his own spit as he spoke. "Do that. *That!*"

"Over you go." Adam pulled Jared's leg up, flipped him, and pulled his hips up so he had no choice but to get up on his knees.

"Like this?" Jared said quietly. "Do you want me like this?"

Adam's hands stopped where they were, on Jared's hips. "Is this okay?"

"Yes. I was just surprised." Jared's voice came from somewhere deep inside the pillow.

"But it's okay."

"Adam. *A ghrá*. Would you fuck me already?"

"My pleasure, *cupcake*." Adam surged against Jared's ass until it enveloped his cock. He drew out slowly, dragging across the sensitive skin, and pushed back with his hips, which brought a sharp cry from Jared. "Okay?"

"Guh, yeah," Jared moaned. "You have to ask?"

Adam dragged back out and snapped his hips again. "Mm hmm."

Jared let out a grunting sound and an expletive, and Adam discovered he did take the Lord's name in vain when he was getting fucked. In this position, Jared got loud, and when Adam reached around his hips and took hold of his dick, Jared gave a strangled moan, and cum warmed Adam's hand. He rested his forehead against Jared's sweat-soaked spine for a minute, then surged into him again and again until he was soaring, gliding on the crisp, cold air of his own release while Jared's body tensed and shuddered beneath him. Jared collapsed, and Adam fell, panting, onto Jared's back.

Adam reached for Jared's hand and laced their fingers together, giving it a squeeze.

"Oh *fuck*, Adam. I don't want this," Jared murmured.

Adam froze. "What did you say?"

"I don't *want* this; you're going to swallow me up."

## Chapter Six

Adam rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. While he was there, he got rid of the spent condom and ran water to wet his face. He decided that just a splash wasn't enough and turned on the shower. Soon, hot water cascaded over his skin, warming him even though his heart felt like ice. What had he expected? *What did he even want?* As he toweled himself off, he heard a timid knock on the door.

"Adam?"

"Yeah."

"That was a shitty thing I said."

Adam didn't reply.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry if it was the truth." Adam waited, but when he heard no sound from the other side of the door, he decided to shave. When he came out, Jared was no longer in the room. The rumpled sheets and air reeked of sweat and sex. Adam really couldn't put his finger on what had happened that made Jared bolt like that.

When Adam made his way to the kitchen to fix breakfast, he heard Jared making shuffling noises behind Ana's door. He was glad there wasn't going to be any kind of a confrontation.

When Jared finally emerged, Adam had finished his breakfast, and he was sitting at the table looking out at the winter landscape, sipping a mug of hot coffee.

"There's eggs in the pan," Adam told him. "And fresh coffee."

Jared came up behind him and put his arms around Adam's neck, surprising him. Adam turned and dragged Jared onto his lap, giving him a hard hug. He offered his coffee and Jared declined a sip, but they kissed until they shared the taste between them anyway.

"What have you been up to?" Adam asked, curious about what Jared had found to interest him in Ana's room.

"I've been reading the books about glass. I took classes in glass art in college, but I haven't worked with it in ages. I've forgotten more than I ever learned."

"It's my sister Ana's obsession."

"I gathered that. Does she have a studio?"

"Yeah, well, it's part of her house. She works when she's up here too. She's good; she doesn't do badly. She and her husband are both artists."

Jared cupped Adam's face with one hand, and when Adam would have caught the other to kiss it, he jerked it away. Adam frowned when he saw that it was wrapped in a towel.

"What's—"

"I cut it." Jared rolled his eyes. "I was looking through your sister's glass; I barely caught an edge, but it was sharp. I'm applying pressure." He showed that his hand was fisted.

"My sister gets cut up all the time; you need those Kevlar gloves that she refuses to wear."



"Nobody wears those," Jared said as Adam scooted him off.

"Let me get the first aid kit."

Jared followed along to the sink, picking up the mousetrap they'd left in the kitchen on the way. "Oh, *shit*, we have another taker." He placed it on the counter. "How many does that make?"

Adam got to his knees and rummaged around in the low cabinet. "Eight, I think. Radio said more snow, so when I'm done with this, maybe we should take Mickey here and let him loose before it starts."

Adam stood with the first aid kit and took Jared's hand. The cut wasn't too deep, but it was long and it looked like a bleeder. He cleaned it out well, even though Jared winced like he was getting his appendix out, and put a couple of Steri-Strips on it.

When he looked up, he saw Jared's eyes on the mouse. "There, that does it." Adam taped off the gauze bandage and let his hand go.

"I'm starting to like these guys." Jared tapped a finger against the green plastic, and the mouse froze.

"You probably just scared it to death."

"Won't they just end up as owl pellets?"

Adam busied himself putting away the first aid kit. "Probably."

"That makes me feel bad."

"We could look into boarding schools. Just say the word."

Jared flexed his hand. "Ow."

"Hurts, huh? First lesson. Glass sharp. Bleeding bad." Adam walked to the living room and found the other two traps also had guests. "We could start our own bed-and-breakfast."

"With guest mice?"

Adam grinned. "Mice pancakes."

When Adam would have headed for the mudroom, Jared caught his arm with his good hand and pulled him in for a searching kiss.

"How can you be so...good?"

Adam sighed. "I'm not good, Jared. I'm not Dudley Do-Right."

"You're so fucking patient." Jared pursed his lips. "I sure the hell don't deserve it."

Adam placed the mouse houses down on the washing machine and started automatically putting on his outerwear. "I'm anything but patient. Up here, you have to pick your battles. You notice we're snowed in; it's close quarters; it gets cramped. You learn to let things be up here."

"So, what? You're just waiting to be impatient later?"

"Yep, when we're back in L.A. I plan to—"

Jared interrupted him. "I'm not going back, Adam."

"You what?" Adam's chest hurt like he'd swallowed an ice cube. "What?"

"I'm not going back. I've made up my mind. I'm going to travel for a while. Get my feet back under me."

"For how long?" Adam asked, afraid that he already knew the answer. Afraid that if he gave it too much thought he'd let it all show; he'd blow his carefully crafted cool and confess what he'd known since he'd pulled Jared out of his house on the day they met. He *loved* this man. Adam looked away on the pretext of pulling on his gear.

"Indefinitely. Maybe." Jared sat down on the floor to drag on his socks. "I don't know. I thought I'd follow up on some of the glass information I got out of your sister's books. Maybe take a class."

"Take a class?"

Jared stopped what he was doing. "Sure. Why not?"

"I could give you my sister's number if you want. She knows—"

"It's not a stupid idea or anything."

Adam frowned at him. "I never said it was."

“It beats the hell out of staying in a rehab facility like it was the Plaza Hotel.”

“Hey, I never —”

“I have no home. I have no family. I have *nothing*. Nothing to keep me and nothing to hold me back, and just because you don't think I'm *capable* of taking a mouse outside by myself or putting a Band-Aid on my own cut doesn't mean it's true.”

Adam counted to ten. “Are you through?”

Jared looked down at his hands where they held his snow boot. He shoved his foot into it. “Yes.”

“Fine. Take the mice to the clearing and let them go. I think I'll go find out if our neighbor Bob is here and see if he'll plow us out if we need it when we leave.” Adam let the door slam behind him. *Fuck that*. If Jared wanted to fight, he could do it by himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam dragged himself up the hill to the porch steps. He congratulated himself on getting that far. His snow boots had lost traction more than once, and coming up the steep hill to the back of the cabin, he'd fallen twice. He hadn't felt it, though, and he gave credit where credit was due. Bob Evans, great neighbor, erstwhile mountain man, former national park ranger, and owner of the snow plow that made it possible to visit the cabin in winter, poured a great glass of whiskey. It was a magical glass in that it never emptied, not even if you kept drinking it, even when it seemed you must have drained it three or four times over. *Man was a fucking genius*.

Glad he didn't have to find the lock with a key, because he was barely finding the door, Adam spilled into the cabin. He had no earthly idea how long he'd been gone, but there had been several games of pool and Avalanche hockey on the big screen. It was dark. Not that he couldn't find his way around the cabin, hell, even the whole property, in the dark. When he walked in from getting rid of his muddy, wet things, though, the whole place was eerily silent. No lights illuminated the first floor, and no cooking smells emanated from the kitchen. He was already beginning a lecture in his head about

people needing to eat regular meals when he knocked on the guest room door and entered before finding it empty.

Only moderately alarmed, he ascended the stairs and checked the rooms, one by one, until he got to his own. By then, the good part of his buzz was a thing of the past, and his heart thundered in his chest as he looked around, finally worried, that maybe Jared had gotten lost or taken the car and left. When he saw Jared standing at the window gazing out on the aspen grove, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"I saw you coming up the walk; it was high comedy." Jared didn't turn.

