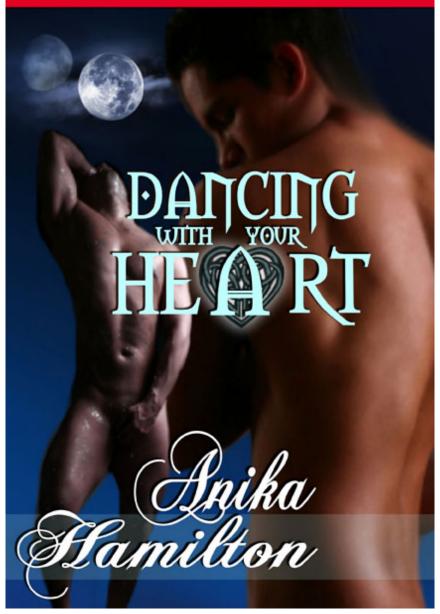
SIREN PUBLISHING



DANCING WITH YOUR HEART

Anika Hamilton

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc. www.SirenPublishing.com **ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:** Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book. This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

DANCING WITH YOUR HEART Copyright © 2009 by Anika Hamilton E-book ISBN: 1-60601-401-3

First E-book Publication: March 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston All cover art and logo copyright © 2009 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc. www.SirenPublishing.com

DEDICATION

To my mom, Marie, for encouraging me to write.

DANCING WITH YOUR HEART

ANIKA HAMILTON Copyright © 2009

Chapter 1

The mountaineers paid homage to the moons, showing appreciation for its presence. Fabian never missed the tribal dance, not since he stumbled on it at the age of five. Loving the music, fascinated by the people, inspired by the dancing, he rejoiced in every experience.

Swaying, his hands stretched towards the sky, face upturned looking at the twin moons and billion and one stars. The music thrummed through and within him, drawing him closer to that place where nothing mattered but the peace in his heart. His body moved, hips twisting and turning, translating the music and making it his own. The percussions sounded beautiful, rich and sharp, matching his mood.

Fabian loved this time on the island, loved the sundown that heralded the twin moons. He loved the music of the mountaindwellers, the beat of their drums singing to his heart. He could feel himself getting lost in the moment. And he without a doubt loved it. What could be better than this absolutely perfect moment?

The cool night air whipped through his hair, carrying the scent of crushed grass and perfumed flowers. The bonfires had been doused after the rising of the second moon, marking the passage from innocence to intimacy.

His fingers painted the sky, seemingly touching the stars. Lowering his hand, he searched each digit for stardust, shrugging when none was in evidence. He lifted his arms towards the sky, reimmersing himself into the moment. The music took him to that place again, the calm resettling into his heart, lighting his soul.

The Time of Innocence had long passed, all the young ones and others who didn't wish to participate had returned to their homes, leaving the mountaintop behind. The next few moments before dawn belonged to the adults. Adults who wanted to indulge in the Dance of Love. On nights like these, when his need got too great he would stay passed the Time of Innocence, hoping for the touch of intimacy. He remembered when he'd become old enough to stay the whole night. His cheeks had reddened with shock and his body had responded to the scenes playing out before him.

The Dance of Love involved the coupling and tripling of people in a dance more intimate than he had ever experienced. Clothes were stripped from bodies that were explored by the touch of the willing and the willed, the mountaineers expressing their love for each other through this dance. Boundaries were important and one did not enter a coupling or tripling without being invited.

This ritual, beautiful and scared, he had yet to experience. No one ever approached him and certainly Marcus Fuller's attempts on those few uncomfortable occasions didn't count. After Marcus had moved into town, he and his men did everything they could to force shop owners out of business, from threats to destroying some of the wares they had for sale. And although no one ever caught him in the act, everyone knew he did the damage himself or at least ordered it done. The man was a menace and Fabian couldn't stand him.

But other than Marcus none of the other revelers had ever taken an interest in him. Something he never understood. Just the fact that he stayed showed his willingness to participate. He didn't look around, knowing his prospects would be nonexistent. So instead he took comfort in his head space.

Someone bounced into him and another person and a third, the sweaty bodies of the other revelers jolting him, knocking him out of his mind space. Wiping his face with the back of his hand, the wet strands of his hair stuck to his body. He wondered if he should go find some coconut milk and cool off now or try to reach that place again.

Moving to the outer edges of the crowd, Fabian dropped his hands away from his face, stroking down his torso, palms sliding over his moistened nipples. A groan to his left shocked him into stopping his hands' progress. His nipples pebbled under his palms in response, becoming pointy nubs at the delicious sound. He normally tried not to pay attention to the other people around him. Who would want him anyway?

He was a nobody, only the poor son of the poor baker in their little town of Brentwood Bourg. He never lacked for anything he really needed growing up, but they didn't have money to spare for the frivolities that were important to others his age.

In a small town like theirs, the baker was usually comfortably well off. But with all the doctor bills related to his mom's lingering illness, they had scrimped and scraped, saving every coin the bakery made. Doctor after doctor had been summoned to their small town at his father's insistence, hoping to save his wife's life. But in the end, all the doctors gave the same prediction. His mother would die and it would seem never-ending. The medicine the doctors provided would ease her pain, but they could do nothing else for her. So Fabian had grown up almost poor, people generally ignoring him. His crush included.

He was just the hired help after all.

But to be lusted after, it had never happened to him and quite frankly he preferred it that way. He ignored the voice in his head that reminded him of his presence on the mountaintop during the Dance of Love. After all, his hand had become his best friend. It didn't complain about anything, making his life good and easy. Or so he tried to convince himself on a nightly basis.

Unfortunately for him, Fabian believed his own bullshit less and less lately. And as a result he had been staying long past the Time of Innocence more and more. In his heart of hearts, he wanted a companion, a mate, someone to dance with. He wanted someone who would feel the music and translate it using his own body language. His greatest desire was to have someone to love. He shook his head. Actually it was to have Caden Eliot's love. But that would never happen. The man had the biggest heart Fabian had ever seen. He made himself available to help any and all members of their little town.

Stroking lower on his chest, he listened for the groan again, the ridges of his stomach rippling under his touch when it came. He loved that sound. His cock hardened, reaching up towards his navel. How could one small sound bring him such ecstasy?

Lost in his thoughts, Fabian didn't notice the person moving in behind him, until strong arms wrapped around his torso. The hard edge of the man's shaft pressed into the small of his back and Fabian gasped. *This could not be happening*. No one ever did the Dance of Love with him.

Small nips and bites placed along the back of his neck drew him out of his musings. Moaning, Fabian felt the rough wetness of the man's tongue stroking over the bites. A calloused palm pressed flat on his neck, moving downwards, following the same path Fabian's hands had taken a few seconds ago. Fabian shivered, his skin prickling with gooseflesh. The soft panting breaths behind him wafted across his moistened skin heightening the pleasure.

But unlike his path, the journey of those hands didn't cease at Fabian's stomach. Those delightful hands continued on, capturing his cock, arousing him further. He had stripped off his clothes along with everyone else and the contact of skin on skin felt delicious. Hissing, his fingers dug into the arm that surrounded him with so much pleasure. The short hairs on that arm provided him with a level of enjoyment he had never yet experienced. How could he have gone so long through life without all of these sensations? How could he experience them all in one night and not die from over-stimulation?

Fabian ached, never having felt this kind of need before, never having wanted this badly before. His stomach tightened, need pooling low in his belly. Feeling this stranger's fingers circling his cock exhilarated him, causing his hips to jerk forward. No other hand had ever touched him there but his own. Up until now, he wouldn't have thought he needed the experience. He thought he could do without this feeling, thought that he would be better off without it and all the complications it brought.

Oh Goddess, how wrong he had been!

Inhaling deeply, Fabian dragged in a whiff of something spicy and male. The scent drew him in, enthralling him. That scent could become familiar. He desperately wanted it to be. The man at his back leaned in closer to his body, rubbing against his back, locking them together. They uttered no words to each other. No pleasantries exchanged between them. It wasn't needed and it wasn't even wanted. But delicious sounds rented the air. And for the first time Fabian added the song of his own voice to the mix.

The hand wrapped more tightly around his cock, stroking Fabian from groin to tip, milking him. His hips thrust forward involuntarily, enjoying the strokes of this man's hand. The man captured his balls, fondling them. Grinding into his back, Fabian could feel the imprint of the other man's cock, the outline marking a hot trail at his back. A rumbling moan escaped him, causing a shudder to travel the length of Fabian's body.

Raw, primitive and sexual, the moment reminded Fabian what his nightly dancing was all about. This primal dance between two people so perfectly matched, striving for something more, for each other, and for the claiming of hearts. Fabian's breathing became labored as the man played with his cock, pressing the tip of his finger against the slit. Fabian wanted more and he couldn't handle any more. Tipping his head back, he rested it on the man's chest before turning it to the side. He buried his nose in the side of the stranger's neck, listening to the staccato beat of his heart. The spicy male scent stronger now and all him, this man intoxicated him and he could easily get addicted.

His companion sped up his hand movements, matching the rhythm of the drums, and the jerky thrusts at his back. The pulsing cock at his back coated him with pre-cum. He wanted to lap up the essence of this man's lust, knowing it must be yummy, hoping he would get the chance to find out.

Tweaking and pinching his own nipples with one hand, Fabian stretched the other out behind him. He needed to touch, to feel. Placing his hand along the man's hips, Fabian drew him closer, loving the hot member at his back and the warm skin beneath his touch. He scooted back as far as possible, wanting more of this man, needing to crawl into his skin. Fabian's craving for this man he didn't even know drove him to distraction.

The music hit a crescendo, taking them along for the ride. Screaming his release, he felt the hot splash of the man's cum staining his back. The man emitted a low rumbling groan, vibrating him from shoulder to thigh, every point they were pressed together. The arms around him tightened, the man's face buried into his neck.

Fabian's release spilled over the man's hand, dripping on his feet. Lifting the hand stained with his cum, Fabian sucked each finger into his mouth, lapping up all the evidence of his pleasure. The groans behind him deepened at his actions, sounding wilder than when the other man had painted his back. Inhaling, the spiciness of the man's scent hit him again, their lovemaking heating his skin, making it muskier.

The man slowly lowered Fabian to the ground, pressing soft kisses to the nape of his neck. Fabian tried to turn over but the man stopped him, cuddling up to him. Not overly worried, Fabian figured they had plenty of time to get to know each other. They had time before the sun rose again. Snuggling back into those strong arms, lassitude melted his bones and sleep quickly claimed him.

Blinking his eyes open, Fabian stretched his arms above his head, working out the kinks from sleeping on the ground. He woke refreshed, ready to begin the next round, needing to explore his man. He looked to the sky, noting the first moon had completely disappeared. He had time enough to indulge. A quick glimpse of his shoulder revealed that his mystery man was not behind him. He had hoped to learn his identity.

Disappointment seized him, constricting his heart as he wondered if it had all been a dream. He searched the crowd, staring at the people milling around, wondering if any of them belonged to him. Not that he would have recognized the man's face or voice for that matter if presented to him. But he tried nonetheless.

He had hoped the moment hadn't only affected him. But maybe he'd been wrong. The touches, the light nips, this had been his first sexual encounter with anyone, man or woman. Fabian had never even tasted another's lips. Hadn't he done it right?

The mountain top seemed almost deserted and the first moon setting meant dawn would be making an appearance soon, officially ending the night. The people who lived on the mountain had most likely returned to their lodges and caves, probably checking when the twin moons would rise again. While the townspeople had probably made their way down the mountainside, following the path that led to Brentwood and eventually home. He knew why they made haste. They hoped to get as much sleep as possible before they had to be off to work again.

Giving up on finding his mystery man, he decided to go home and do the same. He got his feet under him, his eyes scanning the area, trying to pinpoint the location of his clothes. Surprise widened them when he noticed the pants and shirt resting on the grass carpeted floor right beside him. Folded into a neat bundle, a note topped off the pile.

The night had been special for him. It had brought new perspective to his life and a new appreciation for life. Plus, he had finally participated in the Dance. It also made him aware of something new and different, something that had never affected him quite so deeply before now. Fabian now knew how to make love. Well, sort of.

Reading the note, he realized he had one more experience to add to his growing list tonight. As if his orgasm at the hands of another man wasn't enough.

Fabian Baxter, you are the love of my life, the note read, and when the time is right I will reveal myself to you. Remember this night as the beginning and the end, the beginning of us and the ending of our loneliness.

His vision blurred, misting over with emotion, the words swimming on the paper. Using the edge of his shirt, he dried his eyes, reading the note again. Looking at the signature, Fabian marveled at the wonder of his life changing so drastically in the space of one single night. He smoothed his fingertips over every letter of every word. The last words scribbled on the note stated clearly and firmly:

Fabian Baxter, you now have a secret admirer.

Chapter 2

Caden Eliot whistled as he walked along the shop-lined street, heading towards Eliot Ironworks. As the local blacksmith, he loved working with his hands, enjoyed creating the tools for cooking, the furniture and the fixtures and all the other stuff he made for the villagers. Inhaling deeply, he passed shop after shop, waving at the various merchants and customers familiar to him while politely acknowledging the others he didn't know. Their small town regularly got visitors from the residents of the neighboring towns, the mountain, and the seashore. With the right amount of coin or commodities to trade, one could get almost anything they desired here.

Noticing Mrs. James and her large brood of hellions approaching, he stepped off the walkway and onto the graveled road. He knew those little brats and what they would be about. Hurrying his steps, he laughed as he tried to evade their grasping, grimy hands. He could hear their giggles adding to his merriment as they chased after him. His heart felt light with the joy suffusing him. Waving goodbye to them as they finally left him alone, they returned to their mother and the shopping expedition he knew she had planned for them all. Then the ones old enough would be off to school for their lessons.

Clouds crowded the sky making the dawn appear dark and grim. But not even the threat of a rainstorm and all the potential disaster it heralded could dampen Caden's good humor. Last night had been wonderful. Swinging his arms, he couldn't believe he had held his love within them. He certainly couldn't ask for a better beginning in his quest to conquer Fabian's heart. For years now, he'd been wondering how to achieve his heart's desires. And when his best friend, Jasmine Holly, mentioned seeing Fabian at the Dance of Love, he knew that would be his chance. Now he and Fabian had had their first sexual encounter. And although the other man didn't know Caden had been behind him, Fabian had gained pleasure from the moment, lapping up the proof from Caden's fingers afterwards. Shuddering at the remembered experience, Caden felt the uncomfortable tightening of his pants.

Thoughts of Fabian diverting him, Caden decided to make a detour. He wanted to see the other man before starting work, more so he *needed* to see him. The graveled road crunched under his boots as Caden turned off onto the next pathway, leading away from his shop. The distance to Baxter's Bakery was short and he could smell the delicious aromas of breads and sweets before he even saw the front door. Excitement zinged through him at the prospect of seeing the other man again.

