



Dona
Nobis
Pacem

willa okati

Dona Nobis Pacem
Willi Okati

Chapter One

In a fit of optimism, some enterprising settler twenty-odd years ago had named this patch of land "Shady Grove". The name hadn't stuck longer than the first summer, arid heat scorching the life out of anything green the daft fellow had tried to plant and carrying away his wife and children.

After that, or so the story went, the settler had cursed his homestead with the new name of "Hell".

When gold was found not far West in a puny stream, the name changed yet again to "El Dorado", though that lasted no longer than the rush of miners who picked, panned and mined away most of the precious metal.

When the gold was mostly gone and civilization caught up with the roughneck men who'd blazed through in search of riches, there came bankers, lawyers and doctors, along with their pretty wives and dainty daughters. Amongst themselves, they'd formed a quaint city council, elected a mayor and a nominated a marshal, and rechristened this hole in the ground as "Nazareth".

Those whose tongues weren't corseted by the niceties observed in polite society still called the former boomtown "Hell".

As for Donnell, he called it home, and had since the day he was born, a silent infant who opened his mouth to wail, but made no sound, not then and not ever afterwards. He'd never spoken a word nor even so much as been able to coax a noise from his throat, though his hearing was top-notch quality.

Donnell chose to speak through music instead. Music was his voice, tickled out through the ivories of the old upright piano he'd paid a considerable sum in gold dust to have shipped from Chicago. Within the safe haven of Treighton's saloon, Donnell had set himself up to have a fine view of Main Street through the mosquito netting tacked to their window frames while he played.

He could arrange Treighton's however he wanted, no questions asked. Owner's rules and that owner would be him.

Music wasn't his only skill. He was a favored son of Lady Luck, and the cards danced to his tune. Those who thought a mute man was simple and an easy cheat at faro often found themselves losing big.

He'd given up the game after winning Treighton's, though. No sense in pushing his luck *too* far.

A man who'd call himself satisfied with his lot in life, Donnell caressed the piano keys, Chopin flowing smooth and sweet as Kentucky bourbon under his mastery of the music. He let the corner of his mouth quirk upward with dry humor. Many were they who'd claimed the son of a whore, muteness aside, would never make anything of his life. They'd been wrong, too.

Did they accept his good fortune with grace? Hell, no. The "proper" folks of Nazareth scorned him still, and always would. Too good for the likes of him and his saloon.

Thank God for sinners, eh?

Chopin had melted into the angry crash and clatter of Tchaikovsky. Donnell stopped when he realized he'd launched into a storm of a piece, drawing curious looks from his staff and the few dedicated drinkers who lingered after either a liquid breakfast or a more solid meal of eggs and biscuits -- as many who came for the whiskey stayed for the good, solid food. Those who bided there sipped the hours away a pinch of gold dust and a tot of whiskey at a time until the proper hour to enjoy a beery luncheon.

Donnell flexed his fingers, careful as ever, making sure of their flexibility and nimbleness. Losing one or more haunted his rare nightmares. He summoned a bright, careless grin and tipped an imaginary hat at the wary handful of folk inside Treighton's, then winked.

The drinkers cackled, thinking Donnell had meant to startle them -- a joke -- with his crashing music. The cleaning staff, who kept their own counsel, returned as silently as Donnell to their work. Those who knew better, his daytime bartender Levi and the cook Bettina, both kept their attention on Donnell, waiting to see if there'd be a storm coming from him, or more peaceful weather.

Donnell nodded more soberly to the pair, waving to indicate he'd only had an upsetting notion cross his mind and they'd nothing to fret over. To the cook, Bettina, who had raised him from a newly-orphaned, two-hours-old infant, Donnell used his idiosyncratic

mélange of self-taught sign language to repeat himself and add *you worry too much, Mother.*

"Look who's saying so," Bettina retorted, tart and sharp as ever she'd been. She never hesitated to use such turns of phrase. Donnell appreciated her all the more for her refusal to pussyfoot about. He was grateful most of all for the stubborn persistence that had led her to help Donnell shape his sign language in the first place, adding in a mix of Apache and Navajo she'd learned at the missions where she, an orphan herself, had been raised -- from which she'd run away as soon as she was able.

What he'd do without Bettina, Donnell didn't know, and hoped the day would be long in coming before he'd have to figure that out.

Thin as a rail despite years of sampling and tasting as she cooked, her fair Irish complexion looked browner at first glance thanks to her vast profusion of freckles. Her unusual yet striking features retained the prettiness of her youth that had served her well during her time spent as a soiled dove in the same house where Donnell had been born.

He could not have asked for a finer friend, and no man on earth had a better mother.

"Better not play that racket come night," Bettina warned as she approached the piano. "Sounds like cats fighting. You'll scare away all your customers."

Donnell made a face at her. He had no concerns regarding his regulars. If any of the high-and-mighty came around, they'd get the rough end of Rachmaninoff. What worried him more were the holy rollers and the flock of priests in town; what set his teeth on edge was the thought of their resident holy madman harassing his clientele. Nothing sent the paying customers packing faster than a raving self-titled saint weeping at their feet and begging them to reconsider their sins.

Annoying little gnat.

More aggravating still: the madman Michael was held in greater regard than a mute man who owned his own business. Where was the fairness in that?

Bettina laid her work-worn hand over Donnell's and squeezed with as much gentleness as she was capable of. "It'll be fine, child, you'll see. Don't you take on so."

Donnell patted her forearm. "Shhh," he vocalized, the only sound he was capable of. It had a hundred different meanings, and on occasions like this he was glad of its

variability, when he wasn't rightly sure himself as to his response to the reassurance even Bettina clearly didn't believe.

What Bettina might have said next was lost in a sudden clamor rising from the dusty, uneven street outside, usually quiet and deadly dull during the morning hours while laborers and leftover miners toiled, polite society occupied themselves with polite works, and gamblers slept off their night's fun. Attention captured, Donnell peered through the mosquito netting over his window.

A woman of limited stature, Bettina stretched to peek over his head. "Nothing out there to concern yourself with," she sniffed, spying the cause of the commotion first. "Just a tramp."

She was likely right. Still, with nothing better to do and not trusting himself not to launch back into thunderous compositions on the ivories, Donnell swiveled his piano stool about and set his arms on the sill, all the better to play audience.

Soon enough, the source of the commotion came into view. Donnell raised one eyebrow, intrigued. A tall, lean man, far too thin for his height, he was dressed in the tattered remnants of a once-respectable shirt now missing its collar and cuffs and formerly sturdy denim trousers, with no hat on his head nor shoes on his feet nor a coat on his back. Bleached-out hair stringy from lack of washing and long enough to be caught up in a queue hung over his face and tangled across his eyes.

Donnell leaned forward, instantly captivated. He'd never seen the equal of those eyes, their color distinct even at this distance. Aqua blue, the shade of Jamaican waters, dulled by hunger and pain but no less remarkable.

In point of fact, were he to be cleaned up and provided with a few good healthy meals, Donnell guessed this young man would easily steal his heart away.

Not that anyone save for Bettina knew about his preferences. It was safer that way. He came in for scant questioning about his lack of female companionship, as most thought if his tongue didn't work then neither would his cock.

Donnell abandoned those thoughts and focused on the beautiful --yes, beautiful -- young man instead, a far more pleasant diversion. He'd no stubble on his cheeks or chin, both badly sunburned. Young, then. Tall and gangly enough that at a guess Donnell would have put him in his late teens, no more than twenty, not so far Donnell's junior.

A man could make quite a lot of himself in twenty years plus change. He could raise himself a fine establishment like Donnell's or he could end up staggering filthy and starving down a dusty badlands street with children and bad-tempered dogs jeering him every barefooted step of the way.

Donnell frowned when the young man staggered, swaying alarmingly before righting himself. That didn't seem to be clumsiness, but rather weariness. Perhaps illness?

"Drunk," Bettina sniffed. She might work in a saloon, but she had no patience with men who behaved badly when they'd had too much of the grape and grain.

Barely hearing her, Donnell continued to track the man's progress. Seeming to ignore the rabble jeering at him, he came to a stop and stood up as straight as he could, attempting to brush as much dust, mud and worse off his clothes, smoothing them down. He dragged his hair out of his face with hands that shook minutely and gazed up the length of the street still to go.

The quiet despair in his eyes struck a chord in Donnell's heart, reverberating with a sense of hollow misery. Here was a man who'd fallen as far as he could go, with a trail of heartbreak behind him that stretched out for as many miles as he'd walked.

Donnell sat back and drummed his fingers on his knees. *Poor bastard.*

He watched the young man for a moment longer to see what he'd do. Wiping his hands on the filthy remnants of his trousers, the young man approached the first "respectable" type who walked past, a stout old quack of a doctor with tightly pursed lips and a wrinkled nose. Donnell couldn't hear what the young man said as he accosted the doctor, but the doctor's reply filled him in.

"I have no work for the likes of you," the doctor said, drawing back as if the young man carried a plague with him. "Do you think I'd hire a drunkard?"

"I'm not drunk." The young man's voice, steady and pure and as young as Donnell had suspected, carried its fine tenor clearly to Donnell's ears. "I just need a few days' work to get back on my feet."

"So you can spend all the gold you earn on more rye, I've no doubt. My answer is no. Stand aside before I summon the marshal."

The young man radiated dejection, but dipped his head politely as he stepped back. He stared after the doctor as the prissy old son of a bitch high-stepped away, no doubt off to enjoy an hour or two with one of the ladies at Mirelle's bordello.

Goddamned hypocrite; if Donnell was any judge the redness of the doctor's cheeks and the spidery veins on his nose told the story of a man who enjoyed his port all too well and was likely more often drunk than this forlorn fellow he'd rejected.

Donnell shook his head and stood.

"Child," Bettina warned him, keeping her voice down. "Best to mind your own business."

You would say that? Donnell signed in disbelief.

Bettina looked away. "This time? I would."

She refused to return her gaze to him, and so Donnell could not ask her why on earth she, a generous soul beneath her tough exterior, would deny succor to a man in need of help.

Donnell cocked an eyebrow at Levi, questioning him. Levi, a great brute of a man, hairy as a bear, shrugged. "Got me. Reckon she figures we got enough to keep ourselves busy keeping this place open for business without takin' in strays."

Or perhaps, Donnell thought to himself, *Bettina fears I'll lose my heart to a no-hoper. She knows me all too well.*

He sighed. She wasn't wrong. It'd be far too easy to let himself fall under the spell of those aqua blue eyes. His cock gave an interested twitch at the thought of the young man healthy and naked beneath him, his smile coy and his body inviting.

Donnell did have better sense than that, or so he liked to think. And he would not take advantage of a man in this fellow's weakened state.

Directly to Levi, he signed, *I'm not looking to adopt the pitiful pup out there. Just want to give him a meal. I can almost hear his stomach growling from here.*

Bettina's curiosity had gotten the best of her, and she'd followed the second half of their exchange. She scowled, though with concern visible behind the thin press of her lips.

"And who do you plan to have cook this meal?"