"Objects in the mirror may be thicker than you drunk they are." Halfway out of his jeans, Adam fell onto the bed and wriggled them off the rest of the way. "Bob, our neighbor, likes to entertain. Guess he doesn't have much of a chance up here in winter."

"Looks like he made up for lost time."

"I'm not on the clock, and I wasn't driving, Jared. No harm, no foul." Adam stared at the ceiling for a long time, then turned over, away from Jared, to face the wall. "Did you even eat?"

"No. Fuck, Adam. What do you fucking care whether I eat?" The bed dipped behind Adam, and a soft hand came down in his hair. "That's what I don't get. Do I just have 'If found, be kind and adopt' written on my forehead?"

Adam frowned. "No." He turned over. "What are you talking about?"

"I admit I'm attracted to guys like you. Guys like Keith. Men who are strong and in control, take-charge kinds of guys. But then it all goes wrong, and instead of seeing me as someone they can respect, they end up running after me, trying to feed me and house me like I'm some fucking gerbil or something."

"I don't know who these other guys are that treat you like a gerbil, but—"

"Jeez, don't you get it? There haven't been any other guys. Only Keith. Only ever Keith and then you." Jared reached over and switched on the lamp next to the bed. "Look at me. I'm thirty-seven years old. I was someone's *boy* for over twenty years, and

I can't tell you how fucking terrifying this is for me. Part of me wants to be *your* boy. It would be so easy. I could just let it all go..."

Adam rose to a sitting position, his back against the headboard. He pulled the sheet up to cover his hips. "I don't want a boy. You can't think I want a boy."

"I know that. Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I know eventually you'd hate that?" Jared sighed and maneuvered so he was shoulder to shoulder with Adam. He slumped a little, and his hair flopped to one side. Adam thought he looked more like a boy than ever right then. Even through his alcoholic haze, he realized that was probably going to contribute to the problem and not the solution. "Right now, right this minute, I'm not ready to be anything else."

"I could try being less..." Adam trailed off when he saw the look of pain that crossed Jared's face.

"It's not you."

Adam blew out a breath and rolled his eyes. "Wow. The full-on dump. *It's not you; it's me.*"

Jared caught his hand and squeezed it hard before lacing their fingers together. "It's not like that; I swear it's not like that."

"So. What happens now?"

"I don't know." Jared pushed a strand of hair back from his face. He got up and walked to the window, where he leaned up against the frame with his arms folded. "Starting to snow again."

"Yeah?" Adam felt beat. A little pleasant, still buzzed, but not falling-down drunk. Just relaxed. What Jared was saying hadn't sunk in yet maybe, or perhaps he couldn't believe it. It wasn't final in his hazy brain, and he held on to the hope that he was misreading the situation or that Jared would change his mind.

"It's cold."

Adam assessed the situation. "I'm warm."

Jared turned toward Adam and asked in a small voice, "Do you mind if I join you?"

"I think we've already established that it's not what I want that counts."

Jared turned back to the window.

Adam slid down between the covers. "I didn't mean that *exactly* the way it sounded."

"Didn't you?"

"Not entirely." Adam pulled the blankets back in invitation. "Come here."

Jared came toward him and slipped silently between the sheets, and when Adam might have left him alone, Jared pulled at him until he was braced on his forearms and lodged between Jared's legs.

"Are you sure?" Adam nudged his cock against Jared's.

In answer, Jared pulled Adam into a kiss that invited both his tongue and his cock to play. Adam picked up Jared's knees and ground against him, hard, and lost himself in the act. By the time they'd dug around the bedding for lube and a condom, his heart felt like it was rocketing around in his brain. He shook his head to clear it, aware he'd consumed too much alcohol, but that it hadn't done much to kill off his libido. Jared squirmed beneath Adam as he got him ready, finally slicking himself over the condom.

"Hold still." He pinned Jared's knees almost to his shoulders with his hands and pressed hard with his cock, sighing deeply, almost groaning when he was once again enveloped in Jared's heat.

"A ghrá." Jared moaned, lifting both hands to bring Adam's head down for a kiss.

Adam resisted. "You've said that before. What does it mean?"

Jared shook his head. "It's like lover, my love."

Adam stopped what he was doing.

"It doesn't have to mean anything," Jared told him.

Even if they didn't mean anything, the words broke over Adam like a cold wave. Jared planned to walk away, making words pointless. Adam took the opportunity to say everything he had to say with his body, and planned to keep on saying it, until he finally had to let Jared go.

Adam leaned in and kissed Jared with all the tenderness he had and surged into his tight heat. He set a slow pace, sighing deeply when he felt Jared's arms wrap around his neck. Those same hands, the ones that played with the glass in his sister's room and had clenched together so tightly on the plane, explored him gently, tentatively.

Jared's mouth dropped open, and he began to pant. Adam felt like a machine, like a piston, sliding in and out of Jared's body as part of an engine composed of the two of them together. Sweat dripped off his body, slicking him, causing him to slide across Jared's flesh as he ground Jared's cock between them.

"So perfect," Adam whispered, listening to the cries Jared gave him in exchange for his love-without-words. "Gonna let me take you there?"

Jared reached out blindly, and Adam caught his hands and laced their fingers together before pushing them down and pinning them above his head. Adam braced his weight on their clasped hands, and Jared huffed out a shuddering breath. "*Adam.*"

Adam watched Jared's eyes close and his body go rigid as he shook and trembled. His ass clenched on Adam's cock.

"*Jared.*" Adam rode the waves of his own release, from its unstoppable beginning until he was pressed so deep into Jared's body the man's eyes snapped open, and he stared back, dazed.

Jared wrapped his body around Adam and clung until he fell asleep in a tangle of limbs and spunk and bedding. Adam contemplated his sleeping lover, wondering if Jared was using his own body to speak with his heart. He drifted off, satisfied – if not content – until the raucous heavy-metal music of his cell phone's ringtone interrupted their sleep.

Adam grabbed his phone and answered it, listening as he got up and walked to the window. He spoke, answering questions, hearing the words that came to him from the instrument, but his mind was still wholly focused on the aspens, the snow, and the man still lying in the bed.

"When?" he asked. There wasn't any point in arguing. When his caller hung up, he stared at the phone in his hand as though he didn't really know what it was.

"Bad news?" Jared asked from the bed.

"Big fire. I need to go."

"Now?" Jared sat up, already looking for his briefs and jeans. "Right now?"

"I need to catch the first plane out. There's a state of emergency, and firefighters from all over California are being moved to an area around Santa Barbara to battle the blaze. They'll be bringing in inmates from the prisons and engines from other states. It's moving fast, and they need everyone they can get."

"I'll pack up now," Jared offered. "Most of my things are downstairs."

"I'm sorry about this. Do you want to stay? I don't know – you could take the key, take the car, and drop it off when you go to the airport."

Jared was silent for a long time.

"If you haven't decided what you want to do –"

"You just need to drop me off at a hotel in Colorado Springs. I'll be fine from there."

"Do you need the car?"

"No," Jared said. "I'll just... I'll figure out what to do. Don't worry about me, Adam, I'm a grown man."

Suddenly, Adam felt tired. "I know." He began pulling the sheets off the bed. "I need to clean up a little, so I won't be ready to go till...say..." He looked at his phone again. 3:00 a.m. No wonder he was tired. "Five. Be ready."

"If I can do anything to help..."



"If you could clean up the kitchen," Adam said, rolling his clothes into his pilot case. "And empty the mouse traps, if we have guests. Heaven forbid my mom should come up here and find a starved mouse in one of those traps. An out-of-control wildfire would seem trivial by comparison."

"Okay."

"Hey." Adam crossed the room and hauled Jared in for a hard hug. "I had a great time, Jared. I hope you know..."

"Thank you, me too. Thank you for bringing me here."

Adam found he couldn't meet Jared's eyes after that, even though he had a number of opportunities. Bob, lured out of bed in the early morning hours with the promise of a new bottle of Bushmill's and a case of Fat Tire beer the next time one of the family came to the cabin, cleared the snow from the drive and down to the main road that wound its way to town. Once in Colorado Springs proper, Jared picked a hotel from the GPS, and Adam took him there. He shut off the engine before he got out to pull Jared's bag from the back of the SUV.

"You're sure you don't want me to go in? What if they don't have a vacancy?"

Jared gave an exasperated sigh. "I'll be fine."

"I know that." Adam kicked at a bit of dirty ice. "*I know that.*"

"I'll be thinking about you," Jared told him.