Entering the bakery, Caden surveyed the room. The shop had about eight customers waiting to be served but he didn't care. Actually, it was to be expected. Baxter's made the best pastries he had ever tasted, the best on the island actually. He might be biased because of his feelings for Fabian, but the crowd would seem to support his opinion.

He walked over and joined the line, deciding that he would ogle Fabian while he too waited his turn. The other man stood at a counter, collecting payment for the orders the customers placed. A door to the left of Fabian led to the kitchen where his father most likely currently worked slaving over the oven. To the man's right, a glass case held some of the baked goods already prepared so far. The rest of the room had only standing space.

The first customer left and Mrs. Russell went up and placed her order. His eyes alighted on Fabian and even with the flour stains on the man's cheek he was breathtaking. Caden's heart thumped hard in his chest, his mouth watering. He wanted a bite of that man's cinnamon flavored skin again. Smiling, the intimacy of last night reared its head, the ache in his jaw reminding him of how much he had smiled since his late night dance with Fabian.

Standing behind Mr. Addison, his eyes never left Fabian's face. Hair curled, framing strong facial features, the man was stunning. Fabian's beautiful chocolate brown eyes shone with warmth as he helped Mrs. Russell. He directed a smile at her, but the curving of those sensual lips hit Caden right in his gut. Caden's body responded to that smile, need building, gathering, settling in his lower stomach. As if the smile spoke to him, saying Sex, Now, Caden, Fabian.

Mrs. Russell left with her package of baked goods and the next person approached the counter. He paid little attention to the other customers, recognizing them mostly by voice, his eyes wholly focused on his lover. Moving along with the line, Caden took a couple steps forward. His mood soured however when he heard the voice of the next customer. What was *he* doing here? Caden scowled.

"Fabian, how does your dawn fair thus far?" the customer at the front of the line asked, the words coming out a deep purr, making Caden shudder with revulsion. Marcus Fuller had been trying to get into Fabian's pants from the time he moved to their little town. Well as far as Caden was concerned, that's all the man had been trying to do. He made no other efforts to earn a living or contribute to their community. The man was a menace plain and simple.

Growling, the deep angry sound rolled from Caden's throat ceaselessly. He clenched his fist at his sides, his chest rising and falling. No one had the right to talk to Fabian like that. No one but him. Mr. Addison took a step forward, furtively looking over his shoulder, probably fearing Caden's displeasure would be directed at him.

Using polite words and spoken with very little emotion, Fabian responded, "It fairs well, Marcus. And how has your dawn been?" Fabian asked, much to Caden's distress. Why would Fabian engage the man in these kinds of pleasantries? Caden wanted to shout at Fabian, to tell him not to encourage that asshole. If you gave Marcus a small opening, he would take twenty times what you offered.

Five other customers needed to be served before him and Caden chaffed at the necessity of waiting that long before dealing with this situation. Fabian moved about behind the counter, talking with Marcus while he prepared the man's order. Funny, the male customer Fabian served before Mrs. Russell hadn't inspired this very harsh response from Caden a few minutes before. But rational thought failed him at the moment.

His scalp started to tingle. Anger festered within him as he continued to watch Marcus flirt with *his* man. Narrowing his eyes, Caden balled his hands into tight fists. The only thing stopping him from going to the front of the line and physically dragging his lover out of the shop was that Fabian didn't seem to notice. The man had always been oblivious to the advances of others, never recognizing his own appeal. That was the reason for Caden's secret admirer tactic. He hoped to get at Fabian by whatever means he could, since the subtle approach just didn't seem to work.

Fabian finished up Marcus' order and the man had no choice but to leave the bakery. Caden's patience had worn thin by the time he made it to the front of the line. His eyes no longer reflecting warmth he had felt earlier, instead they now glared at Fabian. Mouth tightening into a scowl, Caden didn't even notice the other customer entering the bakery after to stand behind him.

He was late for work, through no fault of the man standing behind the glass enclosure. But he didn't care. Nope, Caden was hopping mad. "You were slavering over the man." Sneering at his lover, his mouth acted as if it no longer took orders from his brain. He knew Fabian hadn't responded to the other man in any way. In fact, the man hadn't even encouraged Marcus. But right now he was too stupid with jealousy to think about that.

Fabian opened his mouth, but when nothing came out, he snapped it shut. His face reddened, storm clouds building within the depths of his eyes. Placing his palms flat on the glass top, Fabian leaned forward slightly as if imparting a great secret. "Go fuck yourself, Caden. And leave me be." His lips tipped up at the sides in a sardonic smile.

Caden's mouth compressed into a thin line and rage consumed him even as his cock hardened with arousal. He had watched the interchange between the two men. He knew Fabian wasn't interested in Marcus. But no matter how irrational his reaction was, Caden still hated anybody showing the slightest bit of interest for his man. Fabian was his and no one else's. He also found the current state of the man's anger turned him on incredibly.

"I'd rather fuck you," Caden whispered back, his voice deepening, sounding smoky to his own ears. His heart rate picked up when those words passed his lips. To be able to tell Fabian how he felt, even if it was under the guise of anger and threat, was exhilarating. Licking his lips, Caden inhaled the scents of the bakery. The sweet pastries, warm breads, and Fabian's heated flesh, threatened to make Caden's cock explode in his pants.

"You wish," Fabian retorted, a hint of a sneer surrounding his lips, even as his eyes flared with something heated and deep and elemental. Caden wanted to trace this man's lips with his tongue, drink that sneer and turn it into lust. He wanted to feast from his man and feed Fabian his love, drowning in the wonder in his eyes as they discovered each other.

He wanted Fabian.

"Now either order something, or leave." Fabian demanded, curling his hands into a fist on top of the glass enclosure.

"Are you on the menu?" Caden mused, loving this fire from his love, the sparring between them making him want. He couldn't believe his own courage to say these things to the man. The thought of wasting another dawn, of the what-ifs that had previously plagued him, solidified his plans in his mind and heart. He didn't want to go another moment, see the twin moons again without Fabian. His talk with Jasmine and the encouragement she gave him bolstered his confidence. He would have Fabian Baxter. Soon he would have his man for always.

Eyes widening, Fabian obviously hadn't expected this kind of comeback from him. His nostrils flared and he removed his hands from the glass surface, taking a step back. "Caden," he groaned, his voice heating up, the raspy sound attesting to the effect Caden's question had on him. This was definitely a good sign for their future.

Caden reveled in that huskiness, rejoicing that his words had touched on some deep-seated need within Fabian. Now all he had to do was continue mounting his attack, storming the fort Fabian had erected around his heart, touching that need. They could be so good to each other, for each other, and before long Caden aimed to make Fabian believe it as much as he himself did.

* * * *

Fabian watched Caden walk out of his family bakery, eyes glued to his pant clad buttocks, admiring the smooth rolling motion below the man's waist. Capturing his lip between his teeth, he bit down hard, hoping to distract himself from the appealing picture. The urge to knead the man there so strong, Fabian actually swayed towards him. He caught himself before completely toppling over, hands splayed on the counter, stopping his forward momentum. Groaning in dismay, he peeked up at his next customer, Ms. Monica, but luckily for him the older woman dug inside her oversized bags oblivious to the direction of Fabian's gaze. *Whew*!

Looking back towards the exit, he noticed that Caden had already left. His lips curved up into a small smile as his pulse finally slowed from the conversation he just completed with the other man. That had been fun...and arousing. He couldn't believe the things they'd said to each other, the promise hidden in every sentence. Thinking about the conversation again, he started grumbling when he realized the man had left without even buying a single pastry. Annoyed, Fabian's amused stare turned into a glare directed at the empty space Caden recently occupied. The fact that he hadn't been the first customer ever who left without making a purchase did not escape Fabian. But that didn't seem to matter. Why did it bother him when Caden did the same?

It wasn't as if he was interested in Caden or so he tried to convince himself. His heart did a few quick double taps, increasing at his obvious untruth. Okay, he wasn't interested anymore. His heart sped up again, calling him out as a liar. "Would you shut up?" Fabian muttered, angered at his own body's response, realizing the futility of lying to himself. How sad to be betrayed by one's own beating heart.

"Well I never," an angry voice penetrated his thoughts. "Fabian Baxter, I have been coming to this bakery since you were barely old enough to see over the top of this here counter." Ms. Monica, the schoolmarm, huffed out, rapping her knuckles on the hard surface. "How dare you address me in such a manner."

Concern for her health overrode the humiliation of a witness to his self-discussion when the woman's cheeks began turning a deep shade of purple. Worrying his bottom lip, he wondered if the older woman would suffer an apoplexy. She really didn't seem at all well. Looking over his shoulder, he sought out the door that led to the kitchen as another thought occurred to him. What would he do if his father saw him upsetting Ms. Monica? Emitting a relieved sigh, he turned back to the older woman.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Monica. The comment wasn't intended for you." He smoothed all emotions from his features, putting the most innocent look on his face that he could muster. He knew Caden was pure trouble. The man wasn't even in his vicinity and he still caused problems.

Both eyebrows rising, she never quite mastered the condensing one brow lift, not that anyone had the guts to mention it, "Really? Since I'm the only person currently in the bakery right now, young man, to whom were you referring, hmm?"

Opening his mouth to spout some more nonsensical explanation, he snapped it shut again. What was the point? The woman wouldn't believe him anyway. Not that he blamed her. The situation had deteriorated into one of the strangest conversations of his life, and that included any and all dealings with Marcus Fuller. Without a doubt, Caden would pay for this.

"Pardon me, Ms. Monica. I did not intend to offend you," he apologized, determined to put an end to this farce of a discourse and stare them towards safer topics. "What can I get for you, ma'am?"

She glared at him for a long moment, the longest of his entire life, before grudgingly saying, "This is the last dawn that my older kids will be in lessons with me. They move onto learn with Mr. Walker on the morrow. I'm going to be helping out some but it won't be the same." Her voice cracked slightly and she dabbed surreptitiously at her eyes. Everyone knew Ms. Monica took her duty to the kids very seriously. Sometimes, aspiring teachers from neighboring town came to study with her, hoping to learn how to become as good an influence on others as she had been. "Anyway, I wanted to get them something sweet. You know, sort of a farewell kind of thing."

"Mmm-hmm," he replied. Caden had popped into his mind, those beautiful light brown eyes warm and teasing. The lips he wanted to taste so badly. He wanted the other man so much he ached.

Looking through the glass enclosures, she perused the selections on display. His dad had just placed a new batch of pastries inside, so they were hot and fresh. "Maybe something filled with strawberries and plums and bananas. Not together, of course."

"Of course." Distracted, he imagined the intimacy last night, imagined that his secret admirer and Caden were one and the same.

"Don't sass me boy." Ms. Monica used her best school teacher voice on him, shoving him out of his musings for the second time that hour. Dammit, Caden jumbled his mind, messing with his focus. He hadn't even remembered he stood in the bakery.

But that voice did to him what it did to every single person in their small town. He automatically stood taller, clasping his hands together, head held at the right angle. He remembered he no longer had to play the good little schoolboy and immediately started deflating. Face heating with embarrassment, his shoulders hunched and his hands swung forward resting at his sides. His head dipped down, hair falling around his face to hide his features. "No ma'am," he replied, ever respectful.

Chuckling, Ms. Monica patted him on the cheek, treating him like one of her charges. His humiliation worsened. "You were always one of my most well behaved pupils, Fabian Baxter. Even if you haven't settled down yet," she scolded, reproof in her eyes.

His jaw dropped, mouth hanging open with shock surely written all over his face. Ms. Monica certainly didn't pull her punches, did she? Heat crawled up his neck, reddening his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Clearing his throat, he thought and discarded every response in his head. What could he say to her, anyway? The woman had a valid point, one she should be making.

Her next words spared him from saying anything stupid, as she ended with, "Be a dear and have the pastries delivered to the school by two after high noon, will you please?"

"Yes, ma'am." Fabian nodded, accepting the coins Ms. Monica handed to him. After he stowed away the money, he turned to look up at her watching started towards the door.

"Have a good dawn, Fabian Baxter." Ms. Monica said, breezing out of the bakery and leaving Fabian floundering for air in her wake.

Thankfully, he had precious little time to dwell on Ms. Monica's admonishment after that. As soon as the door swung closed behind her, a flurry of customers descended on the bakery, everyone getting a little something to begin or end their work time. Closing time came really late for Fabian, especially since he had done double duty. His body ached. The strain of working in the kitchen alongside his father when the bakery was empty and working at the counter when customers showed up made him weary. Fabian wondered if Damien would show up for work the next morning. Damien Carlisle usually worked the counter, freeing up Fabian to work with his father. He certainly couldn't do this again, especially since he would be participating in the picnic auction on the morrow.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" His father approached him, lifting the apron from around his neck, preparing to leave even without Fabian's response. "I could stay and help finish the clean up. You worked as hard as I did this dawn, maybe even harder." The concern in his father's voice made Fabian smile. Dark circles rimmed the older man's eyes, weariness evidenced there.

Wrapping his arm around his father's shoulders, Fabian led him towards the door. He refused to argue with him. This was a small thing he could do for the man who raised and loved him so much. "I'll see you at home, Papa. And I don't mind. You know, you're getting up there in age. You need your rest," Fabian teased, eyes sparkling at the older man.

Fabian's father, Jermaine Baxter, huffed out a breath. "I'm not afraid to get the switch for your behind, you little devil." His dad mock threatened, grinning. They were really close, the loss of Fabian's mother forged a tighter bond between them. He allowed Fabian to lead him to the door. "I'll see you at home, son."

The sun descended, bathing them in shades of red. Outside, Fabian noticed others closing up their stores as well, making preparations to go home or to Barney's Eatery. He watched his father for a bit, realizing his good fortunes. His father accepted him completely, quirks and all. Fabian had learnt long ago, he could talk to his dad about anything. And although they hadn't had a chance yet, he intended to discuss this secret admirer situation with him soon. He needed someone else to talk to, to help him sort out the situation. He worried that he made more out of this unknown admirer to deflect from his love for Caden Eliot. Could that be?

Goddess, he hoped not.

When his father turned a corner, he went back inside the bakery and moved behind the counter to begin the clean up. His father had carried the receipts and collections with him, so Fabian wouldn't have to perform that task. But he needed to sweep the floors and clean out the display case. His eyes snagged on a piece of paper on the floor by the door.

Returning to pick it up, he opened the door again but saw no one. The note had been resting under the mail slot on the door. Anybody could have pushed it through the opening. Closing the door, he looked around the bakery as if trying to divine the source of the missive, wondering who could have delivered the note and when. He unfolded the piece of paper and read the words.

Hello, my Fabian, you looked delicious this dawn. Your hair mussed, your cheeks smudged with flour. Baxter's Bakery might be the best in town, but you are the only treat I want. Will you feed me?

Fabian looked at the words. No one ever said things like that to him. The note pleased him, the sentiment sweet but he was confused. He loved Caden, but he wanted this admirer, too. He wanted all the things the secret admirer represented, the mystery, the passion, the tenderness. He read the rest.