Donnell beamed at Bettina. He stood, kissed her thin cheek with a smack, and pointed himself at the swinging saloon doors.

Enough kind souls had helped Donnell in his day. He owed this poor fellow no less.

Chapter Two

Lacking any other entertainment, the ragtag children let to run wild all day long hadn't let up one bit in their harassment of the young man. So far, they'd not thrown anything but clods of loose dirt, nor had any of the flea-ridden cur dogs at their heels done more than bark and growl, their surly tempers inflamed by the heat and the jeers from their nominal masters.

For his part, the young man kept his chin up and his focus determinedly fixed away from his tormentors. He'd tried to tuck his dirty hair behind his ears, but the hot, arid winds constantly swept the stiff locks over his face time and time again.

Donnell prodded one brat after another out of his way, sometimes with the backside of his hand, as he approached. Some of them cursed him, some stood aside, but they left off baiting the young man and that suited Donnell well enough.

The young man had caught the attention of a small, nervous-looking type who sweated and squeaked as he swore he had no work available. Donnell thought he recognized the flea as a clerk at the dry goods emporium.

When, disappointed yet again, the young man turned away, he came nearly nose-to-nose with Donnell. He yelped, strangling it off in the middle with an immediate faint pink blush, probably the best he could muster in his half-starved state. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I didn't hear you coming."

Donnell raised his hands, palms up. *No harm done*. He gazed at the young man, fascinated. Up close his eyes were far lovelier than from afar, the deep blue-green of the sea, dulled at the present time but likely to be luminous as the moon when he was in proper health. Most of the women of Donnell's acquaintance would kill for a pair of eyes like his, capable of catching a man's interest with a sweep of his lashes.

They certainly held Donnell fascinated. Warmth bloomed in his lower belly, heated interest pooling.

Careful, now. But perhaps...? Donnell knew better than to betray himself without being certain, but from the way this man turned faintly pink, looked away, then snuck a quick glance back before biting his lip, gave Donnell hope.

Clearly disconcerted, the young man back-stepped a pace, far enough to regain his composure and put out his hand. "Nathan," he said. "Could you use a hired man for the day, sir? I'm not afraid to work hard."

Donnell eyed Nathan skeptically. He doubted Nathan would be able to lift a feather before he got a decent meal inside him. He shook his head, but before Nathan could wilt in yet another bout of disappointment, caught Nathan by the arm and nodded to the right, toward Treighton's.

Nathan frowned, confused. "I apologize, sir. I don't take your meaning."

"He ain't got no meaning," one of the urchins jeered. "Can't you tell? He can't talk none. He's dumb."

A clod of dirt hit Donnell squarely in the backside, followed fast by one to Nathan's shoulder that nearly knocked Nathan off his feet. Impatient and alarmed, for the mood was turning ugly fast, Donnell shook Nathan's arm and forgot himself, signing one-handed without realizing it'd look like no more than the palsy to unfamiliar eyes.

Nathan shook off Donnell's grip. "I don't know what your joke is, but it's not funny, sir. Tell whoever sent you that I mean to stay here until I've found work."

Donnell cast his gaze heavenwards. He grasped Nathan's sleeve, trying to tug him away from the rabble.

"Leave off, I said!" Nathan pushed him away. "I'll have none of this game."

Donnell pinched the bridge of his nose. *Fine. The hell with it!* Generosity, that was one thing. Playing the fool to a man who'd never be convinced of his honesty was another, and Donnell had better things to do with his time. Bettina had been right -- this was a complication Donnell could do without, even if Nathan still did have the most compelling blue eyes Donnell had ever been favored to see.

And as for the hot meal Bettina was no doubt cooking up even now, hell, Donnell would eat it. He'd enjoy every last crumb, too.

Behind him, Nathan's stomach emitted a miserable whining growl. Donnell flinched.

Damn stubborn pride, anyway.

For all her huffy protests, Bettina was the next to try.

"He most certainly *will* eat this food I've slaved over a hot stove to prepare especially for him. You get your hands off that plate!" She slapped Donnell's fingers. "Do you know how carefully prepared food like this has to be? It has to go easy in his empty belly or it'll all come right back up again. He'll eat this, he will, or I'll push it down his throat."

Donnell held his hands up in surrender and stood aside. *Good luck.*

Bettina draped a clean kerchief over a small plate of unspiced hominy, a spoonful of battered eggs, and a plain biscuit. She carried a cup filled with thin chicken stock in her other skinny hand and had murder in her eye.

Donnell shrugged elaborately. *Suit yourself if you must*, he said, infusing the sign with a high level of cynicism spurred by hurt at Nathan's rejection. *I know his type. He won't take charity until he's on his deathbed, and maybe not even then.*

"So you say." Bettina sniffed. "We'll just see about that."

Donnell watched out of the corner of his eye as, despite being respectful as possible to a lady and courteous in his bow, Nathan refused the food. He licked his lips, eyed the plate with a desperate sort of hunger, and grimaced in what had to be the pain of his stomach gnawing at him.

And still he said no.

Wisely, Donnell busied himself practicing one of the new songs he'd heard whistled around town recently, far too consumed in selecting the right notes to pay Bettina any heed when she stomped back into Treighton's, rage hanging in a heavy cloud around her. He kept his head down until she'd slammed the door to the kitchens behind her, and then glanced up curiously at the street.

Nathan approached a banker, his voice too low to be heard, white lines of stress standing out around the corners of his eyes and mouth.

What's happened to drive a man so young as he to this place? Donnell wondered, slowing the pace of the sprightly tune into something nearly dirge like. *Mule headed boy! He can't last much longer out there, especially once the sun gets properly high, him without a hat nor a sip of water to his name. And what then?*

Come high noon, tolled briskly by the brass bells in Treighton's heavy clock, Nathan had had not a scrap of luck. By then, Donnell knew, word would have spread about him.

As Donnell might have predicted, Nathan's efforts had won him a crowd of amused hecklers, only some of them unshaven, red-faced minors. Most were those who called themselves respectable, and though they gathered in small clusters on the boardwalks and whispered behind their hands, their nasty enjoyment of Nathan's plight cut no less deep. Donnell could see the growing sense of hopelessness in Nathan's face, as well as the rapid dwindling of his small reservoir of strength.

Insulted or no, there was but only so much Donnell could take. He slid off his piano stool, rolled up his sleeves, and prepared to try again, hoping against hope Nathan's exhaustion would finally induce him to listen to reason.

Listen. Yes. That'll be a problem. He could have asked Bettina to interpret, but from the sonorous clatter of banging pots and pans that'd rung out since she returned, her offering rejected, Donnell thought approaching her with this plan would hardly be the wisest course of action.

He'd have to figure out another way. Was there a pencil behind the bar... ha! And paper? Donnell groaned as he realized the only paper in the saloon was his precious sheet music, worth more than its weight in gold. He hesitated to use it for this purpose--

Outside, Nathan's legs gave out. He crashed to one knee, head hanging heavy. The crowd tittered or guffawed, depending on their position in polite hierarchy. Someone threw a dried buffalo chip that glanced off Nathan's hip.

Oh, no, you don't, Donnell growled. He snatched the top sheet of music and tucked it under his arm. *You and I are going to understand each other, Nathan.*

Donnell had learned, a long, long time ago, never to tempt the fates by claiming a situation couldn't get worse. Such a lament would only ensure far worse raining down on a man's head.

He wondered if Nathan had ever heard that particular lesson. Quite probably not, as by the time Donnell reached the street, the situation had gone from bad, bad, bad to far, far downhill from there.

Michael Mallone had arrived.

Donnell mouthed a swear word. Michael dratted Mallone, dark in spirit as a thundercloud, mad as a March hare, and on a one-man mission to “purify” Nazareth one lost soul at a time. Michael saw himself as an angel with a mission, if one could credit that as an honest belief. Mad, the man was. Purely mad.

Donnell knew some of the Bible, and as he recalled angels weren't kindly sorts, and some of them carried flaming swords. Such a one would be Michael Mallone. He'd vowed to make of Nazareth a proper, law-abiding, God-fearing town where women would come to raise families, where there'd be a church and a school and respectable citizens washed clean and pressed neat.

And that, as Michael never lost a chance to remind the townsfolk, meant ending the trade on this side of Main Street and closing down the bordellos and saloons. He carried out every last one of his missions in broad view of all, some agreeing with him even if they thought him a lunatic, some ripe with piety and sorghum-sweet compassion for the sinners he destroyed to save.

Michael had a particular grievance against Donnell, and had since Michael's arrival in Nazareth. He wanted the land on which Treighton's stood, as well as the plot immediately across the street. He'd claimed to have had a vision the first night he stayed in Nazareth, saying that there could be no other spot for the church he'd been divinely directed to construct.

Donnell supposed Michael had expected a simpleton mute to hand over the keys to one who could do good works with his costly land. When Donnell had refused Michael's laughable offer and scorned him with his knowledge of Michael's past, Michael had decided to make a point of painting Donnell in particular as Satan himself come to live in Nazareth. Perhaps he thought he could shame Donnell into slinking away.

That'd never happen. Too bad for Michael! That land was *Donnell's*, and it'd be pried away from him over his dead body.

The trouble here was that although most folks laughed at Michael for his madness, no one would dirty their fingers stopping him from collecting trash.

They would consider Nathan trash, and let Michael tidy him away.

As Donnell hurried toward them, Michael stood above Nathan, hands folded neatly before him, his firm lips curved in the gentlest of smiles. Enjoying Nathan's suffering, with everyone else there who didn't know the man behind the mask interpreting his expression as one of beatific sorrow for so fallen a specimen of humanity.

Looking at him, Donnell saw unfolding before his eyes precisely what would happen. Michael would pronounce a benediction over Nathan, absolving him of his sins for falling prey to the weaknesses of the flesh, and escort him to the jail where he could sleep off his overconsumption and learn to repent.

After that, if Nathan didn't die from bad food, poor food, no food and didn't succumb to a fever, he'd "owe Michael his life", and Michael would tenderly, mercilessly guide Nathan into an existence composed of torturous piety that'd kill him far more slowly, but destroy him all the same, starting with his spirit.

Donnell's temper rose red and hot behind his eyes. *No you don't*, he thought, clenching his fists. *Not this one.*

Calling upon the authority he employed to run his saloon and counting on his luck that had won him the establishment, Donnell lifted his head high and stalked through the crowd, not stopping until he'd reached Nathan's side.

For this, I apologize. Donnell nudged Nathan firmly in the ribs once, twice, and again.

Poor bastard; he looked up startled and shocked at Donnell before the push knocked him off balance and he went down.

Donnell shook his finger at Nathan, mouthing the words without sound, knowing Michael had some skill at reading lips. *What's the meaning of this? You get your ass inside this minute, brat, or you won't be paid a red cent for today. Do you understand?*

Michael's seraphic smile wavered not a whit. A brief flash of anger deep in the man's silver eyes told Donnell that Michael knew exactly what he was up to. "Surely this isn't your employee," he replied smoothly. "I'm given to understand he's only staggered into town this morning."