"You know where I'll be."

"I know." Jared's mouth lifted at the corners. "I just need to start a fire, right?"

"You *shit*. Take care of yourself."

"You too." Instead of hugging him, Adam gave a half wave and returned to the driver's seat of the car. Once inside, he keyed the engine and released the emergency brake to drive away. He couldn't stop himself from taking one last, long look at Jared, standing by his suitcase under the canopy that hung over the door of the hotel. He distinctly saw Jared mouth the words *Be careful* as he moved into traffic.

## Chapter Seven

People moved around Jared's studio and workshop like ants. He had taken the precaution of simply staying out of their way, of making himself as unnoticeable as possible until he was found out and towed to a chair for a pre-interview spruce-up.

In the nearly three years since he'd made Colorado his home, he'd been content to hone his craft. He'd traveled, taken classes, and worked with other glass artists. He'd built this smallish workspace with a hot shop in back, and done it all in relative obscurity.

A recent commission for his work at a newly constructed skyscraper had changed all that, vaulting him from a small-time glass craft shop to a large-scale design operation with an ever-growing circle of admirers. And once again, it had been Keith's hand that caused it, just as surely as if he'd reached up from the grave to pull Jared in.

A chance meeting in a restaurant with old friends and a renewal of their acquaintance, lost since Keith had passed on, sparked interest in his blue-themed glass art studio, Blue Fire. They were looking for an installation for the soaring lobby of the Peterson Building, and based on the smaller pieces he had in his studio and his portfolio of completed projects, they'd asked Jared to come up with a plan.

When his concept was chosen from the designs submitted by a number of prominent artists, he'd built the separate pieces right there in his workshop, had them shipped, and had overseen the glass installation personally. The pieces he'd constructed now formed the soothing blue backdrop to the reception desk; its massive blue-glass mosaic panels lit from behind like a secular cathedral.

Jared sat still for the person dabbing something on his face and fussed with the power pack of a wireless microphone that was jabbing him in the small of his back. He eyed the people setting up cameras and lights in his studio and blanched when someone came precariously close to a set of vertical shelves where he stored expensive pieces of glass.

"Uh, watch yourself there," he called out to catch their attention, but they were focused on something the cameraman was saying and didn't turn. He closed his eyes and hoped for the best. Casey Slade, the woman who would be conducting the interview, interrupted his thoughts.

"So, I was planning to talk about the shop, Blue Fire, and the work you did for the Peterson Building. How the contacts you'd made with your late partner have come into play, making it possible for your work to be noticed, even though you've taken a detour from design into actually crafting your work by hand in a small studio."

"Great," Jared muttered as they finally let him get up off the chair. He stood uncertainly, still wearing the bib they'd used to shield his clothing from the detritus of his makeup.

"Excuse me?"

"I like to think that my work for the Peterson Building stands for itself, and that it's the work that matters, not the contacts."

"Well, of course, I didn't mean to imply that it isn't. You certainly would never have been contracted if the work fell below a certain standard. But you have to admit that without the contacts, far fewer people would be looking at it."

"I do." Jared sighed. "I do have to admit that." It wouldn't do to drip sarcasm all over her. She truly believed getting his work seen by the most people possible was a good thing. "Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed doing the Peterson Building. There were a lot of really in—" A loud crash echoed off all the hard surfaces in his tiny shop.

"You *idiot*," someone shouted, and Jared yanked the paper from his neck and strode to where some members of the crew looked at something on the ground.

"I'm sorry." The young man bent to pick up a light fixture. Not something of his, thank heavens, and Jared let out a sigh of relief.

Jared gave him a smile. "It's close quarters in here; gets a little cramped, I know."

"But the pieces are beautiful." The boy swept up the glass from a light bulb with a couple of pieces of cardboard. "I'd love to photograph them. Light them just right and they'd be like jewels."

"Thank you." Jared left him to get a broom and a dustpan. When he returned and handed it over, the kid's shy smile turned to one of gratitude.

"I'm really sorry about the mess."

"No harm done. Well, to me anyway."

"Mr. Kenny?" Casey smiled at him. "If you could just come over this way?"

"Sure." Jared followed her to the area they'd designated. The spot wasn't supposed to be much longer than five minutes, part of an hour intended to focus on emerging names in the Colorado art scene. For his part, he doubted he'd even be recognized for his work in stained glass if it hadn't been for the Peterson Building. That project had been very new, very green, and the darling of the sustainable resource set, as well the latest work of a high-profile firm, Charles and Renklin, The Peterson Building had certainly put him on the map in a way he'd never imagined.

Jared gathered they were going to stand and wait until cameras rolled, and then he would answer Casey's questions and maybe show a bit of his work. He wasn't above trolling for work; on the contrary, he *wanted* work. Keeping busy was the best way to

hold off the loneliness of a life spent mostly on the road or holed up in his studio. But his favorite part of his new line of work was the time he got to spend in the hot shop alone with the glass. This new phase, dealing with the recognition he was beginning to receive, was simply something he had to endure.

When the interview began and the first question out of Casey's mouth took him by surprise, he realized nothing was going to go the way he'd hoped.

"Jared, I hope I can call you by your first name. You are the widower, for all intents and purposes, of Keith Kincaid, whose stunning work in architecture is internationally renowned. You were only a teen when your partnership began. What was it like trying to rebuild after the death of a man who was so much larger than life?"

Jared stared at her for such a long time she told the cameraman to cut. "What's the matter, Jared? Do you need a moment to collect your thoughts? There's no need to be nervous; you'll do just fine."

"That's not it. I thought this was going to be about my work."

"Of course it is, but you worked with Kincaid for twenty years, and that has obviously informed your current work," she told him. "Ready?"

"No, I'd rather you didn't get into my personal —"

"I promise to only ask questions that are pertinent to the art. It's my understanding though —" She looked at him with some surprise, then pulled a number of index cards from her pocket and flipped through them briefly. "That your personal relationship with Kincaid was never a secret."

"It wasn't for me, but Keith —"

"I understand that he never publicly acknowledged you, but you shared several homes, including the one that burned three years ago, and since his death, there has been an unauthorized biography which discusses your relationship in great detail."

Jared didn't answer.

"Are you ready, or do you need another minute?"

Jared gazed at her placidly. "I'm ready." He knew the next few minutes would be a battle of wills. The lines had been drawn distinctly.

This time when they rolled tape and she asked her question, he was ready.

"My work has been a great source of solace for me."

"The home you shared with Kincaid when he died was said to have been his last project. He passed away shortly after its completion, and barely months after that, it burned to the ground. What are your thoughts about losing both your partner and your home in such a short time?"

Jared ground his teeth. Casey Slade was clod, going for the story with no timing or tact. Keith would have eaten her alive and spit the lavalier microphone clipped to her jacket into an ashtray afterward like an olive pit.

"One of the most amazing things about glass, Miss Slade, is that it's got the chemical signature of a liquid. A jumble of molecules that form a structure that is, in fact, indistinguishable from a liquid. It is the thickest of liquids and the least solid of solids. It becomes fluid if it's heated, but once it begins to cool, it becomes a substance that isn't changed so much as it is hardened. It's a chemical conundrum."

"I'm sure that's very interesting, Jared, but my question was how much do you think Keith Kincaid has influenced and informed your work, and do you ever wish he were here to share it with you."

"That's my point exactly, Miss Slade. The property of glass that makes it interesting to me is its nature. It can be shaped by outside influences, but it still remains glass. Molten, solid, shattered into a million pieces, glass is first, last, and always, glass."

"I see." She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "And what does your glass say about you? You've chosen to work exclusively with blue glass. Is that a phase, like Picasso's Blue Period? Will you add other colors to your work, or do you intend to work exclusively with blue forever?"

"Well, I can't really say, exactly. Certainly blue is a *nice* color. And Picasso's Blue Period refers to a tint of blue that pervaded his paintings, but he used other colors at the

time, sweet pink lips and tan guitars. True flesh tones washed and shadowed with a peculiar blue. I make no pretense to that kind of genius, Casey, but you're kind to make the comparison."

Jared had to give her credit; she was a tenacious little thing. Trying again, she said, "Picasso's Blue Period began with the suicide of his friend —"

"Did it really? I didn't know that. I thought he just liked the color blue, as I do. His blue period was followed by his rose period. What do the psychologists make of that, I wonder? Traumatized by flowers?"

The rest of the interview went the way he'd thought it was supposed to go in the first place. As everyone left, the boy who'd dropped the light fixture pressed a piece of folded paper into his hand, which read, "For taking pictures, or...anything," with a phone number on it.