Fabian Baxter, your secret admirer awaits.

Chapter 3

"Ten," someone shouted. The auction was in full swing by the time Caden arrived. He had rushed to the outskirts of the town, following the path that led right to the event. Near the entrance to the forest, this area was constantly used as a gathering place for the residents. All kinds of events were held there, from hand-fasting ceremonies to graduations to last rites ceremonies to town meetings. Easily accessible, this place provided the space they needed to celebrate, plan, or mourn.

Chairs lined up next to each other, separated by a crude aisle in the centre and faced a raised staging area. A lectern rested in the middle of the stage where the auctioneer stood overseeing the event. People fidgeted on their stools, the heat making them restless. The storm hadn't come the previous dawn as most had predicted and this dawn was bright and sunny.

Sweat trickling down his back, he worried his bottom lip with his teeth, wondering if he had missed Fabian's turn. His heart constricted at the possibility. The other man had never participated before and Caden did not want to miss the opportunity to win him. The darn Patrick job took much longer than he had planned. The intricacy of the barn fixtures had been very time-consuming.

Making his way around the perimeter of the small crowd, he listened as the bids increased. He went as close to the stage as humanly possible, surveying the crowd. Noticing an empty stool located between Mrs. Foster, the seamstress, and Mr. Rhodes, the newest member of their community of Brentwood Bourg, he stepped over and on some feet and sat down. Relief made him weak when the person up for bid came into view. His friend, Jasmine, stood poised next to the auctioneer. The proceeds from the auction would fund the school supplies the town had to trade for. These kinds of fundraisers occurred quite often, the community's way of chipping in to help the young ones.

"We have a bid of fifteen, anyone for seventeen?" the auctioneer shouted, his booming voice carrying over the crowd. The voice of the auctioneer, Mr. Camper, carried loudly to the back of the crowd. He always presided over these events because of his ability to be heard.

Ignoring the man now that he knew Jasmine was next on the auction block, Caden scanned the remaining people on the stage. He glimpsed someone fidgeting off to the side, folding and unfolding his arms, straightening his shirt, tugging at his trousers. *Fabian*. Caden breathed, the man's usual mannerisms calming him instantly. The man was gorgeous, his curly hair blowing in the wind, his cheeks red, his clothes more disheveled than not. But still he just couldn't stand still. Humor blossomed in his chest as Caden settled back in his chair. Good, he hadn't missed him.

Eyes shifting back to Jasmine and meeting hers, he raised his hand in a wave of greeting. She started bouncing on the balls of her feet, loving the attention this auction afforded her as the bids increased. Blowing her a kiss, he leaned back even more in his chair and crossed his arms, anxious for Fabian's time to start.

"We have twenty from Caden," the auctioneer announced and Caden wanted to throttle him

"What?" someone screamed over to his right, clearly vocalizing Caden's own thoughts as gasps and quiet murmurs reverberated throughout the crowd.

Caden jumped to his feet, hands fisted at his sides, his shock matching that of everyone there. What the fuck? "I never bid," he growled, realizing too late how horrible his response would seem to the gathered crowd. Biting down on his lip, he stopped anything more stupid from escaping his mouth, and dropped back into his chair. He tried to make himself small, wanting to hide from this situation.

The auctioneer continued uninterrupted, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. "Do I hear twenty-one?"

"Sorry," he mouthed to Jasmine, mortification making his ears burn, buzzing from all the chatter. Giggling traveled to him from the stage, making him cringe. Jasmine always found the humor in a situation. But really, she took entirely too much enjoyment in his current discomfort. *Hellion*.

Sweating with embarrassment, he sank lower, butt scrapping against the stool. Any lower and he would be sprawled out on the floor. Although he knew escape wasn't possible, Caden scanned the crowd, looking for a safe exit route, embarrassment making him sweat even more. Then he remembered his reasons for coming in the first place. Like Fabian he never attended the auctions either. There hadn't been any point before. The only man he wanted to win hadn't entered and he didn't think Fabian would bid on him if he had signed up. But this time was different and he wouldn't leave before winning Fabian, no matter how crazy things got.

He searched the crowd again, looking for one person in particular. The thunderstruck visage stopped his roving eyes, shooting daggers at him and churning his gut. Found him. What could he say? Taylor Jenkins, Jasmine's mate, looked livid, the veins on his neck popping out, eyes locked on him in a way that reflected loathing. Caden wondered if he would make it home in one piece that sundown.

Raising his hand, Taylor bid again, the challenge evident in his stare. "Twenty-five," he growled, the words coming out garbled. His gaze dared Caden to say something, warned him of the consequences if he did. The man's anger seared him even from that distance separating them. Folding his arms over his chest, the muscles of Taylor's arms and chest flexed and bulged effectively delivering his threat. Caden ducked out of Taylor's line of sight, using Mr. Rhodes as a shield. He could hear giggling coming from the stage again, louder this time, grating on his nerves. He knew his objection to her laugh stemmed from the joke being on him. For some reason, Jasmine found this very dangerous situation hilarious, delighting in her mate's barbaric ways. He turned his head towards her, his eyes shining with the promise of revenge. But instead of meeting her gaze, his eyes collided with Fabian.

Hurt and anger reflected back at him in those beautiful eyes he loved so much. He never wanted to see that look again, never wanted to be the cause. Dammit, this noontime auction was *not* turning out the way he wanted it to, the way he'd planned. Desperate, his lips curved into a tentative smile, hoping to ease the man somehow. Regardless of the issues so far, he refused to give up on this venture and this mix-up would not deter him from his chosen path. Before the night was out, Fabian would know how much he cared one way or another.

"Twenty-five, going once," the auctioneer looked in his direction, a prompt to bid again. *Oh no!* Shaking his head almost violently at the man, Caden scooted down lower, the stool digging uncomfortably into his back. "Twice," he continued. "Sold to Taylor Jenkins. Come collect your prize."

When he got on stage, Taylor bent down his larger than large frame, kissing Jasmine in front of everyone. He was staking his claim, letting the crowd know that no one else was allowed to touch. As if anyone would dare. Jasmine melted into his body, pressing herself against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. There was no doubt those two belonged together, an irrefutable fact that Caden already knew to be absolutely true.

He would have to do a lot of damage control with Taylor, convince the man this had been an accident. Hiding for the rest of his life did not appeal to him in the least. But that could wait until later, much later. His man stood on the auction block now, awaiting his fate. The money in his pocket burned a hole where it rested, eager to be spent and help Caden claim his prize.

"Next on the auction block, the handsome and wonderful baker, Fabian Baxter," the auctioneer introduced. "He has prepared a wide variety of pastries to whet your appetite. And all of you who have tasted a treat from Baxter's Bakery know exactly what I mean. Now, let's open the bidding. Starting at five?" Mr. Camper asked.

Caden sat up straighter on the stool, raising his hand in the process. His heart rate increased, his cock now semi-hard, he was so close. In a matter of moments, Fabian would belong to him, for tonight at least, longer if luck was on his side. His heel tapped on the ground, leg jerking, his excitement bleeding through into the nervous action.

"Five from Caden. Seven?"

Caden glanced at Fabian, catching the widened eyes and slack jaw. The man hadn't obviously hadn't expected to be the recipient of his bid. Well, Fabian was his. The other hurt in the other man's eyes receded, reflecting wonder and some hope. His lips finally returned Caden's smile, softening his features even more.

"Seven," Marcus answered and just like that Fabian's reactions turned to disgust. His face paled, lips flattening into a fine line.

Caden really wanted to hurt the man, the gall of Marcus to bid on his man. "Ten," Caden countered, jumping to his feet. Thank the Goddess, he had brought a large sum of coins with him. It would seem he needed it, if that asshole Marcus was here. He couldn't let Marcus win, more importantly he couldn't lose this one chance with Fabian. Heart sinking at the very real possibility of that happening, he fisted his hands, locking eyes on Marcus.

Strangely enough, he felt like this was his last chance. He loved Fabian so much, but fear had kept him from pursuing the man. And although he wasn't sure why he felt this way he knew his time was running out. He needed to see this plan to fruition, needed to complete the tasks he set himself, complete the plan he had implemented the night of the twin moons. He needed to storm Fabian from two fronts, the secret and the obvious.

"Fifteen," Marcus announced, the auctioneer barely having a chance to get a word in edgewise. A smug smile showed from Marcus' oily face, reminding Caden of the reasons for his hatred of the man. He could not be trusted. He had waltzed into town, never telling much about his past that didn't sound false. Caden had taken an instant dislike to the man, Marcus rubbing him the wrong way, on many levels.

"Thirty," Caden exploded, his teeth gnashing together. That was all the money he had in his pocket. At his sides, his hands balled into tighter fists as he waited to hear from Marcus again. The auctioneer acknowledged his bid, but Caden's eyes never wavered from Marcus, watching his every move, fearing it wouldn't be enough to win Fabian.

Marcus rummaged through his pouch, finally coming up empty. Crossing his arms over his chest, the man plopped down on the chair. The satisfaction rushing through Caden's veins made him giddy and a little lightheaded. He'd won. Fabian was his.

"Caden's bid of thirty, going once, going twice, sold to Caden Eliot." A wide smile split the auctioneer's face. The crowd looked quite pleased with themselves as well. Everyone acted like they each won Fabian, too, some even clapped. He couldn't help how proud he felt, as he went to claim his man. Half the town probably knew he was in love with Fabian. And sometimes he wished someone would let him know if Fabian felt the same way.

He walked to the table at the side of the stage, paying the bid price to the collector before going up on stage to claim his prize. Holding out his hand to Fabian, Caden waited with bated breath to see what the other man would do.

Fabian had seemed so hurt during the whole Jasmine fiasco. Would he look past his hurt to eat with Caden? The hand capturing his in a warm embrace told Caden, yes.

* * * *

Fabian had felt betrayed, unable to even look at Caden. He hated to admit his crush on the man, his fantasies about having him, of having the experience of falling in love with each other. And when the man seemed to have bid on his best friend, Jasmine, he figured he had no chance. He couldn't compete with breasts and other such womanly parts and more importantly he didn't want to try. No one ever bid on Jasmine at these auctions. Taylor was way too scary to tangle with. The man's love for his mate was always on display for all to see, just like the kiss he planted on her lips a few moments ago. Now before the whole community Caden had declared his intentions to pursue Jasmine and challenge Taylor.

The unfairness of life hit him hard, to have a secret admirer who he had no hope of identifying and a long lasting crush he had no hope of acquiring. Heart constricting with his disappointment, Fabian remembered feeling the need to leave, to escape. He hadn't been stupid enough to expect Caden would bid on him, but he had hoped. The auctioneer called his name, eliminating his ability to exit gracefully and unseen. The bidding had started and Fabian had ignored the auctioneer's words not caring overmuch who would win him, until he heard, "Five from Caden."

And just like that Fabian had perked up. Caden bid on him, his mind tried and failed to understand, to truly comprehend the situation. Why would Caden bid on him? What was the other man playing at? Pondering these questions, that pesky thing called hope started to blossom again, lightening his heart. His confusion and happiness, however, were short-lived as the wonder of Caden bidding on him morphed into the horror of the disgusting man, Marcus Fuller, bidding on him as well.

This was some kind of celestial trance where he would be forever plagued with the man of his dreams and the one of his nightmares trying to win him. The situation just couldn't be real. Head swinging from side to side as the bidding escalated, Fabian watched with a certain level of detachment as the two men went back and forth, fighting for their prize. Anxiety began setting in as Marcus appeared to be close to winning him. But then Caden had triumphed, giving him some measure of relief.

Leaving the auction immediately after the bidding, hands warmly ensconced in each other, Fabian walked next to Caden on the way to the picnic location the other man selected. Surprise thrummed through his body, holding him in its clutches. His mind couldn't make sense of the current situation. Inhaling deeply, he tried to calm his racing heart as excitement shot through him. Verbally sparring with his crush was one thing, being this close to him quite another. Even with the evidence at his side, he could hardly believe Caden would be his until sundown.

He stared down as the grass muffled their steps and the sounds of the animals chattering followed them on their journey. Leaving Brentwood Bourg, they entered the forest and continued on their journey. Fear and hope warred within him as his need for Caden increased with each and every step. He couldn't handle falling deeper for this man, something he knew could happen quite quickly. Tilting his head up and slightly to the left, he focused on Caden's profile. Fabian drank in the short spiky hair, the nose with its bump, the kissable lips. Handsome didn't begin to describe this man. Love barely scratched the surface of how Fabian felt for him.

Stopping suddenly, Caden declared, "This is it." He released Fabian's hand, placing the basket on the grassy floor. He wanted to snatch up the other man's hand, not liking that small separation between them. Oblivious to his struggles, Caden reached inside the basket and pulled out the blanket he had packed. Fanning out the material, he carefully smoothed it out.

Fabian watched his every move, not participating, unable to help in anyway. His mind was still occupied with trying to fight the urge to grab Caden to him and also figure out why Caden had bid on him. However, his mind wasn't completely occupied by only these two issues. More and more, his thoughts moved away from them and turned to more pleasurable pursuits such as admiring Caden's body. His arms and legs flexed as he performed the simple task of getting everything ready. He should be embarrassed for not helping but really it was the man's own fault for looking so delectable.

Caden sat cross-legged on the blanket with Fabian mirroring his actions. He rested his elbows on his knees, cupping his face as he continued to watch Caden. The blacksmith didn't seem to mind his perusal and thank the Goddess for that. He dug out the food Fabian prepared, laying it out neatly on the little tray between them.

Staring at Fabian, Caden said, "Fabian listen, I was not trying to bid on Jasmine." His words sounded so sincere that Fabian wanted nothing more than to believe him. He met the other man's gaze, furrowed brow and all and regarded him closely. For so long, he had wanted to have this opportunity to get to know Caden better, to be able to reveal his true feelings. And since this chance had presented itself he wouldn't risk it for an unsure declaration in front of bunch of nosy people.

"Okay," Fabian responded tentative but hopeful. Things would eventually work out the way it was supposed to. He didn't want to spend their time together worrying about all the 'what ifs'. Caden sat here with him, paying to spend time with him. That meant something and Fabian would enjoy it.

"Okay," Caden's answer sounded as unsure as his own but to Fabian's relief the other man didn't press. "Let's see what we have here." Looking at the items he had laid out, Caden asked, "May I feed you?"

Smiling, Fabian nodded, eager for the opportunity. "Yes," his voice ripe with want. The intimacy of their surroundings consumed Fabian, adding to the moment. He could feel himself falling a little more, his heart melting towards this man who would feed him.

Little was said between them for a while, the silence pregnant with sexual tension. They could hear the rushing of the lake some distance away and the chirping of the birds. The area probably wasn't deserted as people came to this area often for a little romantic togetherness. But as Caden fed him, his world narrowed to include only them, this moment was another new experience Fabian couldn't pass up. Caden played his fingers along Fabian's lips with each piece of pastry he provided, enhancing the flavor of strawberries and apples and bananas with his salty skin.