Donnell stood firm. *Yes. And I've hired him.*

"When, precisely?"

Today, Donnell replied, declining to elaborate on hour and minute. It was the truth, so far as it went, and there was nothing Michael could say to refute such if Nathan would only keep his mouth shut.

Luck was with them. Nathan stared up at Donnell, confusion written across his features briefly before his eyes rolled up into his head and he went limp.

Donnell knew a faint when he saw one, and he also knew how to take advantage of a lucky break. *Sunstroke*, he signed. *Better get him inside. If you'll excuse me?*

Dark, sour disapproval twisted Michael's lips. He'd lost this round, and he knew it. He wasn't strong enough to bodily reclaim Nathan. "You do that," he said stiffly. "I'll be watching him, sir. You are a blight in the eyes of God, and he'll see you punished."

Michael fell to his knees with his hands raised to the heavens. "Behold our sorrows, Lord! Do you see, my friends? Such are the evils of these establishments. Such fates await us all when we allow ourselves to weaken and our steps to wander from the light and the truth--"

More hot air in him than a Texas summer. Donnell rolled his eyes and ceased to pay Michael any attention. Going down on one knee in the dust, Donnell got his arms under the width of Nathan's bony torso and heaved Nathan over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes, carrying him toward the saloon, to sanctuary.

Chapter Three

As the sun headed toward its zenith, incandescent and brutal, the streets of Nazareth were nigh unbearable. Donnell, who'd lived in these territories since the day he was born, found the merciless heat a trial, and tended to eye with skepticism those greenhorns who thought they were tougher than any element out there.

Those types were, he figured, the ones who froze to death come the first blizzards in winter, drowned when trying to cross fords, and in the case of Nathan, parched themselves drier than the dusty dirt in the street without a hat or sufficient water.

Donnell might be "dumb" -- and he did hate that word -- but at least he had common sense. Or not so common, in his opinion; if it were *common* then there'd be a great many fewer fools stumbling about in need of rescue.

He stopped at the edge of the boardwalk, warily eyeing the step up. Since nothing built in Nazareth was made to conform to a standard, navigating the wooden walks was sometimes akin to hopping from stone to stone to make one's way through a pond. Often, the sight of tough miners and otherwise swaggering gunmen bouncing about like jackrabbits afforded Donnell no end of entertainment.

Now, with the full deadweight of Nathan slung across his shoulder, weighing considerably more than the sack of potatoes Donnell might have carried in a similar fashion, the full nine-inch rise between dirt road and wooden boardwalk presented no amusement and all frustration. Also unlike a sack of potatoes or coal or onions, Nathan had many a moving part, all of them dangling loose as noodles.

Donnell spared a moment's contemplation as to what a jackanapes the pair of them must have looked like. Nothing to be done for it, was there? Hitching Nathan higher on his shoulder, he attempted to keep his balance and step up at the same time.

Nathan stirred on Donnell's shoulder, his head bumping Donnell's back as he ventured, confused, toward wakefulness.

"Shhh, shhh," Donnell tried to soothe, standing still once more. "Shhh, shhh." He could produce that one small sound, if nothing more. He awkwardly patted Nathan's hip. "Shhh."

Nathan groaned and tossed without much strength, but with enough mass to make Donnell stagger. If Nathan were to start flailing about they'd pitch ass over teakettle for sure, and what would have been the point of rescuing the man if he was only to lead him to break his crown mere minutes later?

Blast! Donnell thought fast.

Nathan wriggled, his dangling foot kicking weakly all too close to Donnell's groin for his comfort. Natural self-preservation came to the fore and, recognizing a good plan, Donnell eased Nathan off his shoulder and slung an arm around Nathan's waist as he touched down.

As he'd hoped, when Nathan's bare feet touched the dirt, he automatically tried to bear his own weight. Didn't do such a fine job of the work, not yet aware enough to balance properly, but Donnell could support him fine.

He patted Nathan's stomach and heaved upward. Nathan fumbled after him, playing a half-blind follow-the-leader, and finally, glory be, they were off the thrice-cursed road. Never -- well, almost never -- had Donnell been quite so glad to bump the double swinging doors open with his hip and escape the punishing outside world, exchanging it for the relative cool and quiet of his saloon.

Steadying Nathan on his feet, Donnell tried to get a better look at the man while his eyes adjusted. Nathan gazed blearily back, not really seeing Donnell at all, and wavered for a moment before his aqua eyes rolled up and his eyelids fluttered shut over the white sclera.

Donnell caught Nathan before Nathan fell completely and heaved a sigh. *You, sir, are going to be far more trouble than you're worth*, he signed one-handed, not thinking.

"He understand you?"

Donnell twisted his head at a painful angle and squinted to see the hulking-bear shape of Levi, his bartender, approaching them from behind. He hitched Nathan's weight on his hip, feeling uncomfortably as if he was toting a two-hundred-pound son. His lips stretched thin as he signed to Levi, *Could've used your help sooner*.

Levi didn't understand Donnell's sign language -- only Bettina had that gift -- but he wasn't a slow-witted man and intuited basic translations with decent skill. He wiped his hands on his bar towel as he replied, "Ayup, and you know I'd've given assistance if I

could." He jerked his thumb over one shoulder. "Them in here were lookin' to kick up a stir when you went out. Thought they'd maybe take advantage of your bein' distracted. Had to keep 'em subdued."

In Donnell's experience, Levi's method of subduing involved retrieving a stick of solidly petrified Jerusalem tree wood or a rifle loaded with buckshot from under the bar and brandishing it with promising menace.

Donnell checked past Levi to see the small handful of drinkers huddled in close on themselves, sneaking furtive peeks at he and Levi and studiously ignoring Nathan.

Thank you, Donnell signed.

Levi understood that one just fine. His chipped and broken teeth shone in the midst of his heavy dark beard. "He as heavy as he looks?"

For one who had so clearly gone ages without a proper meal in his belly, Nathan was still of a size considerable enough to make Donnell ache already from the effort of carrying him. *Give me a hand now?* he signed to Levi, nodding sharply toward Nathan and hitching him forward to make his point perfectly clear.

"Sure, boss." Levi wasn't deft or gentle, but his sturdy muscles took Nathan on as easy-seeming as a goose down pillow. "Where you want him to go?"

Donnell hesitated. When he'd decided to bring Nathan in, he'd vaguely planned to plunk him down on a cot in the storage room where it was darker, cooler, and he could rest up.

Didn't seem right somehow, now. Donnell flashed on a newly-formed memory of dazed, aqua-blue eyes and broken innocence, and knew he couldn't leave Nathan down here careless of his recovery. He'd gone and gotten involved, and he'd finish the job proper-like.

Upstairs, he indicated to Levi. *My private bedchamber.*

Levi's eyebrows, thick and furry as caterpillars, climbed toward his low hairline. "Bettina's gonna have your hide for letting a stranger upstairs."

You let me worry about Bettina. Donnell paused. *Where is Bettina?*

A crashing clank of iron on iron sounded from the kitchen, the sound of a Bettina's temper venting itself on the cookware.

"Best we get him moved and the damage done before she gets feisty enough to come yell at us," Levi said in the low whisper of a co-conspirator. He jostled Nathan as he readjusted the man's long, spindly weight. "Looks a bit like my son," he said, gruff as a grizzly, giving Donnell to know why Levi had chosen to get so involved. "You lead the way, boss, and I'll keep out a look behind us."

Nathan moaned, no louder than a whisper. A sudden whim and impulse seized Donnell, and he fitted action to thought without stopping to consider. He smoothed the lank hair off Nathan's forehead with the gentle touch of a mother -- or a lover -- and smiled when Nathan settled, seeming more at ease.

You just rest easy now, Donnell signed. *You're safe here.*

Nathan sighed and slipped into a natural sleep. Poor pretty fellow.

For Nathan, reality had taken a sideways twist. Whether he dreamed or whether he was awake, he didn't know, and hadn't the energy to bother finding out.

Maybe, he thought, not in words but in a fuzzy series of mental images, he'd died.

He almost hoped so; it'd be a mercy. Though he had come such a long way only to drop on the doorstep of his hopes... well, at least he'd gone down as a man should, true to his vows to the last.

IWell insofar as a rejected candidate for priesthood could, anyhow. Bile rose hot and thin and spread bitterly over Nathan's tongue. His throat still seemed too tender and vulnerable to him without the collar he'd worn, though for only days. He'd worked since he was nine years old in the hopes of surviving Abbot Innocent's tutelage long enough to don the vestments, and to be left with nothing now...

Nathan twitched as his balance turned once more, becoming aware that he was rising. Had the angels come to take him home? He'd open his eyes to see, he surely would, but he was tired, so tired... his feet ached abominably, cut from stones, chapped raw, filthy as a pig's trotters.

"Wonder what in tarnation his story might be," a voice deep as the bottom of an oaken barrel rumbled, close enough to startle Nathan into flinching. "Reckon he'll live to tell us what's what?"

Silence answered the deep-voiced man's question, but it was a *listening* sort of quiet. Small, light breezes brushed over Nathan's face as if someone were fanning him, easing his skin stretched too tightly over his cheeks from his painful sunburn.

Curious despite his weakness, Nathan tried to part his gummy, heavy eyelids to see where the moving air came from. He only managed to crack them a fraction, so little he peered blearily through his eyelashes, but caught sight of a man walking behind him. Perfectly molded as an angel, fine and fair, he had the look of one of the saints in Abbot Innocent's prayer book.

"Saint Jude," Nathan croaked, seized with a whimsical humor. "Patron... lost causes..."

The man's lips twitched with what Nathan recognized as amusement. He laid a finger over his mouth and then transferred that same finger to Nathan's lips, pressing them shut.

Nathan didn't understand the gesture, but he knew all too well the jolt of heat and *want* in his belly. *No. No, not again; I left this behind, I did...*

He gagged, spasming. The angel walking behind him stopped abruptly, beautifully shaped eyes opening wide. Nathan heaved and hitched and, thanks be for small miracles, found himself tilted sharply to one side. The thin, stringy bile that was all he had left to vomit splashed on a plank floor instead of on the angel.

Nathan wanted to hide his face for the shame, and with deep gratefulness welcomed the return of the dark that swallowed all his senses and made the world disappear.

With Levi's help, Donnell had gotten Nathan settled in his bed. They'd stripped away the quilt and the blankets. Though the coverings might well be needed come nightfall when temperatures took their steep drop, Donnell could see no sense in smothering Nathan while he was so hot. Donnell thought he might have been able to boil a teakettle on the man's forehead.

Levi stepped away, tugging at his beard in thought. "I don't reckon much odds on him lasting long," he said, dubious. "I seen plenty of goners in my day. He don't got a prayer."

Donnell raised his hands and shrugged. Maybe so, maybe not. He'd come this far. *Fetch me some water, and I'll take care of matters myself.*

"How much?"

Enough for us both to drink, and as much as you can get and carry for washing. I want to scrape off some of this dirt.

"You want carbolic in case he's got lice?"