As Jared tossed it into the trash, he had a moment of real regret. He doubted that the poor kid had a lot of nice people in his life if his behavior with the crew was anything to go by. He remembered being young and letting Keith and his cronies treat him like a punk. When he'd done something well he might've gotten a pat and a beer, but when he'd made a mistake, it had earned him a blistering evisceration and a contrite apology later, long after the fact.

Jared picked up a lightweight sphere of glass. He was determined to learn to blow glass but so far completely sucked at it. He'd worked at honing his skill relentlessly, finding local artists to work with him, and inviting people to Colorado from across the country. He hoped that someday he'd be proficient enough to make something without wanting to immediately throw it back into the furnace.

One of the things he had learned to make, and rather well, was doll's eyes. At the request of a woman who had a doll maker's shop within walking distance of his studio, he'd begun trying his hand at creating glass eyes for dolls. His conscience told him it was wrong to populate the world with dolls who all had eyes as close as he could get them to a certain firefighter's glacial lake-water blue. Still, whenever he had time to

relax and simply play with glass, he used a tabletop glory hole setup and glass rods, and that's what he created.

Of all the blues he'd ever seen, the blues he'd used, the blues he collected, the one he couldn't find anywhere *at all* was the blue in Adam's eyes. Everywhere he looked, something similar reminded him of those beautiful eyes, until he'd been driven to try to re-create the stunning color in glass orbs, dolls' eyes, and marbles. Large pieces and small.

Adam's eyes came to him every day, while he was awake and while he dreamed, reminding him that he'd thrown away what was possibly the most important thing in his life. Jared needed to face the fact that his feelings for Adam hadn't lessened with time as he'd thought they would. Even as his sorrow over Keith's passing had faded – still faded until he went days without experiencing even the barest hint of loss – his passion for Adam had grown. He'd been a man obsessed, his days spent with glass and his nights alone. Even when he worked until he dropped into bed exhausted, Adam's eyes followed him into his dreams.

Nightly now, he asked himself the same question. What would happen? What *could* happen if he called Adam? Would he be with someone else? Would he agree to meet for drinks or dinner? Did he travel to Colorado to visit his family? When he looked up at the stars in the trees of his aspen grove, did he imagine looking at them with...

Jared burned his mouth on the coffee in his mug. All the times he'd thought it, he'd never once picked up a phone, and he knew it was far too late for that now.

Finally alone in his studio, he took his mug to the sink. He again eyed the trash bin where he'd thrown the young man's number and wondered when, if ever, he'd get over himself and take someone up on an offer like that. Kindness. Comfort. Companionship.

The other blue he needed to explore was the unfathomable empty-space blue of loss, monochromatic, sucking the light and life from everything he saw before him every day.



## Chapter Eight

April came, and with it the opportunity to fly to Texas for a first meeting with a new client, and Jared thought he might be coming down with something. The heavy, wet snow was getting to him, and he'd fought a headache ever since he'd woken up. He sat at the bar in the C Concourse at Denver International waiting for a flight to Austin and decided that a strong drink and a few aspirin would go a long way to making him feel, if not better, at least numb. Keith claimed that the rich, red-peppery tomato juice in a Bloody Mary had headache-fighting properties. Just the thought made him almost gag. When the bartender finally stood before him, he asked lightly if the man had anything blue to drink.

The bartender leaned. "It's a blue kind of day?"

Jared rubbed his eyes. "I'm a blue kind of guy." He looked around the bar. Most of the men and women looked like business travelers, and since he was taking a later flight, they looked as tired as he did.

"I can make you an Adios Motherfucker."

"That sounds a little alarming." Jared stared at the hand that placed a cocktail coaster in front of him.

"Where are you headed?" The bartender wore the traditional white shirt and black vest. He had brown hair and good bones. Deep-set brown eyes. His forearms looked like the roots of trees and one wrist had a tribal band tattoo. He seemed the friendly type.

"Texas," Jared replied. He slipped his coat off and placed it with his pilot case. "In an hour."

"Last flight."

"I have a presentation tomorrow afternoon. I'll get in late, sleep awhile, and then go. What was that drink called?"

"An Adios Motherfucker. It has gin, vodka, rum, triple sec, blue Curacao —"

"I'll take it," Jared interrupted. "You think I'll still be able to find the plane?"

"That depends." The man began adding liquor expertly to a shaker. "Is it a jumbo jet or one of those bitty little squirrel run jobs?"

"It's big." Jared slumped. "Hopefully it won't be packed."

"This will help with claustrophobia and stranger anxiety."

The size of the drink when it was poured into a hurricane glass confirmed that it would probably keep him from feeling anything at all. A little soda and a cherry and that rough hand placed it right in front of him. Jared stared. Now that was a blue a man could love. It was a clear crystal blue, like the water in the ancient volcanic tubes on the Na Pali coast of Kauai, an untouched, virginal sort of blue.

"That's beautiful," Jared murmured, taking out his wallet. He put a twenty on the bar, and when the man would have given him change, he refused it.

"No, man. You keep it." He studied the drink for a while before he sipped at it, and found he liked the taste as much as he liked the color. "This is my new drink; you're a genius. Do you have kids?"

"Nope." The man grinned like he had a private joke, and Jared thought he might be waiting for a pickup line. *Not going to happen.*

“Do you like marbles?”

That bartender's grin faded a little, but his eyes remained warm. “Sure.”

Jared reached into his pocket and pulled out a small handful of handmade marbles. All were blue, in varying shades and swirls of color. Some were clear with blue “eyes” and stripes; some were creamy, with deep and dreamy blue veins that made them look like stone.

“Cool.” The bartender held his hand out. “You collect?”

“I make them. It's a hobby.” Jared watched as the man looked at the marbles in the light. “They're kind of a calling card. When I go on business, I take some and leave them with my cards. My portfolio. It's become a kind of quirk.”

“Good quirk. You sure you want to give me all these?”

“Sure. You're my new favorite bartender.” Jared smiled as the man left to tend to other customers. He always enjoyed the way people's eyes lit up when they were holding such a simple thing. A tiny glass toy, yet for all its humble beginnings a treasure. Particularly his own carefully handcrafted blues. He'd messed up an awful lot of glass rods until he'd learned how to make the gorgeous, eye-catching marbles he handed out as a kind of lagniappe to customers, friends, and the occasional waiter or bartender who was willing to go the extra mile.

He sipped his drink and watched idly as CNN Headline News recapped early season baseball games and rotated through the events of the day. He was beginning to feel the alcohol seeping through his veins to the small capillaries of his skin, warming and relaxing him when something made him look at the screen with more than idle curiosity. There were only two things guaranteed to rivet his attention to the small screen these days: One was a particularly brilliant shade of blue, and the other was fire.

He stood and waved to get his bartender's attention. “*Whoa*, could you turn that up?” he asked, leaving his coat and even his laptop case behind—completely forgotten—to find a place where he could see and hear clearly.

The screen was mostly black, with a long and jagged red-orange blaze, whipped by gusty winds and tearing over what looked to be hundreds of acres of land. The aerial view was from a vast distance away, yet the slash of flames looked voracious and intensely hot, out of control and headed for what Jared could see looked like structures in one corner of the screen.

"Do you know anything about this?" Jared asked the bartender, seeing the crawl on the bottom of the screen that said California wildfires continued to burn out of control.

"I think it's the usual—high winds, drought conditions. I lived in Cali for a while and you get used to the fact it's going to burn. Just wonder where next, you know?"

"Shit." Jared returned to his seat and his drink. "I hate that shit."

"You live in California?"

"Not since my house burned down." Jared continued to watch while he drank.

"Ah shit. You could probably find out exactly what's happening on the Web. We have WiFi."

Jared frowned but got out his laptop. He worried he was becoming obsessive-compulsive. *More obsessive-compulsive*. He always watched the fire news in California with the same horrified fascination he imagined he'd feel if an asteroid were headed toward the earth from space.

Firefighting, particularly battling the out-of-control, wind-driven blazes that swept from the canyons to the sea in places like Laguna, Malibu, and Santa Barbara, was a dangerous job, and the man he loved was out there in the thick of it every single damn time. The man who had no clue how much Jared loved him.

Jared Googled images of the fire and the men battling the blaze. It always looked so much like hell to him. In each article, there was a minor note about ten firefighters caught between fronts, evacuated but injured. Six had been airlifted to the Grossman Burn Center. Even as he dug for information, he realized how statistically improbable it was for Adam to be injured. But every damned time a California firefighter was hurt, he

Googled and searched the Web for information. He'd even resorted to phoning old friends with news contacts on one or two occasions when the information wasn't forthcoming. He'd lied his way through a phone call or two. As he opened another window with yet another AP article on the fire, he made the promise to himself yet again that he'd fucking call Adam as soon as time permitted and find out for himself whether the man might consider seeing him again.