Licking his lips, Fabian groaned, closing his eyes as he eagerly accepted bite after bite, savoring the richness, tasting his foods in this wonderfully exciting way. Caden stroked his cheek and Fabian nuzzled into the touch. The warm hands and calloused fingers slid over his skin, causing delicious tingles to run the length of his body. Heat pooled in his stomach and his cock hardened. He wanted more of these touches that reminded him of his secret admirer, that aroused and stimulated him but with Caden behind them.

Worry briefly invaded when he realized he had compared Caden's touch to that of his secret admirer. He immediately put the thought out of his mind because there was no way Caden could be that person. The man was too forthright to use such a ploy or him. Plus, Fabian would have known. Or would he?

The touches got bolder, stroking along his jaw and down his neck, petting him, distracting him from his disturbing thoughts. He nuzzled and arched into them, purring out his pleasure. Caden moved in closer, lifting their shirts and bringing their torsos into intimate contact. The touch shocked him, the scratchy feel of Caden's chest hairs sliding over his skin.

The blacksmith straddled his hips, pressing him down to the blanketed floor. Shoving the food aside, he provided them with room to play and Fabian was grateful for the consideration. He didn't want bits of food stuff sticking to his body by the end of this encounter. The ridge of Caden's cock aligned with his, digging into his groin. Fabian whimpered as his crush captured his lips, sucking and nipping at the tender flesh. The musky taste of the other man swept through as Caden devoured his mouth. He rubbed their hardness together, humping their cocks against each other as he purred into Fabian's mouth. His nipples tightened in answer to the vibrations. Reaching between them, Caden lowered Fabian's trousers, freeing his cock from its confinement. Shuddering, Fabian grabbed Caden's butt, digging his hands into taut flesh. He had never experienced anything like this before. Not even during the Dance of Love.

"What are you doing to me?" Fabian groaned, lost in the moment of this man's musk and his taste on his tongue and his touch on his body. He arched into the hands that suddenly surrounded him.

"So hard. Smooth." Caden observed as his hand captured Fabian with the deliciously calloused heat of his hands. Fabian's showed its appreciation by leaking pre-cum in response to the other man's touches. His heart sang, his body dancing intimately with Caden's as they brushed together. Fabian loved every touch, every stroke. He never wanted any of it to stop.

Growling, Caden played his fingers in the sticky fluids of his release. Caden moved away from him, wrestling with his clothes and kicking off his pants. Releasing his cock to the cool air, Caden lowered himself on Fabian again. He wanted to see his member, wanted to admire every ridge and its thickness. But the musky scent filling the air when the man's cock was released sort of made up for missing out. His lower belly clenched with needed, his nipples coming to a painful peak and his mouth watered.

"Ahh." The ridged, hard heat pressed to Fabian's made him shudder. Circling both cocks with his hand, Caden pressed them tightly together. The man stroked them, his thrusts driving them together repeatedly. Fabian looked down, hoping to catch a glimpse, of them together. And when he did, the sight that greeted his eyes made him come. Caden's cock was longer and wider than his, the angry head demanding Fabian taste. Caden rubbed along the underside of Fabian's cock and his eyes rolled. The fluids from his release made the man's stroking easier. Fabian didn't even soften, his cock demanded as much from him as Caden did. Never before had he felt something so exquisite. He would never be whole without feeling Caden pressed so intimately to him for the rest of his life. This was pure heaven.

"More," Fabian begged him, pride having no place here, only need and want and frenzy and release. Fabian closed his eyes, lost in the myriad of feelings and emotions swamping his body. "So good, Caden. So good," he told the other man, unable to keep this information bottled up anymore.

This was better than the night of the twin moons, and yet somehow similar. The same spicy scent permeated the forest. The same calloused hands touched him. The same sounds emitted from lips. For a moment he wasn't able to separate both men, wasn't able to separate this time from the last one.

"Beautiful," Caden offered, his hand continuing to play with Fabian and himself, raising them higher.

Yes. Fabian thought as he opened his eyes, focusing once again on Caden's face. He needed to be in the here and now. He needed to remember this experience as being wholly with Caden. The confusion of mixing up this man with the secret admirer had no place here and now.

Caden locked gazes with him, grounding Fabian with glazed eyes and undisguised lust. Groaning, his lover mashed their lips together, wildness breaking free. Fabian jerked, his hips pumping, fuelled by the taste of Caden, the fruits flavoring him. His fingers moved up to Caden's back and sank in, drawing them closer, hating the wind for coming between them.

The necessity for air pulled their lips apart but Caden didn't go far. He rested his forehead on Fabian's, breath mingling as they panted into each other's mouth, sharing and exchanging oxygen. His heart contracted every time he inhaled Caden's breaths into his body, as if understanding on a deeper level the impact of these actions.

"Need," Fabian screamed, knowing more now than ever what he needed. He was close, his balls hurt, drawing up close to his body. He needed to come again and he needed Caden to come again, too. "With me, please," he begged again, uncaring. This experience wouldn't end without him knowing his partner enjoyed the moment as much as he did. He would not have a repeat of the twin moons Dance.

"Yes," Caden hissed, his body bowing, his hand tightening around them.

Fabian emptied his cock, spurt after spurt, splattering against his chest. The heat of Caden's release joined with his own, mixing and pooling in his navel. Smug satisfaction curved Fabian's lips as the evidence of this man's pleasure coated him. He couldn't help but feel proud of himself for accomplishing this feat conquered by so many quite often. All he knew was that *he* had done it.

Caden collapsed onto Fabian, breathing labored. "Promise me we'll meet tomorrow," Caden demanded and Fabian wondered how he had the strength to speak, to think. The effort to smile alone wore on him.

When he didn't respond right away, Caden cupped his cheeks. Nuzzling into his touch, Fabian loved the rough palms and prickling they provide. He stretched up his hands, running them through Caden's short cropped hair. The man arched into his touch, the spiky tips grazing his palms. He would never get enough of this man. Staring into his eyes, he saw the warmth shining down at him.

His hands met at the back of Caden's neck, drawing the other man's head towards his own. He wanted a kiss, a taste. This had been the second time in three cycles he was intimate with a person, and he had to say savoring the warm wet recesses of this man's mouth beat everything, hands down.

Caden stopped his progress, not lowering his head any further. "Answer me. Will you meet me?" "Only if you kiss me," Fabian bargained, wanting so badly he would say anything. More than he yearned for a kiss, he craved the taste of Caden's lips again. But Caden had other ideas. The man refused to yield easily. He would not budge, frustrating Fabian with his stubbornness.

"I'll kiss you tomorrow, when we meet." Caden promised, voice cajoling.

Fabian agreed, his desire that great. "Okay," Fabian responded, wishing tomorrow would come soon.

* * * *

After Caden walked Fabian home that night, he strolled along the boarded walkway deep in thought. He headed towards his shop, too keyed up to go to sleep. His steps felt as light as his heart and he knew now more than ever that he absolutely loved Fabian. What would they do on the morrow? Caden mused, besides kissing and tasting and hopefully making love to each other. He hadn't thought beyond getting Fabian to agree to meet with him and he would have to eventually decide what activities would occupy them on their next outing.

He walked into his shop, stopping at the anvil and placing his hands on the hard surface. Looking down, he stared at the tool and the block of wood secured to the bottom of the anvil. Not all blacksmiths could afford an expensive tool like this. Smoothing his hand over the flat surface once more, he pushed thoughts of the anvil away, relegating it to the very back of his mind. Right now, he had other things to think about.

There was something really important he needed to create. Striding to the back of the shop, he rummaged through his supplies, retrieving the gold nuggets, wax, razor, clamp, and the hand torch. He brought the items to his work table as he remembered when he'd acquired the pieces of gold nuggets from a traveling merchant. The items had been purchased with the surety, in his heart and in his soul, that they would eventually be used to link him to his love. And ever dawn since, he itched to use them. The pieces were special to him, representing a life he sorely craved. Finally, his dream would become a reality and he felt the notes he'd penned would play a major part in fulfilling that dream.

Those few shorts phrases seemed to have an impact on Fabian, working some unexpected changes in the man's nature. His carriage, his words, even the tone of his voice seemed more confident. At one time, Fabian probably would never have responded to the outrageous words Caden had uttered the previous dawn.

But really at one time Caden would never have thought to engage in the kinds of exchange that had taken place in the bakery. Maybe the changes resided in Caden himself. He suddenly realized that he felt different because of the notes as well, the written word made him more confident to use the spoken word. He never thought of that before, never knew the effect speaking one's mind could have. Liking the outcome of his plans, he decided to continue with the notes, recognizing the value in them and hoping to reap even more.

That settled, he began working, knowing exactly what he would make for Fabian. His efforts carried him late into the night, cutting and re-cutting the wax, the mould not quite right at first. When he got the mould precisely the way he wanted, he melted the gold, pouring it into the wax. As he worked he imagined placing the ring on Fabian's finger and his appreciation for the meaning behind them. He imagined wearing his own matching ring with a sense of pride and a little smugness.

Placing the mold into the clamp, he watched the gold cool into the shape he'd created. He performed the process again, a matching pair but different in size. The rings turned out beautifully and Caden was eager to present one to Fabian. The engravings took even longer but this was to be the symbol of their union and they would use it during their hand-fasting ceremony. Caden would make them perfect. Hours later, the process was finally complete. Caden was happy with these symbols of his love, and equally happy with the quick note he scribbled as a tribute as well.

Chapter 4

The next dawn, Fabian worked only the kitchen, Damien finally showed up for duty. Fabian spent the entire time from sunup to sundown alongside his father, baking and chatting and joking. Relaxing, Fabian enjoyed this time with him, never taking it for granted, especially after he'd lost his mom.

Cynthia Baxter had been well liked, not only by her family but also by the community. She had been one of those rare people who made everyone feel good about themselves, even when she reprimanded you for something you did wrong. She used to work in the bakery sometimes but her real talent had been flowers, all kinds. Everything grew for her, no matter the weather. He and his father were useless when it came to gardening but they tried to keep the Orchidaceae she loved so much alive with limited success. Every once in a while they had to replace them with new ones.

Time slowly slipped away, the sun dipping as the moon readied to make an appearance. Needing to talk, especially to his father, he announced, "I'll be spending the evening with Caden, Papa." He grinned at his father, the thought of seeing Caden again thrilled him. Looking at the older man's face, he tried to gauge his reactions, before turning back to his task.

"Really?" His father tried to act nonchalant and Fabian hid his face, certain his father was anything but. He could tell the man was deeply interested, wanting to know everything. Jermaine Baxter, like the rest of the community some subtly others not so much, kept pestering him about settling down. "And?" he prompted moments later, his father's curiosity getting the better of him. "Nothing. I'm just going out, that's all," he responded, not sure what else to say. He was too confused for words. "I didn't want you to worry when I didn't come home." Over the long times passed, he had tried so hard to not feel for Caden, to not care about him, to not love him. But he couldn't deny those emotions, not anymore, not with what had happened the previous sun cycle in the meadow between them.

Now he also worried that he was deceiving Caden. He hadn't told the man about the notes or the intimacy between him and a stranger at the Dance of Love during the twin moons. He tried to convince himself these things didn't matter since they hadn't officially met, but that just seemed like semantics. Kneading the dough, he worried about the issue.

"So do you like Caden?" his father asked, seemingly tired of waiting for Fabian to give him information. The man stopped mixing the chocolate chip and walnut batter, giving Fabian his undivided attention. He folded his arms and leaned against their work table.

"Yeah, of course," Fabian responded. He didn't know his own mind sometimes and didn't want to commit to anything out loud. "I wouldn't be going out with him otherwise."

"Boy, I'm not a child and you are no idiot," his father growled, annoyance backing his words, chastising his son for his avoidance. He hadn't heard that tone of voice since he left his youth. He was instantly reminded of the incident with Ms. Monica. It seemed people were taking turns reprimanding him. No matter how much he grew up he would still be a child to most. "Tell me what I want to know."

Pausing in his preparations as well, he felt contrite. He was being evasive and to a man he deeply respected. Nodding, he mumbled, voice getting stronger with each successive word. "I love him, Papa. Always have. It scares me you know. What if I lose him?" Shaking his head, he said nothing else, having nothing else to reveal, at least not yet. He would be devastated if that ever happened. His father moved up to him, bumping their hips together before returning to his task. The older man understood his fears better than anyone, probably even better than him. He cared deeply for Caden and only time would tell where this budding relationship led. Nothing else was said about Caden after that, his father giving him the time to sort out his thoughts.

Later that night, Fabian finished dressing just as his date arrived at his home. Caden wore black leather footwear, black trousers that molded to his thick thighs, and a woolen shirt stretched across well defined chest and arms. His defined muscles made Fabian's mouth water. "You look good," Fabian complimented, his eyes glued to the man's pectorals. He would have no trouble lifting Fabian into his arms. His hands itched to trace the same path it had before, to tangle into the wiry curls, to explore this man's beautiful chest.

Caden's smile glowed as he responded. "Thank you." He lightly stroked the outline of Fabian's mouth, running his fingertips along the eager flesh. Breath held in anticipation, he wondered if he would get his kiss right here, right now.

Caden leaned into him, pressing his lips against Fabian's ear instead. "Breathe, my love. This is not the time or the place for any kind of intimacy." Stepping away from him, Caden raised his hand. "I'll have him home before the sun rises again, Mr. Baxter."

Fabian had been so focused on Caden, his whole being centered on this one man, he hadn't even noticed his father's presence. Looking towards his father, he saw the man nodding an acknowledgement before shooing him out of the house. A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips when he noticed the twinkle of mischief shining from his father's eyes.

"Nonsense," he answered, closing the door while he continued. "You can keep him till morning if you want." He shouted the words, slamming the door and drowning out Fabian's groan.

Caden chuckled, merriment dancing in his eyes. "Well, it seems I have *his* approval."

Shaking his head, Fabian placed his hand in Caden's. "So it would seem," he responded as Caden led him along the boarded walkway out of the housing district, the silence companionable.

* * * *

Standing in the lake, the water reached Caden up to his chest, washing around and between them. They had eaten a supper of fish and loaf at Barney's Eatery before going into the forest again. The lake they used was some distance away from where they had picnicked, but no less secluded. The warm water lapped at their skin as the wind stroked through their hair, reminding them of the chill. Whenever they were perfectly quiet, he could hear splashing in the distance, others taking a late dip somewhere down the river.

On the other bank of the river, a path led to the neighboring town. He rarely visited the other towns on their large island, not really seeing the need. Whatever he needed was already available here in Brentwood Bourg, or often brought in by the traveling traders. Plus, Fabian never traveled beyond the forest on one side or the mountain on the other. And for Caden the important thing was to be as close to Fabian as possible.

He and Fabian had been frolicking in the water all throughout the moon cycle, splashing and swimming laps and just generally playing in a way they never had with each other as kids. Caden wrapped his arms around Fabian, bringing the man into closer contact with his body. He enjoyed the rushing waters and the slippery slide of their bodies as Fabian's feet kicked up the warmth.