Donnell winced. He hadn't thought, but now he had, he'd bet a gold dollar this aqua-eyed seraph was surely infested, and soon his bed would be as well.

Well, what was done, was done. He indicated his agreement to Levi, and added a request for food.

Levi wavered. "I ain't sure about pesterin' Bettina right now--"

An extra dollar's worth of gold in your pay tonight if you help.

"Deal, and shake on it." Levi pumped Donnell's hand, firm as a man such as he naturally would, yet knowledgeable enough of Donnell's standing orders he was careful not to bruise or crush Donnell's fingers. "You sit tight. I'll be back soon's I can."

Donnell waited for Levi's footsteps on the stairs to fade away before he gave in once more to his baser urges and laid his palm on Nathan's hollow cheek. Such a beauty he must have been when he was well. Donnell could yet see proof of that in Nathan's eyes, in the bow of his lips, and in the lank hair he felt certain would shine brighter than sunlight through a glass jar of honey when Nathan was clean and restored to health.

Hark at me. I sound like I've taken him in same as I would a starving puppy in need of a home, don't I?

Actually, Donnell supposed he'd done that very thing. He sighed and nudged the persistently falling-forward locks of hair out of Nathan's eyes. So be it. He'd adopted his foundling.

Whether or not Nathan objected to being claimed, well, that they'd wait to see when he was wakeful and clear-headed again.

And that would happen. Donnell swore to it that he'd see Nathan restored to health or die trying, himself. No one had ever yet told Donnell something was impossible but that he'd managed to overcome the odds.

He'd have this aqua-eyed young man, stubborn as he himself, well and on his feet again, or there'd be a reckoning. Done and done.

Of course, such things were far more easily said than done. Donnell wasn't naive enough to expect his caretaking to go off without a hitch or a bump, and he'd predicted accurately. For one thing, once Nathan was laid out in bed Donnell had found it impossible to shift him without jostling him mercilessly; he'd had to cut off Nathan's rags and bathe the front part of him only. He hoped to get Levi's help with the rest, but for now his barman was needed to handle the growing afternoon and evening crowd.

As the hours passed, the heat poisoning Nathan's body went to his brain -- as Donnell had known it would -- and the true struggle began. Nathan twisted and kicked weakly, head tossing on Donnell's pillows, his lips hung open dry, cracked and pitiful, releasing small moans and whimpers that twisted Donnell's heart.

"Shhh, shhh," he crooned, hour after hour. The afternoon sun slid toward early evening's dim as he sat on the edge of his own bed, dipping a cloth Levi had brought him in a basin of water no longer cool and not very clean, wiping the sweat from Nathan's face time and time again.

Nathan cried out and turned toward the water at one point, his dry tongue poking out in search of the moisture. Donnell patted his cheek and tried to stand, though he hesitated to let go. He had better sense than to pour any of the dirtied wash-water in Nathan's mouth.

As he moved, Nathan tossed, fingers scrabbling without any strength toward Donnell. By chance or happenstance, he caught the edge of the rolled-up cuff of Donnell's once-fine, starched and pressed shirt, long since gone wrinkled and limp in the heat. He'd opened his finely embroidered vest and undone the buttons at his throat, desperate for some air of his own in the close room.

"Shhh," Donnell tried to soothe Nathan, squeezing his hand. He tapped Nathan's lower lip, resenting his inability to say more. How terrible it must be, a stranger in a strange land torn apart by fever dreams, with no one even to murmur words of comfort.

Nathan's eyes moved beneath the lids, the lashes tangling together as he struggled to open them. Twin slits of aqua blue gleamed fever-bright at Donnell. "Don't go," he said, his voice so dry and cracked that it pained Donnell's own throat to hear. "Sorry, sorry, swear I am, don't leave me here--"

Donnell cupped Nathan's cheeks in his palms and stroked his thumbs over Nathan's cheekbones, far too sharp and prominent. How long had it been since he'd eaten? How far had he walked from his home? Why? What drove a man to do such a thing, and how had he survived this long? The riddles were likely to drive Donnell insane.

Though he hated like fire to alarm Nathan, Donnell lifted his foot and stomped his boot firmly on the plank floor once, twice, three times, a signal to those below who knew his codes that he needed help. He shhh'd and stroked Nathan's face through the predicted spasm of fear.

Nathan had begun to shake, tremors juddering through him from head to toe, when the door to Donnell's chambers finally creaked open to let Bettina in.

"Oh, child," she said, soft with pity and sharp with shock at the same time. "He's badly off. Has he been like this all along?"

Donnell tried chafing Nathan's quivering limbs to settle him. He shook his head.

"Fever's got a hard hold on him," Bettina judged, "if he's only now got the ague. Child, he's not going to live. He can't after this. You'd best know that now before--" she stopped.

Donnell glared at her, jutting his chin. *He will. I won't let him die.*

"Why should you care so much?" Bettina protested. She'd entered carrying a pitcher and a bowl, and set both on the stand by Donnell's bed. Finicky, she removed the old, dirtied water and used her thumb and forefinger to drop the filthy swabbing cloth in. "You're only going to break your heart on a stone, child."

Donnell shook his head. He needed another cloth to wash Nathan's face with. That was all he cared for at the moment.

"Son, now you listen to me." Bettina caught Donnell by the chin and forced him to look at her. "There's no sense in getting so wrought up. You did what you could. Now let him go in peace."

Donnell frowned. He nodded at Nathan, asking one-handed, *how is this peace?*

Bettina bit her thin lip. "I can go to the herb woman the doves use," she whispered, her plain eyes full of sympathy and pity, neither of which Donnell wanted. "Get what they use to ease the pain when there's no hope. I helped a woman find her peace that way once. Let him slip away while he sleeps. It's only merciful."

Donnell flinched back, shocked. *Kill him?*

"I never suggested any such thing," Bettina protested. "He's going to die anyhow. You give him the herbs and he'll go peacefully, not in pain, not afraid. Show him that much kindness."

Donnell pulled his lips back over his teeth. He let Nathan go long enough to sign, *as they told you to do away with me when I was just born? When I could neither cry nor suck, the woman who bore me already dead, and everyone said I'd never live? Kinder to let the child die, they said.*

Bettina looked as if Donnell had slapped her. "That's not the same," she said. "Not the same at all."

Then tell me how it's different. Donnell turned away, fixing his attention on Nathan. Nathan cried out quietly and shuddered violently, his fingers flexing and gripping at the sweat-soaked sheet beneath him. Donnell rubbed Nathan's too-thin arm and breathed the only audible reassurance he could: "Shhh, shhh, shhh."

Nathan licked his dry lips with his drier-looking tongue and slivered his eyelids open again, the aqua blue capturing Donnell and holding him fast. "Please," he husked, his voice nearly gone. "Water?"

Donnell nodded, tapping Nathan's chin with his forefinger. Looking back and forth between pitcher and Nathan only to make sure he didn't miss and knock the water over, he dipped the tail end of the fresh cloth Bettina had brought in the liquid and then let the precious drops fall slowly, one by one, in Nathan's mouth.

Barely had he wet Nathan's tongue than Nathan heaved a deep sigh and lay still. Donnell stiffened, fearing the worst. He lay his palm flat over Nathan's heart and tilted his ear toward Nathan's lips.

Nathan's heart beat, slowly but regular; his breath was little more than a shallow, irregular sipping, but he still lived. Donnell sagged briefly over him, relieved to his very bones.

"Oh no," Bettina said behind him. Donnell had nearly forgotten her presence until the pity and sorrow in her sigh arrested his movements. "Don't you do it, child. I see what this is. I feared it but hoped you had more sense."

What are you going on about? Donnell signed irritably.

"I'm not too old not to know what you've got in your heart."

Donnell twitched his shoulders, aggravated, warning her to leave well enough alone.

"Son, you're asking for trouble on top of trouble." Bettina tried to lay her hand on his arm.

Donnell shrugged her off. Regretful right away, he looked back at Bettina, asking soundlessly for her to let this go.

"I can't do that, child," she said, and looked as if she truly was sorry for what had come to pass. "You know I don't judge you for your tastes. I've got no room to. But if you won't take pity on him, then take it on yourself. Go on back downstairs and let me care for him -- and I won't drug him, upon my heart. Leave for my sake, too, child, because if you stay here any longer you'll fall in love with this skinny boy. And when he dies..."

Donnell shook his head, quiet sadness tempering his half-hearted smile. He understood fully what had driven him to rescue this underfed soul in the first place. He recognized what had caught him so in the aqua blue of Nathan's eyes, and in the fierce pride of the young man's spirit. Though unlovely in his ruined state and weak as a blind kitten, he'd still caught Donnell with strings twined tight around Donnell's heart, and held him fast.

Donnell lifted one shoulder and shaped the silent words with his lips. *Too late.*

Donnell loved Nathan already. And now he had all the more reason to make sure the man lived.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," he sussurated, over and over again, chafing Nathan's hand between both of his own.

Abruptly he stopped, caught by a sudden, fierce urge, one Donnell had struggled against in the past. He'd most often been able to deny himself what he craved, save for the rare moments when there'd been someone of his own bent close to hand -- so few and far between, mostly the younger miners in need of any comfort they could find.

Donnell had not wanted this so badly since any time he could recall, nor had it ever seemed so simple and natural a right.

He bent over Nathan and pressed his lips lightly to Nathan's, careful and easy, light and nearly -- nearly -- chaste.

Nathan opened his eyes, aqua blue haze briefly startled and confused. Then, as Donnell broke the kiss softly and raised away bare inches, Nathan's bruised lips flickered up in a hesitant smile. He closed his eyes again, sighed, and eased into a sleep Donnell could tell right away was natural and sweet.

"God have mercy on us all," Bettina whispered. Donnell heard the despairing tread of her step retreating, knowing her back would be rigidly straight with fear and injured pride, her eyes wet, and her lips pressed firmly together, her heart torn apart on the inside. She only wanted to keep him safe. Donnell knew that.

But if safety meant abandoning Nathan, then Donnell would take his chances and let the devil have the hindmost.

Something so right could never be wrong. He'd find out if Nathan felt the same way when Nathan woke, and he *would*.

Stubborn determination sizzled in Donnell's veins, firing him from the inside out, burning hot as Nathan's sun fever.

I'll see you healthy again and see what there can be between us, or I'll die trying, Donnell promised right then and there, sealing his fate to Nathan's. He pressed his lips to Nathan's knuckles and closed his eyes. *And I'll never leave you. This I swear.*

Chapter Four

"... son of the devil... by your fruits shall ye be judged... thou shalt not suffer a blasphemer to live..."

Nathan barely recognized the thin, reedy sound coming from him as his own. In his own ears, he sounded weak, puling, helpless. Back home... so, so long ago, Kentucky... he'd helped his brother catch rabbits in traps. Whenever they found one caught but still living, they'd made a noise like this...

His throat scraped, raw, as if the side of his pipes scraped one another every time he swallowed. Dry, he was parched, he needed water but no one would carry the reprobate a drop to drink...

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," a stranger crooned over him.