Inevitably though, when the flames died down, and the crews got the blaze under control and beaten down, Jared found a hundred new reasons to continue on as he'd been doing, watching, waiting, worrying, and drowning his heart in alcohol and regret.

When he found the names of the injured firefighters, at first he couldn't process what he was seeing. There it was. Adam Collins. He leaped back, knocking his glass to the ground in his haste to close his laptop. Beads of sweat formed on his skin, a combination of his panic and the alcohol, as he apologized and tried to tidy up.

"What the hell?" The bartender came out from behind the bar with a rag to help him.

"I just found out a friend of mine—a firefighter—was injured," Jared told him, sweeping the ice and the glass up into his hands and cutting himself in the process. The alcohol stung his wounds, but his work with glass for so long had made him immune to the pain.

"You're cut, man." The guy held out the towel, and Jared dumped what he'd picked up into it.

"But heaven knows no germs can live in that." He indicated the blue liquid running on the white tile floor.

"Someone you care about?" Brown eyes met his, old with stories and sympathy.

"Yes." Jared barely breathed. "*Fuck*, yes."

"Go on, I'll clean up. *Move*, you might be able to change your flight, yeah?"

"Yeah." Jared made up his mind and found his feet. "Yeah." He was jerking on his coat when fear manifested itself yet again, freezing him in the act.

"What?" A hand caught the shoulder of his coat, gently helping him to pull it on.

"It's probably too late," Jared murmured.

"It's been my experience that a man regrets not telling someone they're loved a whole lot more than a man regrets hearing it, even if it doesn't work out."

"Thanks," Jared whispered.

He picked up a handful of paper cocktail napkins from a wire holder. "Take some of these. If you bleed all over the airport, someone is bound to call security."

"Thank you." Jared looked back. "Seriously. Thank you very much."

## Chapter Nine

Looking up at the large white edifice that was Sherman Oaks Hospital, Jared had a real what-the-fuck moment. Grossman Burn Center was a world-class facility for burn injuries; people came from all over the globe to be treated here. He wasn't a relative. He wasn't even sure Adam would choose to see him. It wasn't hard to imagine the difficulty of explaining to Adam's family that he hadn't seen the man in three years. It wasn't hard to imagine them thinking the worst and telling him to buzz off. It wasn't hard to imagine that Adam already had a lover, maybe even a civil partner standing beside his bed.

What was all too simple was picturing a pair of fine blue eyes, the finest Jared ever knew, dimmed by the recognition of someone who'd hurt him and further shadowed by physical pain. He stood between two gigantic cement planters staring at the door. Did he have that right? To walk through the front door and ask to be admitted into the presence of the one man he'd spent three years trying to forget?

On the way, he'd read up on burns. The treatment here at the burn center was uniquely effective; still, anyone who suffered a bad burn could expect to experience a long and often painful recovery process. There were multiple surgeries often in the case of grafting, and pressure garments for years after to help heal scarred skin. The work

they did here at the center was cutting edge, reviewed and renewed any time any advance in the treatment of burns was made, and they had a reputation of treating the whole patient, not just the burns.

Considering Jared's own love-hate relationship with fire, he had a tremendous admiration for these men and women who cared for those whose lives it touched. He put a hand in his jacket pocket and felt around till he found a couple of marbles. Like glass, people could also be forged by fire.

Jared straightened his shoulders and, recalling his new favorite bartender's admonition about regret and love and loss, walked into the building with his head held high. At the reception desk, he asked after Adam and was told to wait while a member of his family was contacted. What seemed like an interminable amount of time later, he saw a woman who bore a remarkable resemblance to Adam coming down the hallway.

She was in her late twenties, fair with light brown hair where Adam's was blond. She had the same shape face, softened and muted by her gender, but good bones, strong jaw, high cheekbones, and a light dusting of golden freckles that Adam's tanned skin hid. But what they shared – unmistakably – were the blue eyes that had so enthralled Jared. His hand went to his mouth when he saw them, if only to stop himself from blurting out something stupid. He stared openly at her as she walked toward him. Probably gave her the willies, he thought, but he couldn't help it.

“Are you here about Adam?” she asked, holding her hand out. “I'm Ana, his sister.”

She had a face that said she was curious but too polite to ask how he knew Adam, and when he took her hand, heaven help him, he took it in both of his and turned it over to look at it.

Like his, it was scarred, so many tiny lines appearing white against the wrinkled pink of her palms. It reassured him, somehow, this connection they had. It was almost a gift, as though she'd given him glass in absentia, because of the things he'd found to



play with in her room at Adam's cabin when he couldn't sleep. Meeting her now, he felt absurdly, profoundly grateful.

"Yes." He swallowed hard. "You don't know me, but... I heard Adam was hurt, and I wanted to see if there was anything I could do."

Her eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"It sounds a little...more odd than when I thought about it and jumped on a plane. Yes. Really." He dropped her hand.

"Have we met?"

"No, not formally, although I know of you. I've very much enjoyed your work. In a very strange way, you're a part of the reason I do what I do." He reached into his pocket to anchor himself by touching the marbles he carried, and then pulled one out. "That sounds suitably creepy. I...here."

She smiled, and he could see she couldn't help herself. "A marble?"

He couldn't help smiling either. "I work with glass. It's kind of... Look, Adam saved my life. Stood with me while my house burnt to the ground, offered me extraordinary compassion, and I—"

"Oh, *hell*, you're Jared Kenny!"

"Um. Yes. Did Adam mention me?" His heart smacked against his esophagus.

"No, I had no idea he'd met you. My husband and I saw you on a cable show, and then we looked up your Web site." Ana gave him a genuine smile so like Adam's it almost made his knees weak. She held up the marble. "You're obsessed."

"Yeah well. Glass."

"Yeah, but no, *blue*. What's up with all the blue?" She held up the marble. It was close to, but not quite, the color of her eyes. He doubted that he'd ever find the perfect combination that would match it; that *warm-cold* blue that made Adam's eyes a worthy paradox even as they'd drawn him in and held him spellbound.

"I need to help if I can."

Ana had a stillness about her that he recognized and responded to, even without understanding it, so when she said, "All right. Come with me," he followed her.

\* \* \* \* \*

At eight in the evening, Jared had a shopping bag from a local chain restaurant with dinner in it, and a room in a comfortable motel. The rest of the Collins family was staying in a suite down the hall. They had been taking turns, spending time at the hospital, waiting for updates and information, and had been joined by firefighters and friends at intervals. Adam had spent most of the morning in surgery, having his burns covered by cadaver skin in the first of what could be multiple operations, depending on the nature of the wounds.

Jared hadn't been to see Adam, and currently, he wasn't certain seeing him would be a good idea. He asked Ana and the rest of the Collins family to keep his presence unknown until a good time presented itself. If ever.

Jared was afraid to sleep, although he hadn't mentioned it when Ana had insisted it would do him good to take a room at the hotel where they were staying so he could rest, and he knew he'd never be able to eat. He changed his business clothes for more comfortable jeans and pulled on a short-sleeved cotton shirt, not bothering to button it. He left the food on the little laminated table and lay down, flipping idly through the television channels. At first when the soft knock sounded at his door he thought it was a mistake, or a door down the hall and ignored it.

The knock came again, this time a little louder, and he went to investigate.

"Hi." Ana stood at his door with a shopping bag of her own. She looked a little uncertain. "I brought my dinner; I thought maybe I could join you. My folks are at the hospital, and since my husband couldn't come with..."

"Oh, sure. Yes," Jared replied, buttoning his shirt. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting..." He stood to one side so she could enter his room, and watched as she made her way to

the table and sat down on one of the rolling chairs. He followed and sat opposite her, but made no move to touch his food.

“I wanted to let you know that Adam is resting as comfortably as he possibly can under the circumstances. His pain is being managed, and he says it's bearable. Only the minor burns are painful, there is a third degree burn on his shoulder that... Well, he doesn't feel that one.”

Jared closed his eyes.

“Have you known my brother long?”

“Yes and no. We met over three years ago, but lost touch. *I didn't keep in touch.*” He fought the urge to apologize.

“I see.” She pulled out a plastic container that had some sort of salad topped with grilled chicken in it. He'd forgotten what he ordered. Something pasta maybe. He'd had no intention of eating it—even at the time—but had ordered it on autopilot.

“Adam was very kind to me. I was probably at my lowest ebb, and he had a way of making things seem possible.”