"It's almost time for us to go back," Caden whispered. His face turned to the horizon, he could almost see the sun peaking over it. Dawn started to reappear and Caden felt almost cheated. He wanted more time with Fabian. He could tell the other man still had his reservations about him. And he knew more time spent in each others' company would resolve them. He wanted to stay out here with Fabian for the rest of his life. Keeping his sexy, dripping wet man all to himself seemed to be the only thing, the most important thing, to him right now. He knew it was selfish. But hey, all was fair with one's love, right?

"Mmm-hmm." Fabian nodded. At first, Caden thought he was answering his silent musings until the man started moving back towards the shore. Ah, his affirmation had to do with returning to town. *Darn*. They climbed out of the water and Caden lay down on the bank, rocks and grass digging all along his back. He guided Fabian to his lap, their naked bodies brushing intimately against each other. Cool air wafted across his flesh, prickling his skin.

Reaching up, Caden brushed back his hair, the wet strands dripping on his skin and making him shiver. "But that can wait till later," Fabian whispered, as he leaned into Caden and kissed him. The man rubbed up against him like a feline in heat, purring and whimpering with equal fervor. Fabian's arms surrounded his neck, pulling them more closely together.

He grabbed hold of the man's buttocks, massaging the taut flesh. He loved touching this man, hoped he would always have the pleasure. Moaning, he flipped them over, Fabian landing on his back. Caden pulled away from his sexy baker, scooting down the man's body and propping Fabian's legs over his shoulders. He tried to make himself and Fabian as comfortable as possible but his need drove him too hard to really care. Hugging the man's legs, he placed one hand on the man's hip as the other circled the base of his cock.

Finally! Caden had wanted to taste this man since forever, but he had held back wanting this outing to be all about playing and fun. Now with little time left of their date, he had to have him. Plus, sex could be about play and fun, right? Looking down at Fabian's cock and without any warning, Caden sucked the man's hard member into his mouth down to the root.

Caden growled, the explosion of flavors making him weak. His hands tightened on the man's hip as he realized the total wonder of this moment. His Fabian was absolutely mouth-watering and droolworthy, his taste lush, his scent earthy. His tongue played with the delicate underside. His teeth scraped over the sensitive head.

"Oh my Goddess," Fabian screamed, each word coming out louder than the last. Caden knew this was the first time anyone had done this to the man. No one else had been given the privilege of touching Fabian in this or any other sexual manner and no one else would.

Groaning, he continued sucking, his tongue circling his thickness, toying with the veins popping from the sides of Fabian's cock. He thrust into Caden's mouth like crazy, screaming his pleasure. And Caden was glad he had used his hands to limit how deep Fabian could go. The man forgot about being careful, too lost in the sensations to care about hurting Caden.

He stroked the flat of his tongue over the beautiful head, licking up Fabian's essence that leaked out. Caden loved this flavor even more than he loved the man's pastries. To feast on this man whenever he hungered, Caden shuddered at the possibility.

"I...J...you...cock..." Fabian stuttered.

And Caden could relate. He was equally overwhelmed by the sensations, just as lost in the moment. Up on his knees, his hips jabbing into thin air, his neglected member sought a warm cavern for his own pleasure. Moving his hand from Fabian's hip, Caden fisted himself, strokes mirroring the timing of the man's thrusts into his mouth.

Fabian went deeper into his mouth, almost gagging Caden as he knocked up against the back of his throat. But instead of being worried, Caden delighted in the other man's actions. He loved that Fabian was losing himself in the moment, marveled at how easily he made this man forget himself. He alone had the power to do this to Fabian. *He* aroused Fabian to the point where consequences didn't even matter.

His hair was held in a death grip, Fabian almost ripping out the strands. Tugging hard on his head, Caden bobbed in time to the man's demands. Then Fabian's cock seemed to swell on his tongue, the pulsing of his heated flesh evidence of the impending explosion.

"Thank you," the man screamed as his release filled Caden's mouth, the taste of him throwing Caden into a frenzy of movements. Sweet and musky, he never stopped his mouth from sucking on the man, nor his hand pulling on his cock. He swallowed every drop, not wanting to waste the precious fluid. Five more hard-fisted strokes and he joined Fabian. Tearing his mouth away for fear that he would bite down on the other man, he cried out. His body expelled the evidence of his pleasure as his heart and body filled with pleasure. *Euphoric*.

Resting his face on Fabian's hip, harsh breaths left his body and moved over Fabian's semi-hard flesh, making his cock jump for him. Caden watched, fascinated by the rhythm. Even this intimate part of his man seemed to love to dance. He smiled at the thought.

"Sleep...then home." Fabian whispered, reaching out his arms to Caden. "Up here." The childish words propelled Caden into acting, his desire to please very strong. With great difficulty, he got to his hands and knees, crawling back up Fabian's body and fitting them together.

They would have to take another dip in the river after this bout of lovemaking. But that could certainly wait until later. After all, he agreed with Fabian's suggestion. "Only for a little while," Caden promised as sleep blanketed his mind.

Chapter 5

The twin moons would rise again at sundown. But all Fabian was focused on was his confusion. The past twenty sun cycles had been wonderful for him. He'd been finding little notes from his secret admirer everywhere he went. But what's worse or actually better was he'd been falling for Caden harder than before. They spent a lot of time together, discovering amazing things as they learnt about each other. Without Fabian realizing it, Caden had finally, completely captured his heart, laid claim to his very soul.

But how could he love two men? Or more to the point, how could he choose one man over the other? He had no problems with a relationship of three or more. He just didn't want that for himself. So what should he do? Caden fed his soul, filling the emotional part of him as yet missing in his life. But his secret admirer, this mystery man added another dimension to his life, making him want what he could not have, dangling the unknown before him.

He never had anyone love him that way before, and now in the time separating one twin moons cycle from the next, he had two people to love. Two people who wanted him, two people to love him.

Entering the home he shared with his father, he went straight to other man's sleeping chamber. He found the man who raised him readying himself for work, dressing in his customary cream loosefitting pants and collarless shirt with a pair of sandals for his feet. Fabian approached him, plopping down on the cot near to his father's side.

"Papa, I need some advice." He had always been straightforward with his father, a trait he inherited from both his parents. "I—" He stopped when he couldn't find the right words to describe his dilemma. His indecisiveness had been troubling him, giving him a headache. He just couldn't solve this problem without someone else's help.

His father sat on the cot next to him, turning to face him on the bed. "What is it, son?" Alarm marred his father's face, his eyes troubled as his brows drew together. "You know you can tell me anything."

Great, now he was scaring the man. Nodding his agreement, Fabian inhaled deeply, fortifying himself for the explanation to come before beginning again. "I think I'm in love with two men." There he'd said it, the words having less of a hold on him now that they were out in the open.

"Okay. But nothing in this cosmos decrees that loving two men is wrong," his father said, words tentative, obviously trying to get to the root of Fabian's problem with the limited knowledge he had been given. Goddess above, he loved this man. His father never judged people for their choices.

"I know that. I...I already told you about one of them, about Caden." A small secretive smile skirted Fabian's lips as he thought of the other man. His cock hardened slightly as well, an embarrassing result considering he sat next to his father. Shifting on the cot, he tried to relieve the some of the tension in his pants. His father patiently waited, allowing Fabian the opportunity to order his thoughts. "I never thought we would have a chance to be together. He ignored me all through school. At least that's what I thought."

The older man nodded, accepting his words and waving his hand as he urged Fabian to continue. Looking down, Fabian started picking at the blanket, needing to do something with his hands. Warm hands cupped his chin and raised his head, eyes meeting his father's again. The love and acceptance shining at him soothed him and helped him to focus more on what he wanted to say. "But then he bid on me," Fabian whispered, the wonder of that experience still ringing loudly in his voice. Removing the man's hand from his face, he dropped their clasped hands between them. "That surprised me. Now that I know him though, now that I love him, I see things differently. I think he liked me but didn't know how to say so." At the time, Fabian never thought that a man like Caden could be nervous about approaching him. But that was just plain dumb, all children probably struggled with some form of uncertainty. However, his mind had a hard time reconciling such a self assured man being insecure.

"So the problem is? It appears that your heart has already chosen for you," his father argued, squeezing his hand in reassurance.

Fabian wondered how he expected his father to understand when he himself didn't. "But my body craves another. A man I don't know, a man familiar to me only by touch." Heat crawled up his neck, staining his cheeks at the information his words revealed. He needed to explain everything if he was to get any help with his situation. There was no one else he trusted, no one else who could help him.

His father smiled conspiratorially at him, leaning forward, very interested in his words. There were some things he should hide from the man. His current interest in Fabian's sex life clearly proved that. And he did have a sex life, a rather active one, too. His mind went back to the forest and the river and all the other places that he had experienced Caden's touches.

"Well that isn't entirely true. I love Caden's touches as well, maybe just as much." Shaking his head, the more he spoke, the more he puzzled out this situation, the more he was able to put things into the right perspective. He looked at his dad, "I love Caden's touches more." *Oh my Goddess*, he thought. "I love his touches more," he repeated, mouth hanging open, shock reverberated through him at the truth of those words. Bouncing up and down on the bed, he threw his arms around his father's neck.

His dad smiled at him, nodding. "Then there's your answer. You don't love two men, you love one. So what are you going to do about it?" the man challenged.

Releasing the man, he hopped to his feet, saying, "Keep him for always, of course." His body vibrated with anticipation, the air around him rife with expectancy. "Thank you, Papa." He left shortly after that conversation, having resolved his biggest worry.

He loved Caden, loved him more than some secret admirer not brave enough to reveal himself. And he would tell the man that moon cycle, at the Dance of Love. Walking along the graveled path away from town, he thought about the experiences to come, that of claiming his mate, his heart. After some time, he arrived at the foot of the mountain, taking less time than usual.

The mountaineers allowed the people who lived in the forest, the various towns and near the seas to visit the mountain only when the twin moons rose. Other than that, the area was totally restricted, the mountaineers who lived there a very private bunch. He ascended the mountain, following the sound of the music, the beats of the drums singing to him.

Edging towards the crowd, he noted the younger kids filling the mountainside. The Time of Innocence hadn't yet ended. He watched them jump up and down, gyrating their tiny bodies to the music, laughing and hollering their excitement. Unconsciously, his body responded to the merriment of the crowd, the call of the sounds, his hips rolling with the beat. He didn't immediately spot Caden but he wasn't worried. The man would definitely show up. He had promised and Caden was a man of his word.

He tipped his head back, about to raise his arms to the sky, when someone stopped in front of him. Smiling, he dropped his head forward, happy Caden had finally decided to show. Instead, Marcus stood in front of him, causing Fabian to frown. Why won't this man leave him alone? Seriously, Fabian wasn't interested. "What do you want, Marcus?" Unable to be polite, this was not the man he wanted to see. Fabian took a step back, Marcus in his usual way invading his personal space.

"I wish to dance with you," the man asserted. His greasy smile firmly in place, Fabian swallowed, attempting to suppress his gag reflex. Although very handsome with his blond hair and ocean green eyes, Marcus' personality revolted Fabian so much the man didn't appeal to him.

"I am to dance with another during this moon cycle, Marcus." And with any luck every other time of the twin moons and all the sundowns in between. Shifting closer to the crowd, Fabian hoped to get lost in the horde, trying to get away from the disgusting man.

"Just one, sweet Fabian. I've been waiting a long time to reveal myself to you," Marcus said, stepping in front of Fabian and blocking his path for escape. The words from the very first note coming to him, Marcus' words almost the same as that of his secret admirer.

... When the time is right I will reveal myself to you.

"What do you mean?" Fabian chocked out, needing the answer, and not afraid to hear it. "You're my secret admirer?" he croaked as sweat dotted his forehead and the palms of his hands, his heart rate picking up speed. If Marcus had been the one to touch him at the last twin moons, he didn't know how to process this information. His stomach lurched as his mouth flooded with bile.

An even oilier smile bloomed on the man's features, superiority and arrogance in evidence. "Yes Fabian, my love," he revealed, quite happily. "*I'm* your secret admirer."

* * * *

Caden arrived at the top of the mountain, the rings securely housed in the coin pouch hanging from his wrist. Feeling they headed in the right direction, he planned to tell Fabian about the notes as soon as he saw him. Trepidation made him sweat, while excitement tied up his stomach in knots. His heart warmed at the real possibility of a future together. However, all that hinged on his honesty with his mate, so he needed to tell Fabian about those notes. He hadn't thought they would cause any problems. But after his conversation with Jasmine he realized that it was possible Fabian wouldn't take the notes in the spirit they had been intended.

In his mind, those few written words had made perfect sense. He had revealed his heart to Fabian through every penned thought, while revealing his inner self through the time spent in each other's company. But now he wondered, mostly because of her, if he had made the right decision. He knew the short messages had helped him to open up more, but a favorable reaction from Fabian couldn't be guaranteed. Hoping everything would work out fine, he decided to worry about the consequences after they spoke.

Walking into the summit, he spotted Fabian and Marcus deep in conversation. Caden rushed to Fabian's side, glaring at Marcus with each step. He knew the other man would be up to no good. The man had no honor and the next words out of his mouth confirmed Caden's suspicions. Shock held him captive as his blood ran cold.

"Yes Fabian, my love. I'm your secret admirer." His breath puffed out as Fabian backed away from the man. The horror on his face, in his eyes, his body language, provided the kick Caden needed to start moving again. "Now, come dance with me, my love," the man continued. Caden needed to get Fabian away from Marcus.

"Fabian," he interrupted, not even acknowledging Marcus' presence, his eyes trained on his man's face. "We need to talk."

Fabian didn't answer but he looked paler, more upset. He took a swing at Marcus before doubling over. Fabian emptied the contents of his stomach all over Caden's and Marcus' boots, expelling the contents of his stomach nonstop.

Afterwards, Caden picked him up and walked towards a bunch of large rocks on the outside of the crowd with Marcus trailing behind them. The man cursed at their backs the entire way, pissed at the ruination of his precious footwear. Fabian lay limp in his arms, face averted. His body heaved as he tried to vomit some more, but nothing came up.

After that, his docility ended as he struggled to get free of Caden's embrace. Speeding up his steps, he searched for the most comfortable place to sit. The insistent chatter of Marcus' whiny voice in his ear and the struggling of Fabian in his arm pushed him to his limits.

"Would you leave us be?" Caden knew his voice sounded rough, his anger making it gravelly, but he'd had enough of Marcus's droning. But even in the face of his anger, the man still approached them. "Marcus, you had better leave. Or I swear to the Goddess, I will hurt you in ways you will remember for years to come. Now. Leave. Us," Caden gritted, at the end of his patience.

Marcus opened and closed his mouth, but on closer inspection of Caden's face, he turned around and left. Caden finally picked a spot and sat down, planting Fabian between his spread legs with back to the tree. Boxing him in, Caden restricted his movements, preventing him from going anywhere. One of the revelers passed near them and Caden begged her to bring him some water. When she returned with water, Caden thanked her and offered the liquid to Fabian.