Nathan cringed, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. It could be a trick. They'd tried sending one of the novitiates to entrap him once Abbot Innocent had suspected the twisted desires of Nathan's flesh. A pretty-faced boy with the voice of an angel and a hard, cold heart. Martin... yes, Martin was his name, a favorite of Abbot Innocent's... careless of them; they'd used Martin before to trap the wicked with proof of their own sins. They'd wanted Nathan to give in to the flesh and approach Martin with sin on his mind.

Hadn't worked. He wasn't that dumb.

They hadn't been pleased with his refusal to fall and worship carnally at Martin's slim feet. Nathan supposed they'd have punished him the same as if he had, though...

Damned if he did, damned if he didn't. Bearer of the devil's mark, his soul tarnished dark as ruined silver with his unnatural desires that could not be beaten out of him, though Abbot Innocent had tried...

"Cast him out into the desert," he heard Abbot Innocent pronouncing his sentence, so vividly Nathan thought he lived the moment again. "His flesh is mortified; now let his soul be tested and tried by fire. If he should live, then he may yet find redemption, but the sinner will no longer pollute our home."

So many miles he'd walked, his shoes falling apart, his stomach racked with hunger. He'd thought a dozen times over he'd die, yet he'd lived, and he'd hoped...

And now, he'd failed. God had judged him unworthy after all, and now he'd perish.

Nathan laughed, despairing at the sound, like a breathless puppy's bark. "Wages of sin are death," he mumbled. "Leave him. God decides... live or die, God decides."

"Shhh," the stranger urged. Coolness, blessed, blessed coolness caressed Nathan's cheek. He moaned, lips parting, turning his face blindly in search of more.

Water dripped past his lips. He struggled to sit, the dryness of his mouth compelling him to search for more, but he could barely move his limbs.

"Shhh." Precious water trickled over Nathan's dry, swollen tongue. He gathered the strength to swallow that which his parched mouth didn't absorb straightaway as sand consumed spilled wine, spilled blood...

He reached for his savior, his angel, meaning only to grasp the hem of his robe, and encountered smooth cotton, folded over twice. He pressed his eyelids tighter shut together still and attempted to lick his lips. If he looked upon the Ark, he'd surely die...

The blissful coolness of a wet cloth -- Nathan recognized the sensation now -- swept over his cheeks and chin. Cool fingers followed in its wake. "Shhh."

"Who are you?" Nathan muttered, the question coming out as a labored, scratchy groan.

Lips touched Nathan's forehead in a benediction, a blessing.

He fought to raise his hand and capture the angel's, burning for the comfort. He dared to hope, and made bold enough to ask, heart in his throat, "Am I forgiven?"

"Shhh." The angel's lips brushed Nathan's temple.

Relief weakened Nathan further. "Redeemed," he mumbled. "Thank you."

Welcoming darkness consumed him; Nathan surrendered and went gladly into the dreamless deeps. If he died now, he did it with a shriven heart and he'd open his eyes on heaven.

He hoped heaven looked like Kentucky, when the rolling hills were green with the first days of spring...

Donnell's back ached from the strain of sitting awkwardly on the edge of his bed for -- he checked the position of the rising moon -- hours. He'd only ever left his spot on the ticking to make use of the chamber pot and three times to pace the foursquare walls of his bedchamber, stretching his legs.

Every time he'd left, not long at all had passed before Nathan's thin face pinched tight and he cried out pitifully, his distress only eased when Donnell nestled back in with him and stroked his face or took his hand, shushing him.

Nathan's fever raged on. He hadn't sweated a drop in a long span of time, his skin too dry and too tightly stretched over bone. His breathing was raspy, shallow, and thin, too fast when something in his fever dreams frightened him and otherwise far too slow. When Donnell laid his ear to Nathan's chest, the labored *thump-thump* of his heart worried Donnell something fierce.

"He won't live," Bettina had said. Donnell began to think she was right...

No. Damn it, no! He wouldn't give up until Nathan was well or dead. Be blasted to his aches and pains and his sense of being stifled in this overheated chamber, be blasted to his stomach's roiling at the overwhelming reek of sickness; his complaints were trivial in comparison to Nathan's, and they would pass soon enough.

Donnell rewet his cloth in the last of the water at the bottom of the china bowl and stroked the soft cotton over Nathan's chest. He'd undone the buttons long since, exposing a chest that he thought might once have been lean with wiry muscle, but was now simply pitiful, ribs protruding. Old bruises discolored his torso and sides.

He knew so little about this fellow -- only his name was a certainty, really, for he didn't think Nathan was the type to choose an alias -- but as the hours passed, Donnell found himself suspecting much, and none of his guesses were pleasant.

Under the immediate noise of Nathan's rasping breath, Donnell heard the ruckus raising from the saloon. Nothing to worry about, only the usual nightly crowd coming in eager to wet their whistles and gamble away their dwindling supplies of gold dust.

They'd want music soon, he knew. His piano playing was the big draw that brought more patrons to Treighton's than other establishments; music and the plastered walls that kept

Treighton's cooler than those buildings still made of gap-sided clapboards that admitted the choking dust and the day's roasting heat.

Would the revelers riot when there was no music to be had? Donnell bit his lip, worrying at the soft flesh as he rolled the dilemma over in his mind.

In the end, it was a simple decision. He'd sworn to this duty, and the miners could make do without tunes for one night. Or as many nights as it took to see his duty through.

Donnell's sharp ears pricked up at the sound of a heavy tread on the wooden stairs leading to the upper floor. He knew the measure and pace of that step by heart: Bettina.

He both welcomed her and was immediately wary. If she'd come to try and further dissuade him from his task, there'd be a discord between them. Donnell truly grieved any occasion for true arguments with Bettina. She had raised him on her knee and taught him how to communicate with his hands when it'd become clear he would never have a voice with which to make himself understood.

It was Bettina who'd saved his life when others would have let him die.

It was Bettina who'd saved his hide from a horsewhipping when he'd had too much to drink one night and lacked the sense not to kiss a sweet young gold-miner where there was risk of being seen. As Michael had sworn in private threat he *had* seen, though Donnell was certain he could not possibly have borne witness and not raised immediate hell.

The aftermath of that incident had not been pleasant, and it had won Michael's doubled loathing of Donnell and his temple of sin. Donnell knew enough to be certain that while many a miner and lonely man too far removed from the company of women without price tags often took his comfort in a similar manner, they'd easily turn on one who got caught.

If anyone believed Michael. Though all thought him mad, there were certain issues that would rouse the populace to violence regardless of the source.

Donnell never ceased to be amazed by the lengths to which men would go when they felt themselves threatened, no matter how small the danger. He wanted to keep his saloon -- he'd fought, gambled, and defended his home -- and he would not risk its loss.

So he'd bowed his head to Bettina's raging, knowing it stemmed only from her love for him and fear of what might have happened, but he hadn't been able to give her the promise she begged him for: that it would never happen again in Nazareth.

He had only been able to offer her the compromise: he would not risk himself unless his heart compelled him otherwise; unless he loved true and deep. He'd kept his head down, and he'd taken great caution in his actions ever after.

Until now.

Now, caught and held fast by the drowning depths of Nathan's aqua-blue eyes, Donnell knew himself to be bound to the young man.

There was more than one reason to persist in sitting by Nathan's side. He would not abandon the man who had, without a single word of love but with a small smile and a fevered acceptance of a caress, stolen his heart.

Bettina's sturdy, graceless tread came to a stop directly outside Donnell's door. He imagined her vividly, limp curls trailing from the odd snood she chose to wear instead of putting her hair in a bun, her narrow shoulders sagging with this day's extra cares and hard work. She was no longer a young woman, and though tough for her age, Donnell worried for her.

He sat up straighter, leaving one palm comfortably at rest over Nathan's heart, and waited to see what Bettina wanted. It would break his heart to refuse her if she had plans on her mind that conflicted with his, but... he could do Nathan no harm, whether the intentions were good or not.

"I know you're awake in there," Bettina said without pause. "Open the door, child. I've got both hands full."

Perhaps she'd brought more water? Frowning, Donnell patted Nathan's arm, hoping he slept soundly enough for the moment not to begin fretting when Donnell left him briefly alone, and went to admit entrance to the woman he considered, for all intents and purposes, to be his mother.

When Donnell opened the door, Bettina looked exactly as he'd pictured her, her freckled skin shiny with sweat and her hair curling damply. She had her head held high, though, proud as the fierce Irish to whom she owed her heritage, her faded eyes snapping with pride and defiance.

In her arms, Bettina carried a tray laden so heavily that Donnell wasn't at all certain he'd have been able to carry its weight up a flight of steps. Covered tin plates emitting savory smells that drew water to his mouth, making him realize he'd had nothing to eat and not a drop to drink all the long afternoon, all his energies poured out for Nathan's sake. His stomach growled and twisted.

Bettina's lips quirked with a wry satisfaction. "Thought you'd be about ready to chew your own foot off," she said. "Let an old woman in?"

Donnell hesitated.

Bettina sighed. "Child, I don't mean him any harm now. The harm's already been done. I won't do a thing but look and see how he's faring, but if I still spy there's no hope, I won't lie either."

Donnell drew back, though it meant putting a pace between himself and the savory food under cover of a clean napkin. He folded his arms and shook his head in defiance.

Bettina's lips thinned. "You let me in or I'll turn your scrawny white hindquarters over my knee, child. Didn't you hear me say I wasn't going to hurt him? Might be I could help, if you weren't so blasted stubborn."

Help? Donnell blinked at her, confused.

"I'm too old to talk like this standing outside like a salesman," Bettina grumbled. She stepped forward, the weight of her tray and her determination driving Donnell back and aside.

He withdrew to the edge of the bed, reaching unerringly for Nathan's arm, which he began to stroke. Nathan, who had only just begun to fret, calmed instantly.

Seeing that, Bettina's lips turned down with sorrow. She said nothing of her disapproval, though it was clear for all to see. She knew Donnell had lost his heart.

Donnell looked at her with an unapologetic clearness, but infused his signing with regret for causing her pain: *he's mine now, you see.*

She exhaled slowly, shaking her head. "I noticed. Then if you would, child, stand aside and let someone who's had experience do what they can," she said, laying the tray on

Donnell's dresser. "I nursed you plenty of times when you were young. You've never done this job once. How do you expect to fix him up, with luck alone?"

Luck hasn't served me ill so far. Donnell's nostrils flared with irritation. *I'm doing the best I can,* he signed, fingers flashing.

Bettina dusted her hands on her cook's apron. "Are you too good to learn, then?" When he had no immediate answer, she sniffed haughtily. "I thought so. Eat some of that food yourself before your stomach starts flapping against your backbone, give me that broth, and then give me space to work."

Beneath the cloths draped over the plates, Donnell found leavened biscuits slathered with meat drippings and salt, fried potatoes, and a stew of dried apples. He exhaled lustfully, dizzied by the riches. Never had simple food seemed so appealing.