“I'm torn between curiosity and good manners.”

“Curiosity always wins out, doesn't it?”

She shrugged. “Look it's none of my business, but since you flew here from Colorado when you heard he was injured, maybe you could fill me in on what I don't know, and I'll fill you in on what I do.”

“That seems fair. Adam is precious to me for a lot of different reasons. I was pretty stupid and never told him that.” Jared's throat closed when he caught the flicker of alarm in her eyes. “I don't have to tell him now, either, if it's something you think I should keep to myself.”

“Adam has always been fairly non-communicative about his private life. But lately I've thought he was...a little unhappy. Maybe a little reckless.”

“You mean—”

“Not at work, of course. He'd never let his colleagues down. But it seemed to me whenever we spoke that he was shutting himself off. He stopped coming to Colorado for family events a couple of years ago. Never visited the cabin that I know of.”

*My fault.* Jared's heart sank. “I know his injuries aren't life threatening. What about his work?”

Ana shook her head. “From what they tell me, burns don't just remain static after the initial injury. They can continue to evolve for days after the event, the smoke inhalation damage to his lungs is a factor, and there's a possibility...” She took a deep breath. “There's a possibility that he'll lose his left hand. The fingers were badly burned. Some couldn't be saved.”

Jared slumped over the table with his head in his hands. “*Fuck.*”

“All his life, every minute, he has wanted to be a firefighter. He never wavered from that. He never had a backup plan. I don't know what he'll become if he can no longer do his job.”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” She stopped with her salad fork halfway to her mouth.

“It's nothing bad.” He gave a slight chuckle. “It's just that when I was in that situation, when I'd lost everything and didn't know who I was...Adam took me to your mountain cabin. He showed me your workshop and let me play with your glass. I read your books.”

Frowning, she put her fork down.

“I'm sorry; we should have asked you first I guess.”

“It's not that. I don't care about that. At the hospital, you said I was a part of why you do what you do and I didn't understand.”

Jared went to his laptop case, from which he pulled a handful of blue marbles, all different types, stripes, cat's-eyes, solids, peewees, triple veins.

"I guess I caught what Adam called glass fever. I left your place obsessed." He rolled the little glass orbs on the table. No matter what he was feeling, they always made him smile.

"You make these?"

"Yes." Jared sat across from her again. "For me, it's like making batches of cookies. I can't help myself. And this one" – right next to her eye he held up a small cerulean blue marble with the clarity of a perfect high mountain lake – "is the closest I've ever come to finding the most beautiful blue I've ever seen."

"What blue would that be?"

"Hey, they're almost exactly the same, but yours are...warmer. A more feminine blue. Infinitely less challenging." He dropped the marble into her palm. "I'll never get it right."

"So the blue thing, it's a quest?"

"It's an homage. A kind of eternal flame that I have burning inside of me. Do you think that's stupid? To take away nothing more from the love of your life than the color of his eyes?"

"You *love* my brother," Ana whispered.

"More than anyone else in the world. Isn't that the dumbest thing? As soon as I figured it out, I couldn't bear to tell him. Trying to find the perfect shade of blue glass seemed...safer somehow." Jared looked at the glass on the table. "Does he have someone?"

"I don't know. I don't think so," Ana told him. "He hasn't been very talkative lately."

"If I can help, I will. I'll do anything. Pay for anything. I'm not without resources. I even have some friends in high places." Jared gazed at her with hopeful eyes.

Ana simply looked sad. "I'm pretty sure he's going to need friends in higher places than even you can aspire to, Jared. It's not in anyone's hands but his and God's."

“Do you think he'll see me?” That worried Jared most. Would Adam even agree to let him visit? “Or will he say good-bye and good riddance to the ghosts of Christmas past? I don't mind telling you, I'm not afraid of much. I've played with hot glass and pieces so sharp they could cut me to ribbons. I've watched my house burn to the ground. I've held a dying lover in my arms as he took his final breath and still... I'm afraid to see Adam again.”

Ana gave him a shake of her head. “But it isn't about you this time, is it, Jared?”

## Chapter Ten

One week had passed for Jared while he stared at the walls of the hotel room. He'd watched more television during that time than he'd watched during the entire year. The first couple of days in L.A., it wasn't appropriate for him to visit Adam. Only Adam's family got that privilege anyway, and Jared wasn't sure he'd have taken the opportunity, even if he could have gone. He had dinner nightly with Ana, and it soothed him to hear events from her perspective. From her description, it seemed hardly likely that Adam would benefit from his company. Daily hydrotherapy treatments and trips to the oxygen chambers exhausted him, and he didn't need the added stress of old emotional entanglements. Jared had asked Ana not to tell Adam he was in town, and she'd complied, even though she argued with him about it.

They were both waiting until Adam could focus on anything besides the energy it cost him to heal.

When Ana knocked on the door of his hotel room Friday evening, they had plans to go out for a nice dinner at one of the local restaurants, and then maybe even see a film. Jared could see the interminable waiting was taking its toll on the entire family, although he had little contact with anyone but Ana. Even she admitted a distraction might help ease the tension.

Jared pulled the door open and the first thing he saw was Ana's tear-streaked face.

"What?" he asked, taking her by the hand and pulling her inside. "Bad news?"

Ana ran her fingers over her cheeks, sweeping away the tears and leaving a trail of debris from her mascara behind like the arcs left by windshield wipers. "No, nothing you don't already know."

His heart slowed to an almost normal rhythm as he went to the bathroom to get her something to dry her eyes. "You're tired, aren't you? Remember, *they also serve who only stand and wait.*"

Ana took the box of tissues he proffered. "I'm sorry. It gets to me. I've never seen him like this. He's always just been my goofy kid brother, and this —"

"He's strong, Ana."

"This is too much, even for him." She blew her nose. "I don't feel like going out. I watched him for over an hour today. He was awake, but he kept staring off into nothing. Or watching the crawl from CNN on the bottom of the television screen. Breathing in, breathing out. He gave a one-word answer to any question I asked. He thinks from now on he's only marking time."

"I know the feeling."

"I wish you'd *please* reconsider letting me tell him you're here." When he started to protest, she held her hand up. "Just listen to me. Maybe you think he'll be upset by your presence, but I can't see how being numb is helping him right now."

"Maybe it's not, but he's a long way from needing to deal with romantic entanglements. I didn't even think about that before I came here. I just jumped on a plane and rode to the rescue without taking his needs into consideration."

"And maybe what he needs is something to *feel* about." Ana leaned forward. "Maybe he needs to get pissed. Maybe he needs to fight someone. Maybe love someone or know someone loves him."



"You love him. Your whole family is tight like crazy. I've never seen people so solid."

"You're solid too. You've been carrying this thing for my brother for years, and now you need to grow a pair and step up. Tell him. Let him make up his own mind. Give him something to hang onto or fight against, just...let *him* choose, and not you."

"Jeez."

"I know it's asking a lot. It's asking you to put everything on the line. Maybe he'll completely blow you off and break your heart into a million little pieces. But I'm asking, Jared. For *him*."

Jared stared at Ana for a long time. She was wise and kind, someone he'd want in his corner if he ever had a big fight. He hoped someday they'd work together, collaborate on something that was large and time-consuming. Selfishly, he wanted a happy memory of her to carry on beyond and maybe even replace this sad and tense time.

"All right. When?"

"Now. *Tonight*," she said, getting up. "It's not too late, and he'll be awake still. Bring your marbles."

Jared frowned. "My marbles? Why?"

"They seem to reassure you." She put a hand on his shoulder. "You're going to need them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared had to take precautions against contaminating Adam by wearing a protective plastic covering over his clothing and sterile gloves. The light was dim in Adam's room when Jared entered. Everything white seemed bathed in blue from the glow of the television bolted to the wall. It looked like Adam had it tuned to the local news channel, but Jared didn't think he was watching. From what Jared understood, Adam's burns were largely on his back, left shoulder, and arm down to his left hand.

The whole of the upper left side of Adam's body seemed to be bandaged, padded, and supported. He appeared to be resting comfortably.

Jared longed for a chance to simply look at Adam before he had to say anything. When he approached Adam's bed, he did it as silently as he could. Adam's eyes were closed, but fluttered open as soon as he perceived another presence in the room. Even in the dim light, his eyes were the bluest Jared had ever seen. They were not the same as Ana's. In some inexplicable way, even though they were the very same shade of blue, they were different in their intensity. They opened a little wider when Adam saw him, but other than that, Adam gave him no sign of recognition.

"Hello, Adam. I was in the airport in Denver when I saw on the news..." This was greeted with a watchful silence. "I don't suppose that matters."