Grudgingly he took the bottle and rinsed out his mouth before taking a few sips. "Now you let me go," Fabian ordered through clenched teeth. Eyes focused somewhere over Caden head, the man's breaths seemed labored. He held himself rigidly tight as if he did everything he could to contain his emotions.

How would he tell this man the truth? What could he say to make this right? This should not be happening. "Marcus isn't your secret admirer," he confessed, needing to get this over with in all haste. Fabian stiffened, leaning farther into the boulder at his back. "I swear to you. Marcus is not your secret admirer."

"Oh Goddess, the things I let that man do to me in the light of the twin moons." Fabian shuddered, obviously still believing Marcus had made love to him. "How could I have allowed *him* to touch me?" Turning sorrowful eyes to Caden, his despair shone through. "How could you desire to touch me now?" Covering his face, he said, "Oh…oh…all those notes, I believed every word."

"I'm your secret admirer," Caden hated seeing his mate look so distressed and wanted to get this situation over with. He hadn't pictured it this way. The night he had hoped for becoming far from his dream outcome. Would anything ever work as planned with his dealings with his mate?

"You don't have to lie to me, Caden. I—"

"I do not lie. Fabian Baxter, your chocolate brown eyes light you up when you smile. I yearn for you and need you. When will you grant me a taste? Fabian Baxter, your secret admirer hungers for you. My heart has been empty without you, filled with longing for you. Fabian Baxter, I—"

"Stop. Stop. Stop." Fabian moved his hands from his eyes to cover his ears. Scrambling to his feet, Fabian moved away from the rock, from him, and backed away.

A sour taste filled Caden's mouth as he witnessed a retreat similar to the man's earlier actions with Marcus. Gaining his feet, Caden's palms started to sweat and he rubbed them against his trousers. He kept Fabian in his line of sight, careful not to get too close. He would have preferred to rub at the ache in his heart, but only the man in front of him could assuage that pain.

"I don't understand," Fabian growled, betrayal now at the forefront of Fabian's facial features. "You were toying with my mind."

"No, I was showing you my love," Caden refuted, the truth of those words ringing in his ear. He couldn't argue that courting Fabian from these two points of views would be perceived as dishonest.

"You lied to me." Raising his hands, Fabian looked intent on hitting him. Instead, he curled his fingers into a fist and continued, "I trusted you and you lied to me." "I never lied to you," he explained, but he wasn't sure what he else to say. He didn't know what would make this right. "Look, I made a mistake. But at least Marcus isn't your secret admirer."

"You're like him," Fabian whispered, his voice sounding broken. Shaking his head, dejection speaking volumes through his action. "In fact, you're no better than Marcus." He started to turn his back on Caden. "I can't be with you now."

"Don't compare me to him," he roared. Grabbing Fabian by the forearms, Caden lifted him off his feet, bringing him to eye level. "I am nothing like Marcus." Hurt and anger warred within him. How could Fabian think that of him? Everything he did leading up to this night had been aimed at proving his love for Fabian.

"Put me down," Fabian growled out.

"No! You will hear me, Fabian Baxter. Every written word in those notes spoke the truth of my heart. I hunger for you. I need you. I love you." Sobering, he lowered Fabian back to his feet but didn't let up on his hold. "This secret admirer thing grew bigger than I could handle but even so, everything in those notes was the truth. I love you." Caden shook him. "I. Love. You."

Fabian remained stubbornly silent, his eyes turned away from Caden. That one gesture hurt Caden more than he cared to admit, his gut feeling sucker punched. He angled his face away from Fabian, unwilling to show how deep his action had cut. Life didn't seem fair at all. He returned his gaze to Fabian's averted face when he felt sufficiently under control.

Placing his hand under the other man's chin, he forced Fabian's head up so he could meet his eyes. "Read my notes, remember my touches. You decide if it was real. If you're brave enough to face the love I would offer you then meet me in the forest where we picnicked on the morrow before high noon. I will wait for you there."

Caden lifted him off his feet yet again, smashing their mouths together. The kiss was aggressive and dominating. Fabian stiffened, not participating with his lips pressed firmly together. Caden bit and nipped his him, his tongue scraping against the entrance to Fabian's mouth, demanding access. The other man moved his head to the side but Caden followed him, refusing to capitulate.

Stampeding his defenses, Caden pushed and pushed at Fabian. He needed to taste this man once more. This night should have ended with them in each other's arms, not going their separate ways. Sighing, Fabian stopped fighting and kissed him back, forcing Caden to gentle their embrace. Caden's love for this man had nothing to do with violence and this possibly last kiss between them wouldn't have cruelty as the reminder.

"Read my notes," Caden repeated, pulling away from his mate before releasing him. Retreating, he dug out the neatly folded note from his pouch. "Beginning with this one," he said, reciting the words from memory. "Fabian Baxter, I am your secret admirer and I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I, Caden Eliot, your mate awaits you." Caden pressed the piece of paper into Fabian's hand, and turning, walked down the mountain, leaving Fabian and his heart behind.

Chapter 6

Standing at the outer edges of the forest, Fabian gasped for breath, fear overwhelming him. He'd been so stupid, turning Caden away last night instead of talking with him. Fabian had gone home after their confrontation, unable to stomach the Dance any longer. It felt wrong somehow without Caden there.

Lying on his cot, he had followed Caden's advice. His mind had scrolled through all the touches, all the laughter, all the enjoyment he had gained in the past twenty moon cycles of being in Caden's company. He read the letters again, tears misting his eyes as he viewed them with the new insight that they reflected Caden: his thoughts, his hopes, his dreams. The words revealed his true feelings for Fabian, a testament to his love. And instead of embracing it, Fabian had cruelly dashed it away, his hurt and anger clouding his mind to anything else.

By the time the sun had risen, Fabian had realized his mistake. Now here he stood, at the forest entrance, wondering if he was too late. He had been an idiot, craving the man he had already grown to love, blind to the fact that he already possessed the thing he desired above all. Maybe Caden wouldn't want him back. Maybe that was what he deserved for so callously throwing the man's love back in his face.

"Please be waiting for me," he whispered to the forest, his words ripped out of his mouth and carried on the wind. "Please love me enough to forgive me. Please want me enough to fight."

Dragging in a breath, he stepped towards the forest. A voice behind him hollered his name. Elated, he turned to meet his man, believing his appeals had been answered. Instead, he found Mr. Carlisle's son, Jamie, bearing down on him. The frantic movement of his small body, the panicked look in his eyes could only spell trouble.

Changing directions, Fabian quickly approached the little boy. "What's wrong, Jamie?" The fear Fabian just fought back resurfaced, beginning with his palms sweating and his breathing speeding up.

"You have to come back to town," the little boy said, completely out of breath, his little body heaving from his exertion. "Something's happened with Caden."

Fabian took off running before the boy even said all the words. Please not Caden, please not his mate. His feet carried him as fast they could, his hands pumping as he traveled the path back to town. His nose clogged with the tears he tried to hold back. Caden would be okay, he told himself. There was no need for tears.

Fabian never truly understood what his father experienced with his mother's death. She had been sick all her life but Jermaine hadn't loved her any less. Fabian had loved her as well, she *was* his mother. But she hadn't been his mate, she wasn't the one created in the stars to complete him. But Caden... Caden had been created for him.

In town, Fabian ran along the walkway, passing the various shops and then the housing district, on his way to Caden's home. He needed to see him, touch him, reassure himself his mate was fine. But when he arrived, he halted at the entrance, dread filled him. Scrubbing his face, he pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and dragged in deep gulping breaths. Goddess, he hadn't even told Caden how much he loved him or how sorry he was. Why was he going through this now? Hadn't he gone through enough already with the loss of his mother?

Opening the door, measured steps carried him to the Caden's sleeping room. At the door, his eyes skimmed over the room, settling on the bed. His heart skipped a beat at the scene in front of him, so familiar and so different. Caden lay on bloodstained sheets, his body covered in bruises with no movements to indicate his health. Who would do this? Why would anyone do this?

The doctor stood hovering over his prone body, a brush poised over his skin with whatever concoction the doctor had cooked up. Fabian rushed to the bed, not willing to let the doctor hurt Caden. "No! Stop." Knocking the doctor away, he barely registered the liquid that spilled on him. Grabbing hold of Caden's shoulders, he shook him. "Wake up. Please baby, wake up." But the other man still didn't move. Fear seized his heart, bowing him over before transforming into the deep-seated agony wracking his body. Wrapping his arms around Caden's waist, he buried his face in the man's neck as his knees buckled. For some reason, he was losing all feeling in his body. The fear seizing him, however, had nothing to do with the loss of self and everything to do with his inability to feel the rise and fall of Caden's chest. Tears streamed down his face as that fact sunk in.

"Fabian...wolfsbane...spill." But Fabian didn't know what the doctor meant. All he knew was that since entering the room, Caden had never once moved. Fabian heard shouting, the sound mired in pain, matching the breaking of his heart. He felt more liquid sliding down his body and hands brushing at his skin and clothes. But with each moment that passed the noise dimmed as well as any physical touch to his body. He couldn't move anymore, numbness was his companion now, seeping into his body, into his heart. He didn't even have the strength to cry.

His father had endured the worst sort of fate, to have his mate within reach and lose her. He was a stronger man than Fabian realized, to have possessed the will to withstand the heart death. Fabian didn't think he could go on without his mate. He couldn't face this fate and the shutting down of his body confirmed that. Blessed darkness descended over him, blanketing his mind, weighing down his body, quieting his voice, and then Fabian knew no more.

* * * *

Caden lie in bed alone and awake for the fifth sun cycle in a row. Fabian never visited him once and no one would reveal the man's whereabouts. Right after sunup and right before sundown, Jasmine would visit him, dropping off some food and straightening his home. Taylor visited too, helping him to the cleansing room with showering and other such stuff. On one of their visits, they had let him know that Marcus and his men had packed up a left town right after his attack. At least he wouldn't have to deal with the man anymore. He couldn't believe they had attacked him. But everyone remained mum about Fabian. He hated the silence and he refused to live in the dark anymore.

So against the advice of his doctor and the protestations of his body, Caden dragged himself out of bed, with Taylor's help, and over to Fabian's home. Each step he took was painfully excruciating, even with the aid of the walking sticks. Caden had sustained serious injuries to his body in the attack especially his legs. The doctor set the fractures and he was expected to make a full recovery within three twin moons cycles. The medicines the doctor provided helped to speed up the healing process and allowed him to put some weight on his feet. However, with this impromptu trip he might have set his recovery time back some. But they would heal. The scarring didn't matter to him. Only his desperate need to see Fabian mattered.

What he saw upon entering his love's room cracked his heart in a million pieces. His beautiful mate lie on his bed, pale as the cream sheets covering him. His eyes vacant, his body acting like an empty shell, he looked lost in his own skin. No one had told him.

A sob wrenched from Caden's lips as he ripped to shreds. Please Goddess, no. Not his Fabian. "What happened?" he croaked to Jermaine Baxter, who led him out of the room. His legs trembled from the strain he'd put on them and sweat dripped from his face. His hands slipped on the walking sticks because his wet palms hindered with his grip. How could this be happening to him? Jermaine guided him to a set of chairs in the main room, pushing him into one of them. Caden continued staring in the general direction of the sleeping room, afraid that if he looked away for even a moment his mate would slip away from him and die.

"Caden?" Jermaine took a chair right next to him.

"Please tell me," he whispered, noting Fabian's doctor had entered the room as well.

"He loved you...loves you so much, Caden." The man's words twisted his insides.

"I love him too," Caden told his future father by hand-fast.

Combing his fingers through his hair, Jermaine began. "The doctor had a jar filled with herbs to help you sleep and take away your pain while he attended your legs." Jermaine took a deep breath, fortifying himself for the next part of the explanation. Caden wanted to reach for the other man, but all his energy was centered on Fabian. He had nothing to give. "He saw you laying on the bed, the doctor leaning over you, a jar in one hand, the healing brush in the other. I fear he might have thought the worst. You see, a similar thing happened with his mom. Only she never made it through the night."

Caden had to strain to hear his last words and then it hit him. Capturing the other man's eyes, understanding and then horror filled him. He snapped his mouth shut. Reaching out, he placed his hand on his shoulder, offering a meager comfort for what the man had been through. His heart squeezed at the thought of losing Fabian in a similar situation. A real possibility if what he suspected was true.

Giving him a wobbly smile, Jermaine shook his head and patted his hand where it rested on his shoulder. He continued with the recounting. "Fabian rushed to your side, accidentally knocking the doctor's concoction on himself."

"I gave you some of the medicine to put you in a deep sleep for a couple of sun cycles," the doctor added, his brow furrowing. "But Fabian panicked. He rushed to the bed and knocked over a triple dose onto himself. I think he is in the throes of the heart death. Fabian's sadness and my mixture seem to be causing the problem. You see, the effects of the herbs should have worn off by now otherwise." Shrugging, the man looked bewildered. "He should be awake."

Okay, now he understood what ailed Fabian and why. But he also needed to know, "What are you doing to fix this?" Caden asked the man, his mind still trying to process everything. Getting to his feet, he faced the bedroom, his body straining towards Fabian. But he waited to hear the doctor's solution, wanting to know how long before his mate recovered.

"Well, you see, we have tried everything, but nothing seems to be getting through to him." It was the very thing Caden didn't want to hear.

Whipping his head around, Caden looked at the sweating, nervous man. He didn't care about what didn't work. "My question was," he snarled, "what are you doing to help him? Not tell me what didn't work." His legs pained him, but that didn't compare to the constriction in his heart, his pain nearly unbearable. He hadn't heard of anyone ever surviving the heart death. People usual slipped into a deep void, leading to a soul death and then a physical death. And they expected Caden to just accept that this fate awaited his mate.

Never.

"Uh, well, uh," the doctor stammered.

"Argh! Do something," Caden shouted at the man, stepping forward. He weaved uncomfortably on his feet before steadying himself. Fabian had retreated into his mind for five dawns now, the results of the darn heart death. *Five whole sun cycles*. Worse, Caden hadn't even known, hadn't been here for him. No one had told him of Fabian. No matter how much he asked, no one had explained the reasons for the man's absence.

"We have done everything we can for him, sir." The doctor tugged at his collar, inching away from the reach of Caden's arms. "Nothing short of a miracle will cure him." "How dare you." Caden took another threatening step towards the doctor but Jermaine stepped between them, facing off with the doctor himself.

"I think it's time you left," the older man intoned, his voice angry as well. To talk of the death so cavalierly was not allowed in their community. Everyone knew each other and everyone mourned a passing. The doctor didn't live in their community. He visited from some faraway town that had different rules when it came to importance of a life.

"But sir, there is more I can do here," he backpedaled, obviously lying now that he saw his meal ticket slipping away. This man did not belong here.