Before he filled his own belly, though, Donnell found a small bowl of nearly-translucent broth. When he sniffed, it seemed to be boiled-down chicken stock. *Chicken?* he signed to Bettina, raising his eyebrow in question. Chickens not strictly kept to produce eggs were as rare as saints around Nazareth; only the rich ever ate their meat.

How had Bettina managed to... oh! Donnell guffawed in silent delight, pointing at the bowl and mouthing, *you stole a chicken!*

"I did no such thing." Bettina bridled. "As it happened, thank you very much, sir, a few chickens got loose earlier when some drunk kicked a hole in a coop. When one dropped dead outside our door, why, I saw no sense in wasting the bird. Waste is ungodly." She nodded firmly, though her faded eyes sparkled with mischief.

And would it have been Levi who just happened to tip over the coop?

"For shame," Bettina chided. "No more nonsense, if you please. There's nothing like chicken broth to put heart back in an ailing man, and that's all I plan to say about this soup."

And what would Levi say if I asked him?

"Are you planning on doing so?"

Not really, no.

"Good thing, too. Seeing as how *someone* can't play for the dinner crowd and gamblers tonight, Levi's going to step out from behind the bar and sing."

Donnell stared at her. *Levi sings?*

"He says he does. Can't be worse than a skinned cat, can he?" Taking the bowl of broth from Donnell, she waved him off. "You leave off your questions now and eat up."

Donnell hesitated. Could he trust her? The broth had smelled fine, but...

Her back turned to Donnell, Bettina smoothed the forever-wayward strands of Nathan's wet hair off his forehead. "Poor lamb," she murmured, not for Donnell's benefit. The tenderness she showed toward Nathan, Donnell had only ever seen before when he was a child, and ill.

She hadn't lied. He *could* trust her, and it shamed him to think he'd doubted Bettina's word. Though Donnell knew she yet disagreed with him and didn't like the affection Donnell had developed for Nathan, she'd help.

Tension drained away from Donnell's shoulders, leaving him momentarily as weak as Nathan. He stuffed half a biscuit in his mouth and chewed messily, without a single care for manners. He had Bettina on his side now, and on Nathan's side, too.

The odds were shifting in the house's favor. *Thank you, Lady Luck.*

Bettina coaxed a sip of the thin broth past Nathan's lips. "There you go," she murmured, stroking his throat to help him swallow. Donnell ate, barely tasting the food for his hunger, as through persistence and good fortune Bettina managed to get half the cup of nourishing liquid down Nathan before she stopped to rest.

"What this boy's been through isn't a fate deserving of a mad dog." She ran her fingers lightly as a butterfly's wing over the livid bruises still remaining over Nathan's far-too-prominent ribs. "If someone were to ask me, I'd say someone undeserving of their own skin beat him half to death and let him wander off to die," she said quietly, ripe with distaste for him who'd done the terrible deed.

Donnell nodded. *I guessed as much, myself.*

"What could someone think you'd done to them to deserve that kind of meanness?" Bettina reached for the nearly-dry cloth and resumed Donnell's duties of trying to cool

Nathan's fever-scorched flesh. "There's one sorry son of a bitch out there, who could be this cruel. God had better punish him good."

Nathan's eyes snapped open, aqua blue blazing at something neither Donnell nor Bettina could see. "Mea culpa," he rasped, his mouth wide open enough for the words to have been a full-throated wail had he had enough strength in him to shout.

"Hush now, hush," Bettina hastened to soothe. Donnell hurried forward, driven by instinct, and bent to take Nathan's trembling hand in both of his.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," he begged.

Nathan tossed his head on the flattened pillow, eyes wide open, but clearly seeing nothing of the true world around him.

"Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa..." he rasped, full of grief, a tear sliding from the corner of his eye down his temple, moisture he could not afford to lose.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh."

"Child," Bettina pleaded, though Donnell didn't know if she was trying to soothe him or Nathan. "Be still."

Nathan sobbed dryly. The hand not trapped in Donnell's hold quavered, drawing unsteady lines over his heart. The sign of the cross. "In nomine Patri, in nomine... Deus meus, ex toto corde poenitet me omnium meorum peccatorum, eaque detestor... Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae..."

A violent shudder racked Nathan from head to toe. He scrabbled at his throat, inspiring Donnell -- and Bettina -- with an abrupt fear that he was choking. In the horrible seconds that followed, seeming to stretch on for an eternity, Donnell *knew* the next thing he'd hear from Nathan would be the dreadful hollowness of a death rattle.

No, damn it. No!

Just when Donnell would have caught Nathan up to shake him, hard, Nathan dragged in a lusty breath and sagged, unconscious once more, but with his chest falling, then rising again. Still alive.

Donnell's knees were shaky. He cast Bettina a despairing look and raised his hands. *He won't die. I won't let him.*

"There's only so much a man can do on his own," Bettina said darkly. She pointed at Nathan's bare throat. "I've heard those words before, in church. Mass. I'll tell you what you got here, child, and it isn't any ordinary man. You've caught yourself a priest, and you've gone and fallen in love with him."

Nathan heaved a dry sob and reached blindly for Donnell. "Stay," he pleaded. "Don't..."

"Shhh, shhh, shhh." Donnell lifted Nathan's hand to his mouth and kissed the back, then pressed his cheek to the translucent skin.

What's done is done, he signed to Bettina. He bent over Nathan and pressed his lips to Nathan's forehead.

"You don't know he'd love you back. A priest, Donnell. It's far more likely he wouldn't."

Doesn't matter. It doesn't change what's in me. Donnell rested his fingers over his own heart. *Don't fret so.*

"Love. Bah! I pity you as much as I pity him, child." Bettina gathered up her bowl in preparation for leaving.

Donnell frowned at Nathan. He'd tasted salt on Nathan's forehead. *Bettina?* He shot out a hand to catch hers and pulled it back to Nathan.

"Lord bless," Bettina whispered, sounding as shocked as Donnell. Sweat had sprung out on Nathan's forehead. His lips were slack, and his breathing easier. "His fever's broken."

He'll live? Donnell barely waited for Bettina's nod before whooping silently in victory.

It wasn't over, of course, Donnell knew that. But now he'd get the chance to see what came next. Whether for good or for ill, it almost didn't matter. Nathan would live.

He'd *won*.

Chapter Five

Winding whisper-soft through the thick, dark blanket of dreamless sleep, Nathan thought he heard an angel singing. The sweet sounds twined round about his heart, easing him. He exhaled through parted lips no longer blistered and dry, and lay still, comforted.

"Shhh," the angel soothed, smoothing a cool hand across his forehead.

Nathan sighed and turned his face, eyes yet closed, seeking the angel's blessing.

"Shhh."

Nathan thought he could hear a smile in the angel's wordless, sibilant reassurance. A response came naturally to him, breathed reverently from him, "Salve, Regina, mater misericordiae."

The angel huffed. Was that laughter?

Nathan nestled his cheek into a feathery softness he had never known the likes of. If he had crossed the Jordan and this was indeed heaven, then he could have no regrets.

"Am I dead?" he asked, dismayed at the rawness of his voice.

In answer, the angel pressed two fingers to the side of Nathan's throat. Though puzzled, he held his patience until the gentle pressure on his neck drew his attention to the beating of his heart, the blood pulsing through that large vein.

"Not dead, then."

The angel tweaked his ear. Not an angel? No, no, it had to be. No man on earth would take a care for such as him. He carried the mark of the Devil on him. So Abbot Innocent said.

So everyone in Nazareth must have seen, for no one would hire him to do any work. No chance to redeem himself.

Except this angel, who had swept him away and washed him clean.

His angel.

Nathan considered, his thoughts wispy as clouds and hard to grasp, what sort of angel might have saved him. There were so many meant to walk among mankind. Choirs, seraphim, cherubim, nephilim... angels of mercy, angels of judgment, angels who carried fiery swords...

He gave up trying to understand. All that mattered was that the angel by Nathan's side offered him no harm. For the first time since Abbot Innocent turned Nathan's cot over with his foot, dumping him naked on the unforgiving cellar floor, its stones both cold and damp, he felt safe.

With safety and relief came a sense of deep gratitude. The angel must not go unthanked. "Angele Dei," he murmured, offering his praise. "Qui custos es mei, me tibi commissum pietate superna; hodie, hac nocte, illumina, custodi, rege, et gubernare."

By the time Nathan had finished, the angel shook with -- mirth? It cupped his cheek; when soft lips brushed his own in a kiss of peace, Nathan could sense that they were bowed into a smile.

The gesture pleased Nathan to the very depths of his soul, lightening his heart until it could weigh no more than a feather. Nathan had always wondered if perhaps angels could smile. How wonderful to discover this truth!

He wanted to see the angel. Though it consumed all his remaining strength, Nathan opened his eyes and sought the angel's face.

At first, the world blurred around him, shapes indistinct, colors running together, and the light far, far too bright. He squinted but refused to let his eyes fall shut before he'd accomplished his task, though tears rolled down his cheeks from the sting.

"Shhh," the angel urged. It took his hand.

Nathan understood it wanted him to rest. "Want to see you," he rasped, swallowing painfully between words, breathless when he stopped. "Thank you."

He could sense the angel's hesitation before, finally, it sighed. The angel cupped Nathan's cheek and turned his face so that he looked up and not to his side, and Nathan saw it.

No. Not it. Him. Nathan's lips parted in wonder. Why did the holy writ claim the first thing angels said to men was *fear not*? Who could be afraid of this? Young, he seemed, with soft hair falling over his forehead that smelled of fine soap and was the color of oak

shot through with threads of gold. He'd a face almost as lovely as a woman's, finely molded, rich with compassion.

Nathan sighed, deeply satisfied. He let himself relax, and slept once more.

Donnell watched Nathan sleep, perplexity marring his pleasure in the simple trust and joy Nathan had shown him.

How do I tell him I'm no angel?

Donnell's lips twisted wryly. Well, as soon as he's clear-headed enough to make sense of the singing and understands that these choirs are in praise of one Miss Kitty McGee, who had the finest tits a man could ever hope to see out on the prair-ee, yippie ki yee, well, I suppose he'll figure fast enough that this isn't heaven.

Perhaps then he'll know me for a man. And I am every inch a man, though I cannot speak to say so, and I want... I want...

Donnell realized he had reached for Nathan, not to lay his hand on Nathan's chest to soothe him, no, but to touch him as would a lover who'd won his heart and earned the right.

If Bettina was right and if Nathan had been stripped of his priest's collar, and if this was why...

Even if not...

Too soon. Too soon, no matter how deeply Donnell's curiosity ran -- and yes, his growing taste for Nathan's hands gliding over his body, for the granted right to explore him in return without fear of damaging him.

Not right away, even if Nathan should share his burgeoning tastes. He was not a beast. He could wait; Nathan's body would heal, and then they could begin salving his wounded spirit and exploring this unexpected attraction.

Until then, Donnell would simply enjoy the sight of the good work he'd done and wait, fascinated, to see what sort of man he'd rescued. And he would hope.