Adam exhaled a long breath, as though he'd been holding it.

"I met your family. Your sister's a brick." Jared moved around to the far side of the bed where he could be on Adam's right. "I've been here for a while. Since the day you had your first surgery."

That got a tired laugh. "Cadaver skin. Like Frankenstein."

"That's right." Jared smiled. "We're still looking for Abby Normal's brain."

Adam's laughed again, but then his smile faded. "Why are you here?"

"I brought you something." Jared fumbled around in his jacket pocket and came up with a sphere about two and a half inches around. He held the piece up. It was clear glass with stripes and striations of blue and violet in the center, dynamic and interesting to look at. In the television's light, it threw a strange shadow onto the wall. "Here."

Adam looked at the glass in Jared's hand. "What is it?"

"I don't know, really. Just something I made. It's too big to be a marble, too round for a paperweight. It took several hours to make it. But I have no idea what it is."

"You're still crazy, aren't you?"

"Yes." Jared placed the glass sphere on Adam's chest. "I want you to have this."

"Thank you," Adam replied automatically.

Jared stood silently for a while. Adam did nothing to acknowledge him and left the orb where Jared had placed it.

Eventually, Jared spoke. "Do you remember the reflecting pool?"

"Yes."

"I keep thinking about it. I was a pretty big shit. I harangued you and acted condescending, and still you came a couple of times a week with flowers or puzzles for me."

"I remember."

"Do you? Because I will *never* forget what it felt like to lose everything. Keith was gone; my home was in ashes. I was sick with rage and guilt for failing to protect either of them, as if I could have kept Keith alive by sheer force of will alone, or done something about that damned fire."

Adam shook his head very slightly. "No water. There was no way. I felt bad about that for a long time. I still do."

"You had such serenity when we talked. You came from an untouchable place. I took my anger out on you."

"True."

"Tag," Jared said quietly. "You're *it*."

"Oh, *fuck you*." Adam squeezed his eyes shut.

Jared picked up Adam's right hand, still young and strong. It had long fingers with square blunt tips and golden hairs struggling to the surface on the back.

"I leaned against you. I used you to get my ass up and out of that place, and when I was free of it, I didn't look back."

"You never looked back at me either." Adam frowned at Jared. "What's your point, Jared?"

"I wish I had a point. All I have is a hundred different questions. You took me to Colorado because you said I didn't know the right questions to ask. Fine. I'm slow, and I'm old, and I'm probably not even entirely rational. But now I know the questions. And the first one is what can I do for you?"

"Nothing." Adam picked the glass ball off his chest and tried to hand it back. "It's fine, I'm in good hands. Nothing."

Jared studied Adam. "I've missed you."

"So what, now I get to be your pity fuck?"

"What kind of a question is that? Was I *your* pity fuck?"

"No. But I didn't walk away."

"I'm here now," Jared pointed out.

"And how am I supposed to know you aren't just here because I got hurt?"

"Because I'm telling you." Jared squeezed his hand gently and put his face right in Adam's line of sight. "Because you filled the sky with stars for me and gave me your favorite shade of blue. I loved you then, when I couldn't think about anything else but me all the time, and I love you ten times more now that I can."

"Jeez, Jared." Adam tried to turn his head away, but Jared reached out and gently caught his chin.

"I'm ready to spend the rest of my life proving that to you." He lightly brushed Adam's lips with his own. "Just say the word."

Adam pulled his chin out of Jared's hand. "I can't deal with this right now. I'm all broken. I've lost more than just a part of my hand. I'm not who I was when we were together."

Jared caught Adam's hand and held it, even when Adam would have jerked that away too. "I know, don't you think I know? But I swear. You are like this ball." He held up the glass orb. "This came from bits and pieces of things that were broken. Scraps

from other projects, things anyone might have put in the trash. Now here it is; it's beautiful, it's —”

“Completely useless. Even you don't know what it is, and you made it.”

“I don't have to know what it is,” Jared told him. “I'll find out what it is. It will *become* what it is. In the meantime, you hold onto it. It's beautiful and precious to me and in the process of becoming something wholly new, just like you.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is easy.” Jared rolled his eyes. “Just like falling off a log into a wood chipper and then being dumped into an active volcano.”

“You are such a shit, Jared.” Adam closed his eyes. “You broke my fucking heart.”

“I am so sorry.” Jared pressed his lips to Adam's again, this time tilting his head and asking for entry. Adam made a small sound in the back of his throat and invited him in. Jared kept the pressure gentle, more searching and soothing than passionate. He clasped Adam's hand in his and held on as though he could be a lifeline.

Adam responded with a sigh. “I'm too doped up to fight you.”

Jared rested his forehead against Adam's hand. “I promise you can kick my ass when you're ready. I'm not going anywhere.”

Jared pressed his lips to Adam's cheek. Adam turned toward the kiss, pressing closer. “I'm so scared,” he murmured in Jared's ear. “I'm so fucking scared.”

“Shh,” Jared soothed. “Shh. I've got you.”

“I keep reliving the fire.”

Jared squeezed his hand and let it go. “I know, baby. You've been fighting fire for a long time, haven't you?” He found a chair and pulled it up to the bed, then sat down and laced his fingers with Adam's while he gently stroked the hair back off his face.

“How about I tell you a little of what I've been doing, hm? Pretty soon we'll go back to Colorado for a while, maybe even this winter, if you like, and I'll show you how to do magic with fire.”

## Chapter Eleven

Jared's face was transcendent. In his studio, the heat and glass seemed to be a rush for him and his expression looked like sexual ecstasy. The look on his face caused the blood to race to Adam's dick, and he worried he'd spend his days in the studio with Jared, learning the art of working glass, in a perpetual state of arousal.

*Not like that was a bad thing.*

Only the night before, Jared had closed his shop up after midnight, caught Adam in the falling snow on the way to the deserted parking lot, and rocked his world with a handjob followed by a quickie in the truck and a long night of lovemaking at home. That was only one of the perks of working with his lover at a job both men had a passion for.

"Hey, pay attention," Jared snapped as he spun a glob of molten glass on the end of a rod. "I need heat, fireman."

Adam held the flames from the wide torch at the base of what was going to be a large free-form bowl. As Jared spun it, it opened like a flower and wobbled.

"It's all about movement." Jared turned the piece. "Gravity and force, the way that the earth pulls the glass. So far, I totally suck at this, but I love it."

“You don't suck at it.” Adam was sick of hearing that. Even the pieces Jared scoffed at were in demand, and his wildly imaginative, predominantly blue leaded art glass was highly prized. He watched his lover's eyes in the light of the glowing orb of red-hot glass, and his stomach gave that lurch it always did, just like when they made love.

Sometimes Jared would take the glass and spin it like a baton, lengthening it, using centrifugal force to produce a rod. Sometimes he pulled it, stretching it and making a long rope of colored glass that could start out thick and end up as thin as a stick of sugar candy. Sometimes, like now, Jared would spin a disk around and around, touching the edges with a flat wooden tool like a potter, just a hint of movement that changed the shape as the hot glass hardened and formed. Or he'd roll the edge along a marvering table or a thick mat of wet newspapers in his hand.

The work was fluid and dynamic—like the man who created it—and Jared was obsessed with it, vibrantly alive and pulsing with energy that Adam had been feeding off like a vampire since returning with him to Colorado. Really, long before that he'd come to depend on Jared's love and his powerful personality to get him through months of painful surgeries and physical therapy. He didn't know how Jared had put everything on hold for him, but he had no doubt about why.

Jared *loved* him.

Adam learned that in those first days at the hospital, even as he was now learning to work glass. Jared's patience and his unwavering faith gave Adam everything he needed to face a future that, like the bauble Jared gave him when he returned that first night, had yet to define itself.

Jared was almost giddy as he spun his bowl, continuing that delicate dance, the balance and shift of weight and force of motion that would make the glass thin yet impart its shape.

“You're used to putting out fires. How does it feel to be fanning the flames?” Jared asked as the piece cooled slightly.

"I don't know." Adam watched the piece spin. "When I was a kid, my neighbor's house burned down on Christmas Eve."

Jared looked up. "You never told me that."

"It isn't the best memory. The man who lived there died going back in for one of his kids. They never made it out." Adam closed his eyes. "I watched as the firefighters fought the blaze. I was so attracted to that fire. It was..."

"Glorious," Jared supplied.

"Yes. I *wanted* it. But I hated it."

"I felt the same way when my house burned down. There was all this destruction, but I wanted to fling myself into it, just to feel it. Fire has a terrible beauty, doesn't it?"