Caden growled at the man, Jermaine's hand was the only thing saving him from Caden ripping out his throat. Fabian had told him about his mother and this situation had shaped up to be all too similar. Their little town had yet to find a permanent or visiting doctor with some scruples.

"Not a second ago you claimed there was nothing you could do for my son. So tell me, doctor, which is it?"

"I... well, you see...I could..."

"Leave," Caden bellowed, his patience worn so thin he could have snapped the man's neck. "Leave this house this instant." Thoughts of sacrificing this man in one of the mountain people's rituals to get his love back swam in his head. It would probably work too, a balancing of the cosmos to appease the Goddess.

Caden returned to the room. His legs would not support him anymore and he needed to be with his mate before they gave out. Climbing onto the cot beside Fabian, he took the man into his arms, sorrow seizing him when he felt the frail limbs he held. Caden curled into Fabian's body, pressed his lips against his ear and started rocking them both. He inhaled, the scent of his mate almost drowned out by the sickness hanging in the air. "Please, baby, don't leave me," he cried. "Oh Goddess, please don't take him from me." The sobs came, louder now as Caden's heart broke. He imagined at this moment he experienced the heart death himself.

From that moment on, Caden's every action—sleeping, eating, talking—occurred while he remained at Fabian's side. He only left to use the cleansing room and only for a few moments. Distraught, he feared that leaving for even those short few instants would give Fabian an opening to slip away and leave him forever. Fate had cruelly dangled the love of his life before, snatching him away when he was finally in reach.

Several dawns had passed and Caden stopped listening to Jermaine, Jasmine and Taylor a long time ago. He wasn't sure when, because time seemed to be blending together. Suggestion after suggestion had been passed around, but nothing they tried helped to awaken Fabian.

He could feel himself sinking into a depression unlike any he had ever felt. This was no safe haven for his feelings, no numbness to dull the pain. He felt the agony of loss, the loneliness of being with his mate but without him. He didn't know how long this would go on or how long he could survive in this state. He didn't even know if the heart death would ever claim him. All he knew was that if his mate died, so would he.

His only comfort rested in the rattling of his mate's breathing because as long as the man breathed, he lived. He dosed in and out of consciousness, taking short naps while curved around Fabian's body. The voices in the room had ceased for some time now and he figured they were alone. But then the sound of drums filled the room, waking Caden from a light doze. At first, he thought he dreamt of his first time with Fabian and the dance on the mountain during the twin moons. But the beats followed him into the waking world, flowing through the room and covering up the stillness. A small smile curved his lips, the action feeling rusty. They hadn't stopped exploring all the options for bringing Fabian back to them after all.

* * * *

Fabian's mind was a void, trapped in his own head space and afraid to surface. Voices penetrated every now and then, but nothing and no one could draw him out. He wouldn't let them. With the death of his mate, his love, he knew only hurt and pain awaited him out there. Caden had died and only in this nothingness could Fabian still hear him. Only in this state had the pain receded.

Caden spoke to him, constantly whispering words of love. The voice he loved so much, the one that existed only in this oblivion, made this place ideal. But then something else tried to penetrate the tranquility of his mind space. Something he had never been able to ignore, not since that one fateful night when he turned five. He fought against it, resisting the call as hard as he could. But the sound of the drums surrounded him, shifting him back to awareness. The walls closed in around him, pushing at him as his sanctuary ejected him.

He could do nothing but leave the refuge of his mind and with no place else to go, he settled on consciousness. Dragged out against his will to the new reality of his life, his body and heart responded to the music where his mind had dared not tread. Opening his eyes, he focused on the room and the occupants that filled his sleeping chamber and surrounded his cot. He blinked a few times bringing everyone into focus.

When his vision cleared, he saw his father, tears streaming down his face. Stepping towards the cot, the man cried out, the sound conveying both sorrow and joy. Fabian wanted to comfort him, hating to see his father so upset. But then he noticed Jasmine and Taylor, held firmly in each others' arms and he forgot the other man's distress. Seeing them together reminded him of all he'd lost, everything he would never experience again. His heart clenched painfully with remembrance. Turning his head again, his eyes alighted on the only other person in the room, one of the mountain men. He beat expertly at his drums, filling the room with sounds that had awakened him. He felt empty inside, not even experiencing the awe that seeing one of these honored people in his home should have inspired.

His melancholy wore on him and he needed to use the cleansing room. Attempting to rise, weakness assailed him, blurring his vision and making his head spin. But those problems did not explain his inability to move. Something heavy rested across his chest, pinning him to the bed. Looking down, he noticed an arm wrapped around his body. Confusion clouded his mind as he followed the line of that arm. He wondered who would dare lie next to him with his father standing there in the sleeping room. Only one person would have been afforded that privilege, but he had died.

Tracing over the person's shoulder and neck, his gaze settled on the features of his cot companion. His heart leapt with joy as he came face to face with his love, Caden's warm beautiful eyes staring back at him. He appeared tired and weepy but Fabian's heart lightened at seeing the other man. Lifting his arm, he wanted to touch him, his love for the man so strong it required a constant tactile reminder. A memory teased at his mind, of blood and lacking heartbeats and a doctor. He tried to push it away. But the memory wouldn't leave him. Then it hit him.

Caden?

Scrambling off the bed, Fabian dropped to the floor, his feet weak from disuse. His heart hammered in his chest, ripping at him as if it could return to Caden's side without him. Was he dreaming? Everyone else in the room seemed calm. No one else seemed freaked out at the presence of him.

Crawling to the edge of the cot, Caden looked over the side and their eyes met again. Not quite believing but unable to stop hoping, Fabian stared at him, wondering if his man just might be alive. But how could that be possible? He remembered clearly, no heartbeat or so he'd thought.

He stared at Caden, looking into the eyes he'd grown to love so much. Joy burst into his chest as hope morphed into certainty. The beat of the drums might have awakened him, but those eyes sustained him. "Caden," he whispered, voice scratchy. The other man stared back at him, awe and unshed tears shining from his eyes. "Is it really you?" Fabian whispered, afraid of the answer but needing to hear the truth.

Caden's face stretched into a smile. "Yeah." He nodded, sobbing, his eyes flooded with tears, drops spilling over. He had never seen the other man so vulnerable and he ached for his pain, even as he rejoiced that he hadn't died.

"Oh, thank the Goddess." The words drifted to him from the door. The relief and happiness in his father's voice mirroring his own.

His Caden had survived. Placing his hands flat on the cot, he pressed down, pushing himself up as he tried to move from the floor to the cot. But he didn't move. His hands wouldn't support his own weight and his legs didn't seem able to help either. Worse, Caden didn't look in any shape to offer assistance. He looked to his father, who came over immediately, to help Fabian back onto the cot.

Snuggling into Caden's arms, he set aside his own surprise, his need to comfort his mate stronger. "Don't cry, my love. Whatever it is we can fix it." Instead of calming him, the words seemed to make Caden cry harder. He tried to figure out what might have happened but he didn't really remember anything after seeing Caden lying on the bed with the doctor bent over him. Shuddering, Fabian hoped to never see that sight again. His mother had died after a similar incident with a doctor.

Caden grabbed him around the waist, burying his face in the crook of his neck. Fabian caressed his man's head, the hair longer than normal. Growth of the hairs on his face scratched at Fabian skin. What the hell was going on? Caden always kept his hair prickly short and himself well groomed.

"Please let this be real," Caden whispered against his neck, repeating the words. His larger frame jostled Fabian around as the man trembled uncontrollably. The sobs wracked his body, making Fabian ached.

"Would someone please tell me what has occurred here?" Fabian said, annoyance tingeing his voice. It seemed everyone knew something, something about him that he wasn't privy to. "Caden? Papa? What's going on?" His hands continued to touch Caden, stroking him in an effort to soothe the larger man. Strangely, his hands holding this man felt like a rare treat for him. As if he hadn't done it in far too long.

"You..." Caden tried. "You were..." Caden closed his mouth, tightening his arms around Fabian, almost cutting off his air supply. His body quieted but his sobs never ceased.

"You were in the heart death," Jasmine answered, surprising Fabian with her unexpected words. With his mind completely focused on Caden, he'd forgotten she was there. "You've been sleeping since the moment after you walked into Caden's room."

"No, that can't be true. How long was I asleep?" Fabian turned sorrowful eyes to his mate. What had the man endured? No one could guarantee that someone in the clutches of a heart death would become whole again. They must all have been so worried.

"Twenty-one moon cycles. The twin moons came up last moon cycle and we were able to convince Jacob to play for you," Jasmine responded. She sounded weary. Gazing at her, he noticed she now drooped against Taylor's chest, the man holding up her weight. She looked drained with her face pale and her hair hanging limply around her. Searching the faces of the other occupants of the room, he realized they all did. "Any longer and I think Caden would have joined you." No, his mind screamed, shocked by her words, fear consuming him. Only mumbled words and phrases escaped Caden's lips thus far, spoken into Fabian's neck. No one knew how the heart death would manifest, but everyone knew how it looked when it took complete hold of a person. This disease would not claim his mate.

"Caden, honey, you need to talk to me." His mate wasn't physically dead but he might be nearing the soul death that started the process of a heart death.

"Please don't leave me," Caden begged.

"I won't, baby. I promise."

"But you tried. For more dawns than I can count you tried to leave me." He rambled on and Fabian let him. He needed to know what happened and he needed Caden to talk to him. Plus, the more Caden spoke, the less likely the man was in the throes of the heart death. "No one told me you were sick. I could have helped you before it got too bad. But they kept you away from me," Caden accused.

He rested his face on the top of the other man's head, kneading his back, the room and Caden's body rife with tension. Fabian closed his eyes listening to the sound of his voice as well as the words, its sweetness marred by the despairing information being relayed. The fingers digging into his sides flexed as Caden reflexively grabbed him.

"When I found you, five sun cycles had already passed and you've been sleeping ever since." His anger bled through his words and his unhappiness at Fabian's slight towards him.

"It's okay. I'm here now. I promise." Fabian said, kissing the top of Caden's head. They both grew quiet, relishing the feel of being in each other's arms like this. The drums stopped, but Fabian still felt his heart bursting with joy. His mate was alive and they were together.

Fabian's father came over to the bed, kissing Fabian and then Caden on the forehead. "You both need to rest. We'll come back later." Jasmine and Taylor were up next. She wrapped her arms around the both of them, Taylor doing the same. Everyone left the room, taking the mountain-dweller and his drums with them and leaving Fabian and Caden alone.

"I'm sorry about not giving you a chance to explain about the notes, or giving us a chance to work this out." Shame filled him at the reaction he'd had to those beautifully written missives. He'd been an idiot. He knew that now.

Shaking his head, Caden said, "It's okay. I understand, at least a little." He stroked Fabian's face. "You must understand though. Those notes were penned with all the love inside me, with all the love I want to give to you." And that love was clearly reflected from his eyes, open and honest. Fabian felt it in his touch, so gentle.

"I do. I do understand," he whispered, knowing the truth of those words in his heart. He wouldn't waste one more moment. Or risk losing Caden without the man aware of his feelings. The words Fabian longed to tell Caden came bubbling out. "I love you Caden. I love you so much and I'm sorry."

Heaving a deep sigh, Caden responded, "I love you too, Fabian." Relief interspersed in his words. Returning the smile, Caden pushed up into his arms, touching his lips to Fabian's, licking into his mouth.

Fabian tasted his man, immediately putting some distance between their lips, "Ew," Fabian choked out, "I think some menthe leaves are in order for the both of us." Sniffing the air, he continued, "And most likely a bath as well."

"Yes, and then back to the kissing," Caden replied. Fabian agreed wholeheartedly.

Epilogue

Caden strolled along with Fabian towards the clearing, hands clasped together. They were finally making the trip to the centre of the forest that was nearly three twin moons cycles in the making. Their destination was the place they first picnicked all those long sun cycles ago.

Since Fabian woke up, neither his nor Caden's family would leave their side. Caden loved Jasmine. She and Taylor were the only family he had, but he needed to be alone with his mate. They needed privacy. Barely a touch or a kiss was exchanged between them for fear of someone walking in on them. His cock hurt from the effort of restraining himself.

The leaves mashing beneath their feet, the forest creatures talking to each other, the trees rustling in the wind, all combined to accompany them on their journey. Caden still couldn't believe how far they'd come or how much they'd almost lost. It had almost killed his man when he thought Caden died and it almost killed him when Fabian had succumbed to the heart death. After that experience Caden made a promise not to let Fabian feel alone again.

Caden directed them over to a stand of trees, out of direct sunlight. He knew exactly what he wanted first from Fabian. And he suspected his man wanted the same thing. Caden stripped himself first, helping Fabian out of his clothes when his man took too long to finish. He needed to feel this man's body pressed against his. Caden's arms circled his shoulders, pulling Fabian into a warm embrace. Fabian melted into him as Caden kneaded his shoulders, back, and finally his buttocks. Going down to the spongy grass, Caden propped himself up against the tree trunk with Fabian straddling his hips. His feelings mirrored the first time Caden had Fabian in his arms, except this time nothing was hidden, the light of sun illuminating them to each other. His need for this man strengthened daily and although the pain from his accident had subsided, Fabian wouldn't agree to a trip to the forest until now.

He'd been waiting all this time to fully claim his mate, in body, mind, heart and soul. Retrieving out the bottle of scented oil he brought with them, Caden placed the pouch to the side away from possible damage. This moment long overdue and Caden had wanted to be prepared and make love to his man properly.

Moistening his fingers with the oil, he grabbed one of the man's ass cheeks and opened him up. He knew he skipped some steps but he was eager to be inside his mate. Licking up the line of the man's throat, Caden tasted his skin and as always the flavor of pastries clung to him. His wet fingers circled the man's hole, teasing the soft flesh there. He buried his face in the side of Fabian's neck, inhaling his scent as he slowly penetrated him with one finger. Fabian gasped, the sound stopping his progress. He couldn't tell if pain or pleasure caused the sound but he wouldn't take any chances.

Caden bit down on his own lip, pulling away from him. He searched the other man's eyes. Not finding any hint of pain, he readied to continue but Fabian beat him to it. The man started rocking gently on Caden's finger, pushing it deeper with the motion. The in and out thrusting meant to get Fabian accustomed to his touch felt incredible. Finally seating himself on the digit, the man shuddered, groaning his pleasure.

"You feel so good," Caden revealed, knowing he sounded lovestruck but really not caring.

"More," his mate moaned at the same time and Caden complied. On the next outward and inward thrust, Caden positioned his fingers, adding another to Fabian's snug hole. The pinched lips were his indication of Fabian's discomfort. Caden wrapped his free hand around Fabian's hips, attempting to stop the man's movements.

"You know not what's good for you." Caden tightened his hand around Fabian's hip when the man showed no signs of slowing. "Give it some time, Fabian. The pain will ease and then you can ride my fingers to your heart's desire." Fabian's hole gripped his fingers, holding him inside like Caden's cock needed to be held. His cock begged him not to delay any more, but Caden knew better.