Nathan stretched beneath the softness of the quilt his mother had made him when he was still young enough to help wind her cotton, caught in the warm halfway spot between sleeping and waking -- and oh, so happy. The rumbling burr of a man's baritone filled his ears. *Papa?*

It had to be, and that meant all the badness had only been a dream. He was still in Kentucky, swaddled up safe in the gentle green of the hills, tucked safe in his own bed.

There was no Abbot Innocent with his heart of sharp-flaked stone and his joy in sinner-catching.

No Martin, with the face of a saint and the darkest of souls.

No monastery, tucked secretly away. No chains to bind the acolytes in their beds at night. No punishments, no floggings, no hours upon his knees to beg forgiveness for driving others to sin.

No trial with a judgment against him.

No condemnation to walk for miles upon miles in search of mercy from God that Innocent swore would not come; no burning up, falling time after time for want of water.

No desperate last stand in a boomtown, begging for work to feed himself.

Only safety, only home, and the dream Nathan chose to keep, that of a deathlessly beautiful angel who'd saved him at the last and brought him here, back home.

"My angel," he murmured, sighing deeply.

He listened, drowsy, to his father talking.

"... reckon I can keep on singing, they liked me well enough. Don't guess I want to trade in my post at the bar, though."

Pause.

"Huh. Well, I don't scare the custom off and if they don't care to hear 'Danny Boy' four times in a row then they can just drink more and then they'll be happy as pigs in slop."

Pause.

"Yeah, I know, I know. They're already askin' after you. And him. Man like him, he makes a mark. Folks remember."

Pause.

"Don't matter none to them that they didn't help. They still recall."

Pause.

"Ain't no one said anything untoward, not yet."

Pause.

"I ain't stupid, Donnell. I got eyes, and I hear what I hear."

Pause.

"Naw. I'm still here, ain't I? I don't bite the hand that feeds me and I ain't got no call to judge you for likin' one body shape better'n another. 'sides, I told you, he puts me in mind of my son."

Pause.

"Welcome to you. Anyhow, figured you had better ought to hear from me, not them who'd cause mischief aforehand."

Another pause, and then the heavy tromp of boots faded away. A small sigh, frustrated in tone sounded, and then the gentlest brush of fingertips across Nathan's face, wiping away his uneasiness at the hushed, tense note in Papa's words.

The words Papa had said made no sense, but Nathan didn't much care with his angel to protect him. He had nothing to fear, and so he slept again, safe and warm...

Donnell dipped his tin spoon into the bowl of dumplings Bettina had brought him, made with the last of the chicken she'd stretched far further than he'd ever have imagined one

puny bantam could go. That was Bettina for you, though. A genius in her way. He sucked a soft, doughy bite rich with chicken fat into his mouth and chewed blissfully, his eyes closed.

When he looked at Bettina, her pleasure in his enjoyment showed through the otherwise stern, displeased cast to her features.

Hoping to incur her greater favor, Donnell kissed his fingertips with all the flair of a Frenchman he'd once seen complimenting a lady on her beauty.

Bettina scoffed, though Donnell suspected she wasn't immune to his flattery.

Donnell took quick advantage of her softer moment and nodded to Nathan. *What do you think?* he signed. *Any better today?* Nathan had slept nearly twice around the clock since his fever had broken, barely moving except when Donnell coaxed more water and broth down his throat or helped him use the chamber pot.

He didn't think that was a bad sign. After coming so close to perishing from exposure, Donnell figured Nathan's peaceful rest would do him good.

Bettina pursed her lips as she pressed the back of her hand to Nathan's forehead and then to his cheeks. Donnell knew both to be the natural, easy warmth of a man at rest, without a trace of fever. She bent to listen to his breathing, easier all the time, and to the steadier pumping of Nathan's heart.

"He'll live," she allowed. "But a man like him, on the runaway from whatever devils are chasing him... I don't know how glad he'll be to pull through. If he throws a fit instead of giving thanks, I plan to point him directly at you."

Donnell caught her hand and squeezed it thankfully, looking up at Bettina with *thank you* shaped on his lips.

Bettina started to say something, then stopped herself. Her fretting, borne out of fear for him, wounded Donnell, regardless of knowing she was in the right to worry. He knew nothing about Nathan after all, not really. Though Donnell was sure she'd guessed rightly and Nathan was a priest stripped of his collar, she *might* be wrong. Nathan might be on the run, a few miles ahead of a posse, or a sheriff with a noose in hand; he might have killed or robbed a stage or might be the drunk Nazareth had mocked him as when he'd arrived.

Donnell didn't think for long that any of those suspicions had a single basis in fact. Here, under his hands, lay a good man. Tough, too, to have survived the nursing of one not accustomed to the task.

Concerning the state of his heart... there the land lay a fraction differently. If, when Nathan woke, he rejected Donnell's affections or if he accepted them and they were found out -- as Bettina feared -- the consequences would be catastrophic, and rain down destruction upon all associated with Treighton's.

Seen that way, Donnell felt a sharp flash of dismay at his own selfishness.

He sat back, sunk in thought. *I've acted rashly*, he signed to Bettina, thinking "out loud".

"Blessed right you have," Bettina agreed, the relief only tempering her worry a drop or two, for what was done, was done. "You know I've got your back, child. Just you watch that selfsame back yourself, hear me? You be careful. With you and with him."

Donnell exhaled a long, slow breath and rubbed his face.

"You do already love him." It wasn't a question.

Donnell might argue with her, but he could never lie to Bettina. He signed *yes*, and then raised his hands in resignation. He took far less joy in the affection now, though no less conviction. Nathan was already in his heart, for good or ill.

"Then we go from here," Bettina said simply. "We take it as it comes. And if he says no to you, then you let him walk away."

Donnell winced, but inclined his head in agreement.

Bettina's rigid posture relaxed. "You're a good boy."

Donnell made a face and shrugged. Then, he peeked slyly up at Bettina. He pointed at Nathan and signed, *he still thinks I'm an angel*.

Bettina snorted. "Reckon the sun addled his brains more thoroughly than clabbered milk, then. You're nothing but a devil in disguise."

I love you, Mother.

"Sweet-talking me won't do you any good." She sniffled and turned away, making tracks, fast. "I'll get him some more broth. You finish those dumplings, now, every last bite, or you'll answer to me."

Donnell chuckled as the door shut behind her.

You'll like Bettina, when you wake properly and meet her, Donnell signed over Nathan, his face peaceful in sleep and more appealing than ever with returning health. She saved my life, after all, so that I could save yours.

He regarded Nathan's face, envisioning the captivating aqua blue beneath peacefully closed eyelids. *Do I care in vain? I cannot think so.*

Nor can I think he would not care for me.

Donnell was certain it hadn't been his imagination that he'd seen and felt accurately the shock of returned affection in those first hours that Nathan had lain between life and death.

Is the gamble worth what I stand to lose, though?

He moved closer to Nathan to finish his meal, and found that though these were easily the best dumplings he'd ever had the pleasure of eating in his life, they had lost all savor for him.

This time, as Nathan swam toward wakefulness, he felt... different. Itchy underneath his skin, as if something within him demanded to be recognized and attended to.

He lay still, trying to make sense of the undefined demand. Hunger? No... no, his belly was full, almost painfully so. He licked his lips and tasted saltiness with a hint of fowl. Broth. He remembered.

Thirsty? No. Sips of cool, clean water had followed the broth.

Weary? Heavens, no. If anything, he ached to stand and stretch his limbs, sore from lying abed so long.

Nathan lay quietly, random thoughts shuffling together in order. Broth, water, aching soreness... he'd been ill, hadn't he? The weakness still remaining alarmed Nathan. How close had he come to perishing?

But for his angel, whoever the man might be, Nathan knew he would have died.

Where was his angel? Nathan smiled sleepily. A dream, he supposed, nothing but a dream. No one would care so for a wretch like he.

He opened his eyes to see the world around him clearly for the first time. Plastered white walls, heavy green curtains, fine molding about the ceilings. A sanitarium? Surely not. A private home? Perhaps, but how unlikely it seemed.

Nathan turned his head on the pillow, far softer than any he had lain his head on in his life, and caught sight of a slight movement. Instinctively he tracked the flicker of motion and froze.

His angel, the angel Nathan remembered from his dream, stood across the room, back turned to Nathan, washing himself.

Oh. I must still be dreaming.

Nathan hesitated. He wanted so to look his fill now that he had better concentration. Yet it would be a sin. His eyes looked not in gratitude, but in appreciation a man should not indulge in for another man. He'd learned that lesson well; the instructions had been writ in lashes of the whip on his back. And to lust after an angel, one of God's own messengers? He would feel the singing fires of Hell at his toes any moment, and deserve the pain.

And yet... and yet... if it was a dream... would that be such a sin? Men could not control the ramblings of their mind.

Nathan tried to look away, and found the question to be moot. He lacked the strength to move with his emotions thus tangled, sapping the small amount of energy he'd regained through rest.

Mouth dry, uneasy wariness flatly metallic on his tongue, heart racing, Nathan gazed at his angel and, swallowing on his parched throat, surrendered the struggle against his urges.

Surely he could be forgiven for his dreams.

The angel seemed unaware of Nathan's observation of him as he lifted a fine china pitcher and poured a stream of clear, pure water into a matching china bowl with doves painted on the side. Doves! Nathan smiled, delighted. Perhaps that was a sign. Doves were holy, weren't they?

As for the angel himself... beautiful. So exceedingly beautiful, so finely shaped that he could not be real.

His shoulders were broad and his arms firm with trim muscle, the elegant length of his torso tapering to a narrow waist and slender hips. The well-tailored cut of his trousers clung to his legs as Nathan imagined deerskin might, molded and supple, inviting the eye to admire the supple play of muscle in his limbs as he moved, propping one elegantly booted foot on the lower shelf of the fine dark wood washstand that held both pitcher and ewer.

Beneath his crisp cotton shirt, though it lacked collar and cuffs, Nathan thought he could see the same delicious play of muscles beneath fine-grained skin. He ached to take a closer look --

No. No, he burned to lay hands upon the smooth expanse. To lay his lips on the dip of his angel's spine directly above the tightly defined swell of his buttocks and taste the angel's skin. Would he be salty, as was a human man?

Nathan tried to look away, shame burning hot in his belly. Shame and desire, the one warring with the other.

His cock had lain quiescent between his legs for what seemed an endless age now, his consciousness far too consumed with first pain delivered at Abbot Innocent's hands and then the fight to survive, to keep walking, to seek his redemption.

Now, it stirred at the sight of his angel, so innocently turned away. Unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it away from his shoulders, revealing a flawless, tightly defined back. The angel dipped a clean white cloth into the ewer, wrung out the water, and began again to wash. Slow strokes left trailing drops of aqua vitae that rolled down his back to dampen the waist of his trousers. He turned his head to one side, his profile clear over his shoulder, eyes closed and lips parted in pleasure.

Nathan could no more have stopped himself than he might have tried to cease breathing. His cock had risen to aching fullness, pulsing with need as it pushed against his belly. He bit his lip, knowing he should not, but needing so badly to touch that he could not halt the slow, weak movement of his hand.