Adam stared into the fiery glory hole as he used a long rod to open the oven doors for Jared to reheat the glass in it as they worked, and gave himself a mental shake. "It's true that a lot of firefighters are probably closet pyromaniacs."

"Funny you should mention that. When I'm working the glass, I feel like I'm locked in a dance with the fire. It's sexual, like the energy of creation. Constructive and beautiful while at the same time it's horrifically destructive. It's like getting fucked by the devil."

Adam grinned. "You're still crazy. And it's making me hot, you bastard." Adam opened the doors again for Jared to bring his sculpture out, and took up the torch again.

"What?" Jared's brown eyes took on a feral glow. "Do you find it warm in here? I did warn you the workshop gets—"

"You're doing this on purpose." Adam used the flames to soften the glass where it attached to the punty. He turned the torch off when Jared indicated he didn't need it anymore.

"What, you mean using the things that I know excite you most and talking dirty?"

"Um. Yeah."



“You mean standing here in shorts, waving my hot, *undulating* glass at you while you are helpless to do anything about it?”

Adam frowned. Jared was having entirely too much fun.

“Ah.” Adam backed far enough away from the dangerous equipment to be safe but stayed close enough to still be seen. “That’s where you’re mistaken.” He unbuttoned his shirt bit by bit, watching while Jared perceived his new strategy.

“Adam,” Jared warned. “This is an industrial area and requires a certain amount of protective clothing.”

“I know. I’m far enough away that I’m just going to take my chances.” He slipped his hands down to the waistband of his trousers, judging how effective his little show was by the flare of interest on Jared’s face. He dipped his hands in and, cupping himself, adjusted his now rigid erection so it rose above his pants. “Hey, look. I’m all *sticky*.” He licked the index finger of his right hand and watched as Jared’s eyes nearly bulged.

He’d unbuttoned his jeans and begun to unzip them when he heard a strangled noise from Jared, who cleared his throat. “As I was saying before, I’m quite certain OSHA rules require that—”

An evil smile crept slowly across Adam’s face. “I guess you’re just going to have to fire my ass, Jared, because sometimes a man has needs.”

Adam felt Jared’s eyes hot on him, licking him like flames. It was hard for him not to feel almost painfully embarrassed by the pressure garments covering the scars on his body. Particularly, his left hand, which now resembled more of a scarred red claw than the hand he once used to caress his lover.

The Frankenstein feeling was slow to go away, but the hot, needy way Jared looked at him every time Adam caught him looking was more than enough to make him want to try to get over it. At times like this, when Jared was gazing at him with such love and longing, he felt almost whole and beautiful again.

He took hold of his cock with his good hand and started to work it, while leaning against the wall like some indolent laborer taking a cigarette break in the middle of a long day.

"Uhn... This feels awfully good," he murmured, letting his head fall back. "You just keep spinning that bowl, baby. I'll be back in a sec."

"You fucktard." Jared grinned. "You're going to blow all over my glass." Jared picked up the torch again and heated the base of the bowl where it was attached to the rod.

"Maybe not. Maybe I'll take my time." Adam bit his lip. "I don't know, though. You got me pretty worked up. My heart feels like it's racing. When I close my eyes, I can remember sucking your cock in the snow. How it felt to be on my knees, your dick in my mouth. The noises you made..."

Jared stopped heating the glass and grabbed a V-shaped tool. He scored the piece and tapped the rod lightly to break it off. "You'd better take your time; I'm going to get this to where I can put it down, and then your ass is *mine*."

"I like how you're looking at me, Jared."

"How's that?" A muscle jumped in Jared's jaw. "Like I can't believe you're over there jacking yourself while I'm trying to work?"

"Like you're the fire and I'm the glass. Like you want to burn me up and then fuck me in the center of the flames."

Jared stopped what he was doing and stared. "Where it's *blue*."

Adam thumbed the slit in his cock and gasped. "*Shoot*. Almost there, buddy."

Jared flashed the knocked end of the bowl and got it ready for the kiln. "I swear, Adam. You keep looking at me like that, and I'm putting in a stripper pole over there."

Adam's cock tightened and jerked at the thought, causing his knees to buckle. He pulled his hand away and licked his palm, getting it slick. His breath came in little huffs. "I think I may have discovered a kink here. I think I want to strip for you. I think

that...that... *Oh, fuck, you'd better hurry, lover.* That stripping thing sounds like a great plan to me, if you can explain it to your clients. You need lube in here too, and condoms. One of those little black leather harnesses so I can get a nice grip on you when—”

“*Adam,*” Jared growled. His arousal was evident through the thin cargo shorts he wore. A ring of moisture made a dark stain on the fabric.

“It's like being a kid again, isn't it?” Adam teased. “Seeing something you want, unable to take it. I can see you want me from here. What do you want to do to me Jared? Do you want to bend me over against this wall and fuck me?” He was starting to feel the electric thrum and pulse of his balls as he reached for them with his left hand. His burned hand was encased in a glove, specially made for his fragile, half-destroyed limb, and even though Jared considered it sexy, Adam still found it depressing and foreign to him. He tried not to think about anything but Jared and their shared—if complicated—love affair with fire.

Adam watched Jared open the door to the kiln and push his creation into it to anneal it. He had to reheat and relax the structure of the piece and control the cool-down period in order to toughen the result.

Adam's life with Jared had been exactly like that, forged in the fire when Jared's home burned, superheated by their time in Colorado, relaxed and strengthened by their time apart. Now he felt as though nothing could break them. They'd been tempered by time and adversity, and all that was left was the hard purity of love and faith.

Adam slowed himself down but continued to tease, keeping on the edge so that when Jared finished his project enough to walk away from it he'd be ready. Finally, Jared hurried across the room toward him.

“You shit,” Jared murmured between kisses. “You are so damned beautiful I thought I would die watching you get yourself off over here.”

Adam caught Jared's face between the palms of both hands. "You have no idea how you look when you're working." He kissed Jared in a leisurely way, savoring the smell of the sweat that came from hard work in front of the hot furnaces.

"I should probably put a couch in here or something."

"Nice." Adam cupped Jared's buttocks with his good hand. "But if we go home we can get a shower and fall into bed."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"Okay, shut it down, and let's go." Adam started fixing his clothes, but Jared stopped him.

"Why waste a perfectly great erection?" Jared gripped Adam's dick and worked it, while Adam's hand sought the opening of the damp cargo shorts he'd been staring at all day. They pressed together, cock to cock and skin to skin in a rush of bliss as Adam took both of them in his large hand and began a rhythmic pull and gentle twist.

"Come with me, Jared."

"Look at me," Jared told him. "I could come just from the color of your eyes."

Adam looked down for a second then back up. Heat burned his cheeks. "You and *blue*. He gazed into Jared's eyes and kissed him as they strained against each other. Jared wrapped his arms around his lover's neck and clung to him as the first fine tremors began in his body. Adam cupped Jared's ass to hold him close, crushing him, until all that separated them was skin, and even then, he couldn't get enough.

Jared ground against him as Adam devoured his kisses. Soon Jared was panting and shivering in his arms, and a splash of cum hit Adam's belly even as he gave a grunt, jerked, and slid with a sigh into his own release.

"Jared," he whispered into Jared's sweat-soaked shoulder. "*Jared.*"

Jared clung to Adam as he rocked them both. When Adam opened his eyes, he gave Jared a shy smile. "Love you," he mouthed. "So much."

Jared gazed into eyes that had gone a shade darker but burned with a brightness he hadn't seen before. "Me too. I love you, Adam."

*And there it was.*

That color. That *impossible* blue. So much like the heart of the purest, cleanest flame. It burned through to Jared's soul and purified everything in its path.

"Did I tell you that I've ended my quest for the perfect blue?"

"No." Adam nibbled on Jared's chin a little. "Does that mean we can finally finish a picture puzzle now?"

"I'm serious."

Adam drew back with a frown, brushing a bit of grime from Jared's cheek and finding moisture there. "Serious? You've given it up?"

"No." Jared pulled Adam's face down and pressed their foreheads together until their breath and sweat mingled. He barely grazed Adam's lips with his a few times. Teasing. *Promising*. "A ghrá... I didn't give it up. I found it."

**THE END**

## Z. A. Maxfield

Z. A. Maxfield is a fifth generation native of Los Angeles, although she now lives in the O.C. She started writing in 2006 on a dare from her children and never looked back. Pathologically disorganized, and perennially optimistic, she writes as much as she can, reads as much as she dares, and enjoys her time with family and friends. If anyone asks her how a wife and mother of four manages to find time for a writing career, she'll answer, "It's amazing what you can do if you completely give up housework."

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