Fabian nodded his assent, the man's only response. Removing his hands from Caden's chest, the man began to explore, stroking his torso and mapping the hairs trailing down the middle of his stomach. Caden was in heaven, Fabian's touch inciting him, Fabian's hole hugging him. They were so close to a joining he could burst apart.

Watching that beautiful face closely, he noticed when the features eased. He let up on his grip, stabbing in and out of Fabian again. The man moaned, hands curling into Caden's chest hair, tugging at the strands. His cock twitched in response, loving the small bite of pain. This was what their loving was all about, the slow learning phase and the fast striving for completion phase. Pushing in another finger, Fabian proved himself to be an apt pupil. He stopped, waiting until his body relaxed and then began moving again when it finally did.

He stroked within Fabian, playing his fingers against the man's inner walls. Impatience rode Caden hard, his attempts at being careful taking its toll. "I need you now, baby. Goddess, I hope you're ready." He removed his fingers from Fabian's hole. Reaching for the bottle, he fumbled with it, dumping the rest of its contents into his palm. Gripping his cock, Caden coated himself with the sticky fluid and pressed himself against Fabian's entrance, sorely needing to be inside his man. Please be ready, Caden thought, need playing havoc with his mind.

"Push out when I push in," Caden instructed the other man, unsure whether he'd prepared Fabian adequately and wanting to do everything he could to minimize the potential for pain. He looked to Fabian's face, smiling when he noticed there was no fear in his eyes, only desire to match his own and a trust that touched his heart.

He forced his cock inside, Fabian doing exactly what he asked. The tight channel squeezed him, the stranglehold on his hardened flesh almost too much to bear. Groaning, Caden rested his forehead against Fabian's, gulping in huge breaths of air. Finally, the other man was fully seated on his lap, pressing them tightly together groin to groin. His lungs felt starved for air and his heart beat entirely too fast.

"Tell me when, baby," Caden told him, his cock at home in the warm cavern of Fabian's body, pulsing with need. His man's inner walls surrounded him, scorching him with delicious heat.

Puffing out his breaths, Fabian moaned as he shifted on Caden's lap, testing his readiness. "When," Fabian sighed, rolling his hips in an all too enticing way.

Caden grabbed hold of Fabian's hips, lifting the man off his cock. He clenched his teeth at the convulsive contracting of the man's hole as the sensations bombarded him. He had never realized this could be his, these feelings, these emotions. Dragging him down hard, he slammed his cock up into Fabian at the same time. He was in trouble. No way would he last with the wonderful tightness of Fabian around him, squeezing him.

Fabian purred, ramming down on Caden, arching into him wantonly. Tossing his head, Fabian shook his hair out of his eyes as he focused on Caden. Fabian grabbed hold of his cock, stroking himself in time with Caden's thrusts.

Time seemed to slow, everything around and within him stilling as Caden hovered on the edge of release, relishing Fabian's inner walls. A small bird perched on a branch some distance away from where Caden loved Fabian, its presence here obscene but also oddly appropriate. According to their lore, the dove represented love and loyalty. In this place and time, Caden and Fabian were communing with nature and with each other. Caden couldn't help but think, connected as they were, he and Fabian would come out of the other side of their orgasm closer to each other and nature. The small bird flew away having delivered its message and time went back to normal.

He hammered into Fabian, the man right there with him, a frenzy of movements pushing them along. Sweat dripped from Fabian's body to his, the scents of cinnamon, male and sex mingling. Caden reached for that place, where everything met and he and Fabian would be one. Fabian's ass surrounded him with love, helping him to get there.

"Now, baby," he shouted, all the sensations and emotions combining to tip Caden over the edge.

Fabian's hand sped up as his tugging became frantic, hips thrusting wildly even with Caden's attempts to guide. Head thrown back, a muted shout on his lips, Fabian spilled his load onto his chest as Caden filled up his hole. Melting against the tree, Caden stroked Fabian's sides bringing them both down. Fabian continued to spasm around him and bliss bathed Caden's entire body. Sweat dotted their skin mingling with cum coating Caden's chest.

Fabian brought his head forward but his body held the same position after his orgasm. His movements limited to the inhale and exhale of his breaths, as his inner walls provided the only proof of life. Fabian peeked up at Caden through the mop of his hair. "Oh my Goddess," Fabian murmured. "When can we do *that* again?"

Chuckling, Caden's cock moved within Fabian. Semi-hard, he still rested inside Fabian's body. "When I get back my strength," Caden replied, loving this insatiable creature atop him. Caden grinned. At last he had claimed his mate.

* * * *

Much later, Caden woke spooned around Fabian. Propping himself up on his elbow, he leaned over Fabian's body, admiring the younger man. The light breeze ruffled his hair, giving him the look of a wicked angel, wanton and innocent, his sun-drenched features clearly visible and relaxed in repose.

Needing to touch him, Caden rubbed his semi-hard cock along the back of Fabian's thigh, loving the slip-slide of their bodies against each other. He bent his head to nuzzle in the crook of the other man's neck, Fabian's hair tickling him for his effort. He wanted to taste him again. He wanted to enter that warm cavern that had been made especially for their mutual pleasure.

Unfortunately, any more sexual explorations between them would have to wait. He had a few surprises left for his mate, things Caden hoped would show Fabian how much he loved him. He knew this place would be the only appropriate place for the kind of declaration he wanted to make. So Caden had come prepared.

Humping his leg a little harder, Caden figured he could have some fun while he roused the other man. "Wake up, baby," he breathed into Fabian's ear, his actions jostling the man. Stroking down the man's face, he lovingly traced the features he'd come to love so very much.

Stretching, Fabian rolled onto his back, stopping Caden's amusements. "Why?" he whined, lips pouting as he cracked open his eyes. Turning on his side, Fabian faced him. He ignored Caden's attempts to keep him awake by snuggling into his arms and closing his eyes. Breathing evenly, the man tried to go back to sleep.

"Get up and you'll see." Amused by his mate's antics, Caden slapped the man on the butt. He needed to show Fabian the depth of his love in this one way the other man would understand best. Pushing Fabian away from him after his love pat, he got to his feet. "Fabian," he called, offering his hand and waiting.

Fabian took his time grumbling all the way before he opened his eyes again. Taking the proffered hand, Caden pulled him to his feet. Hair tousled, lips swollen, bite marks marring his body, the man looked gorgeous. Yawning, he stretched again, twisting and turning as he worked the kinks from his body. Jumping from foot to foot, he announced. "I must relieve myself, baby." He walked deeper into the forest to do just that, Caden watching him go. He admired the taut buttocks moving away from him, his cock filling out completely. Licking his lips, Caden took a step towards him. But Fabian disappeared behind a tree and out of his line of sight.

His darn cock had sidetracked him. Shaking his head, Caden realized his own bladder shouted at him. He'd been so focused on that ass he never noticed his own need. Moving from their resting area, he remedied the situation. He returned to the clearing, washing his hands with the water Fabian poured for him. Drying them with the cloth given to him, he tossed the material aside.

Excitement thrummed through his body. This was it. Bending to dig out the rest of the contents from the pouch, he stood in front of Fabian, his treasures clasped in his hand. "First, I made these for us." Caden opened his hands to reveal the rings he'd molded for them resting in his palm. "I love you, Fabian Baxter. I will always love you. Will you be my mate and hand-fast with me for all time?" Caden's words rushed out, the beat of his heart painfully similar.

Fabian's jaw dropped, eyes rounding and welling with tears. He reached trembling hands towards the rings, picking up both of them. His reverence touched Caden as nothing else could. Very carefully, Fabian looked the rings over, the message written inside each of them immediately catching his eye. He stared up at Caden after seeing etched letters, love and happiness smiling up at him.

Watching his mate's every move, he waited for Fabian to say something. The meaning behind those symbols could not have escaped him and Caden expected the man to say *yes*. He also knew he would ask after the letters. Caden had carved the letters, *DWMH Fabian*, in one ring and *DWMH Caden*, in the other. And the words meant everything to them although Fabian didn't know that yet.

"What does it mean?" Fabian's voice sounded scratchy. Fabian trembled so much, the rings were now hopping about in his hand. The man took a step closer to him and he matched that step with one of his own. He could feel Fabian's body heat and inhale his scent without difficulty.

"If you say yes, I'll show you," Caden reasoned. He really needed to learn not to give his mate ultimatums.

But then Fabian nodded and Caden reconsidered. They seem to always work out well for him so why change that? Joy suffused him, growing brighter when Fabian voiced the words.

"Yes, I'll hand-fast with you. I hoped when I was younger but I never thought..." The ceremony did not require rings but Caden would do everything in his power to stake his claim. Fabian was his and everyone would know it. From this sun cycle forward, no one else would have the right to go near his mate.

A happy grin curved Caden's lips, unbelievable happiness flooding his body. Many moon cycles ago, on the dawn of the auction, he had wondered if this would happen. If the plans he had initiated would give him what he wanted. Now here he stood with the love of his life, claiming him for the *rest* of his life.

He took back the rings, placing them on the right hand and middle finger of their hands. The metal fit them both perfectly. Fabian hugged him, their bodies aligning flawlessly. Burying his hands in Caden's hair, he kissed him gently. He wrapped his arms around Fabian, caressing the smooth skin as he separated their lips, the need for air their only consideration.

Caden didn't want to delay the ceremony. The union could occur that cycle since sundown hadn't come yet. He knew if they left now, they could meet up with the village pastor and have the ceremony done before nightfall. And even though the presence of the pastor's wife would be sufficient for the deed to be official, he knew he could convince Jermaine Baxter and Jasmine and Taylor to attend on short notice.

"We can have the ceremony at the next twin moons," Fabian said, dashing any hopes Caden had of completely claiming the man before nightfall. Pacing the grass, features animated, his eyes glowed in the sun's rays. "We must invite Papa and Jasmine and Taylor." He ticked off on his hand, the ring twinkling in the sunlight. "Although with you staking your claim on his mate, I don't know that he would want to come, or even allow Jasmine near you for that matter."

"I...I explained that already," Caden sputtered, cheeks burning with heat. "It was an accident." He didn't think he would ever outlive the humiliation of that time.

Waving his explanation away, Fabian continued, "Oh, and Ms. Monica. I'll show that woman sass. She will sit in the front row." Bouncing around while he spoke, Fabian's mood became contagious. "Telling me to settle down, well, humph. She will see."

"That look is good on you," Caden noted, watching Fabian's happy eyes shining up at him, on each pass. His heart warmed, melting him to the core. He loved this man so much.

Fabian gazed down the length of his own body before meeting Caden's eyes again. "What do you mean? I am naked."

"Bliss, baby. Absolute bliss looks very good on you," Caden replied.

Fabian moved into Caden's body and went up on his toes. He smoothed his lips over Caden's, their lips clinging together, the kiss sweet and tender. "I love you, Caden Eliot. And I am proud to call you mate," Fabian whispered against his lips, deepening the kiss after those words.

His arms tight bands around Fabian, Caden buried his fingers in the younger man's hair. He lifted the smaller man into his body, fitting them together perfectly. Caden feasted from Fabian's lips, taking all his sustenance from this one man.

Ripping his lips away, Caden buried them in the side of Fabian's neck, inhaling deeply of his scent, cinnamon, sex and male. He palmed Fabian's ass, grinding his cock into the soft flesh of his stomach. Groaning, Caden confessed, "You make me forget myself."

He would not be distracted. He needed to finish this. There was one more thing he needed to do.

He placed Fabian away from him, needing to use this moment to completely express how he felt about the other man. "By the time we are finished, you will understand what the letters on our rings mean. You will know how I feel about you."

Nodding his understanding, Fabian fidgeted. The man just couldn't stand still. He always seemed to be in motion, his hands or eyes or hips. Since he had the freedom to do so, he touched Caden constantly, hands stroking his hair or his back, any place he could reach. Caden loved that, loved the feeling of being cherished.

"Close your eyes, Fabian," Caden began. "Listen to my voice. Listen to the trees swaying. Listen to the leaves rustling. Listen to the birds chattering." A lot of thought and preparation had gone into coming up with this gift for Fabian. He knew how much the other man loved his time on the mountain when permitted to attend the Dance. This gift should help him experience that same feeling regardless of the cycle of the moons.

His body overflowing with nervous energy, Fabian closed his eyes too tightly. His body tensed, unable to experience what Caden tried to share with him. "I don't understand," Fabian admitted, his breaths coming faster.

"Relax, my love. I am with you." Stepping closer to Fabian, Caden circled his shoulders, keeping constant contact. "I always will be with you. Trust that nothing will happen to you in my presence and relax." He whispered the last words against his mate's hair, realizing he needed this connection as well.

Fabian's body slowly complied, tension leaving his face and his body. Sighing, the man rested his head on Caden's chest, soothed by his touch. Fabian lifted his arms and lightly circled Caden's waist as if powerless to stop himself. "Now listen. Listen to the sounds of the forest, to the beat of your heart." Drawing him closer, Caden cupped Fabian's head that rested on his chest. "Listen to my heart."

Moving his hands higher, Fabian circled Caden's neck. "I can hear it now. The sounds are beautiful." Awe tangled in his voice and Fabian hummed along with the sounds. He already strived for what Caden was trying to show him, achieving it without much help.

"Exactly." Caden rocked them, moving them together, matching the pulse of the forest. "This is my ultimate gift to you." Caden said, their bodies as one, their pelvises bumping and grinding against each other. "This is what the rings mean, my love. We can make our own music. DWMH means dancing with my heart, and with you, I will always be dancing with my heart."

Stepping out of his arms, Fabian faced outward, raising his arms to the sky and tipping his head back. He snuggled back into Caden, swaying with the rhythm of the forest. Fabian rested his head on Caden's chest, bringing them back together.

Caden hugged Fabian to him again, nosing aside his hair. "We can dance anywhere, using anything as our music," he continued in a hushed voice. This moment between them required respect. He was invading a part of Fabian's life previously reserved as a solitary experience. Dancing was important to Fabian and Caden wanted to make it about the two of them from now on. "I love you, Fabian. Will you dance with me forever?"

Purring, Fabian shifted them intimately together and responded. "I love you, too, Caden. And I will dance with you forever." He buried his nose in the side of Caden's neck. "Thank you for showing me how to dance with my heart," Fabian whispered, placing a soft kiss against his neck.

He pressed his lips to the pulse point at Fabian's neck as emotion threatened to overwhelm him. He licked the skin there once. Then tilting Fabian's head up, Caden captured his lips, already knowing he would always love dancing with his heart.

THE END

http://www.anikahamilton.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anika was born and raised in Jamaica, later moving to sunny South Florida to complete her college education. She has an undergraduate degree in Accounting and a graduate degree in Public Administration.

She spends her daylight hours as a public administrator working in her local government. At night, Anika is usually writing, playing video games, reading, watching TV, or any feasible combination of these activities with writing as the focal point.



Siren Publishing, Inc. www.SirenPublishing.com