He inhaled sharply, with a hiss, when he attempted to wrap his fingers around his cock. He lacked the strength to rub vigorously, but could stroke with faint brushes, and even they were almost more than his over sensitized, long-deprived nerves could bear.

The angel turned at the waist, a soft breath of enjoyment escaping him as he trailed the cloth around his waist. He shifted position, standing nearly sideways to Nathan now, and he too had grown hard, the firm outline of his cock defined in his snug trousers.

Nathan's strength gathered. He squeezed his cock, sensing the approaching culmination, desperately seeking surcease of the burning ache that drove him into a fever. Though with the rest of his body so weak, how would he ever accomplish this? He couldn't bear it if he woke before he had found release; he thought he might explode.

The angel's eyes opened slowly, drowsy with pleasure as a sleepy cat. The tip of his delicate pink tongue came out to trace his lips.

Nathan's breath sped up. He rubbed his thumb over the slickly wet head of his cock, coming closer, closer -- not there, but so near -- he only needed a little more for this torment to end --

His angel tilted its head, soft oaken-hued hair falling to one side, as if he listened intently to something Nathan could not hear. Nathan froze but for the throbbing in his groin; if he had had the voice, he would have keened in dismay. He *burned*.

Licking his upper lip a second time, his hands trembling finely, the angel turned and looked with purpose at Nathan. His eyes widened and his mouth shaped a perfect "o".

To Nathan's eyes, his angel flamed up abruptly, searingly, with the same wild heat that consumed Nathan. He sketched something Nathan could not understand with his elegant hands, the hands of a master artisan, and started toward him.

Nathan had not the strength nor the will nor the desire to stop his angel. *Just a dream*, he chanted to himself, hovering on the veriest edge of his pleasure. *Only a dream, not a sin, and it is not me now, it is him--*

The angel went to one knee on the side of the bed in which Nathan lay and brought both marvelous hands up to cup Nathan's face. He swallowed Nathan's abrupt, startled breath by sealing his lips over Nathan's, slipping his tongue inside to stroke the roof of Nathan's mouth.

Nathan moaned, lost in a heartbeat. He shifted and stirred beneath the heat and weight of the angel, no longer caring about sin, but only about drawing the angel closer to him, catching him with one leg hooked behind the angel's knee.

The angel broke his kiss, face drawing tight. His eyes squeezed shut, he took one of his hands away from Nathan's face and drew it down Nathan's torso, down past where a man should go and laid it to rest over Nathan's throbbing prick.

Nathan thrust into the pressure without choice or thought, nearly sobbing with relief when the fiery ache reached crescendo and he released his seed, soaking his nightshirt and through it the angel's hand.

So dazed and lost to the pleasure was he that when the angel buried his face in Nathan's shoulder and rutted against Nathan's thigh, he could only cling tight and ride the cresting waves, as painful as they were reliving and breath-stealing. The angel stiffened and shuddered, gripping Nathan's shoulders with bruising force and plunging his tongue back inside Nathan's mouth.

They clung to each other in the gasping moments after, the angel tremoring with the same aftershocks that rocked Nathan to his core.

When they parted, the angel's face was nearly aglow with happiness. His lips were bruised and swollen from the roughness of their kissing. He beamed at Nathan and took Nathan's hand in his, compressing Nathan's fingers.

A beam of sunlight slipped through a crack in the heavy drapes. It threw a slat of illumination over the angel's face, and-- and--

Nathan recognized him. Not an angel. Never an angel.

The gambler. The mute trickster. He who'd kicked Nathan in the street, and who'd mocked him.

A man. Only a man.

And this was not a dream. The last remnants of self-deception popped, thin as soap bubbles in this revealing light.

"No," Nathan moaned, trying to struggle away. "Oh, no."

The gambler shook his head, reaching for Nathan. "Shhh, shhh," he implored.

"God!" Nathan turned away, shutting his eyes, sick with self-loathing and miserable shame. He thrust his fist against his mouth, not wanting his groan of misery to escape.

Abbot Innocent had been right after all. You could not redeem those who were born to the devil, and no matter how he struggled with himself, Nathan was who he was and this only proved it for once and ever after.

Surely he was damned, and if this gambler was an angel at all, then he was one of the Fallen come to carry Nathan's soul away to hell.

Chapter Six

Donnell's fingers were still sticky-wet from Nathan's release, Nathan's body yet heaving through the aftershocks of a nearly-violent culmination beneath him, but the man had rejected him utterly.

Donnell looked at Nathan's face turned away from him, eyes screwed tightly shut to block out even the sight of Donnell -- at the twisted misery pinching his features -- and felt, as if a boxer had swung at him, the dull *thud* of his half-formed hopes crushing to nothingness.

So this is how the land lies. Bettina, you were right to fear for my heart as you did.

Donnell withdrew, wiping his damp hand on the leg of his trousers. They'd stain, but he cared little for that.

Though he knew Nathan wouldn't understand him, he signed in the air above the young man's misery, *I'm sorry*.

Nathan curled tighter, pulling his knees toward his chest. "I thought it was a dream," he said, voice still stripped raw from his fever, his tones desolate and ripe with self-loathing. "I thought there was no harm in dreaming."

Donnell wanted to touch Nathan, only for the sake of calming him, but refrained. His hands would not be welcomed, he knew.

"Who are you?" Nathan croaked. "What did you bring me here for?" One of his aqua blue eyes opened, anxiously fixed on Donnell. "Did -- did Abbot Innocent set this us as a trap-
_"

Nathan's lips slammed shut. If possible, he paled whiter still than he had before in his alarm. He shivered, turning fully away from Donnell. With a further twist, he heaved himself on his belly, heedless of the sticky mess on his stomach and thighs.

Donnell suspected Nathan did not know what an appealing picture he presented, the sheet rucked down below his hips, the tautness of his buttocks raised and exposed.

If I were less of a man, I would take further advantage of you, he signed, wryly entertained by the knowledge that he could "say" anything, and Nathan would comprehend not a whit of his meaning. *Lucky you.*

Donnell ran a hand through his hair, grimacing when traces of come still daubing his fingers gummed several strands already in need of a proper wash. He could use a full-bodied scrub, come to that, and though he could ask for sufficient water for a tub bath in the saloon, an excursion to the Nazareth bathhouse would do him good.

He prepared to stand -- he could do no more good here, only damage; he would ask Bettina to take over his duties -- and took one last look at the forbidden fruit laid out for him on the sheets of his own bed, sun-browned and thin but still dear to his heart -- and that was his heart's folly, for he knew now that he had tasted the illicit sweetness that he would crave another taste in vain time after time.

Preparing to stand Donnell stopped, arrested by his first proper sight of Nathan's back. Just now he had been too clouded with regret and hunger to properly look, and of course he had not had the chance to see before.

Staring at Nathan's naked back now, Donnell realized that there had been far "worse" concealed from them all the while. For along with the bruises and the pitifully thin ribs and the knobs of Nathan's spine jutting out, Donnell could clearly see the marks of a lash dealt by a heavy hand.

He had not witnessed many whippings in his day, but Donnell had lived in Nazareth long enough to know the differences in types of injuries. Some marks were accidental, and showed it, some were meant to hurt, and showed it; the old, deep grooved scars and the fresh, still-raw welts spoke of the pleasure the one who'd whipped Nathan had savored while he dealt the blows. The patterns they formed were nearly artistic. More, they were savage.

Whoever had beaten Nathan had taken nearly orgasmic joy in rending the young man's flesh.

Donnell hissed between his teeth. Though he did not wish to cause Nathan more pain, he grasped Nathan's shoulder and shook him gently but firmly, insisting that Nathan pay attention to him.

Nathan shook his head and buried his face in the pillow. "Leave me be. You should have let me die."

Donnell shook him again and when Nathan twitched away, a third time. Finally, Nathan turned his head to a side and one aqua blue eye opened, the other side of his face still concealed in the pillow. "What do you want from me?"

Gratitude would be good for a start, Donnell thought, annoyed, before catching himself. He attempted to smooth the irritation twitching in his expression before nudging, ever so careful not to hurt Nathan, at one of the mostly-healed lash marks on Nathan's back. He raised one eyebrow, knowing it to be a gesture any man could interpret.

To his surprise, Nathan's pale cheek bloomed pink. He pressed his lips together and spoke not a word.

Donnell jabbed him more insistently.

Nathan glared at him, and said nothing.

This is a fine pickle, isn't it? Donnell huffed, too irked not to let it show, and stood. He refused to look behind him to make note of Nathan's reaction to his temper and strode to the door. Flinging it open, he reached for a tasseled cord outside that he had used perhaps a handful of times since it had been installed. For a moment Donnell wondered if it would even work, uncertain up until he heard the peeling of the single brass bell the cord was attached to.

If Nathan would not speak to him and answer his questions, then there was someone else who could understand what Donnell wanted and put them to Nathan, demanding replies, who no one could refuse and whom Donnell knew for certain Nathan could not stand up to.

Bettina thumped up the stairs moments later, skirt caught in her hands and hiked up improperly high so as not to hamper her turn of speed. Her cheeks were pale. "Son, what's going on that you want to ring that bell, that's for emergencies only, you--"

She topped the stairs, scanned Donnell in a heartbeat and found him whole, and, clever to the last, whipped about to fix Nathan with her piercing stare.

Donnell waited, not looking at Nathan himself, knowing he wouldn't have to explain a thing.

"Huh!" Bettina said at last, dripping scorn tempered with dismay. "I guess I don't have to ask what happened *here*."

Nathan made a squeaking noise, a boy's gasp of pure horror. Following fast behind, Donnell heard the desperate rustling of sheets and tick, Nathan trying to the best of his limited strength to cover himself.

"Oh, no," Nathan whimpered, striking dismay into Donnell's heart.

Bettina glared daggers at Donnell. "Mm-*hmm*," she sniffed. "I ought to turn you over my knee."

Donnell rubbed the back of his neck, unexpectedly embarrassed, his plan turned on its end. Ye gads, he'd only thought for Bettina to see the marks on Nathan's back. More fool he for not realizing she'd make note of the stains on his own trousers, the unaccustomed dishevelment of the sheets, or that her sensitive nose would have immediately detected the smells of sex. Sweet Lord, he hadn't even remembered he was shirtless.

"You," she said, jabbing Donnell in his bare chest with a hefty sniff of disdain. "We're going have us a talk later, boy."

Donnell mustered what defiance he could against the force of nature that was Bettina. *His back*, he signed emphatically. *Look. He's been beaten, and badly, and --*

"I can see without your mounting a signpost. I'm not blind," Bettina retorted. "I suggest you absent yourself, child. Doesn't look to me like he cares to have you around, does it?"

Donnell tried to look past her as she moved bodily between him and the bed, fists planted on her narrow hips. *You don't understand --*

"I understand more than I want to." Bettina glanced over her shoulder, her mien settling into pity. "I can tell right enough what's happened, and what's likely come before. You get on out of here and let me tend to him."

I didn't mean to hurt him.

Bettina relented enough to pat Donnell on his cheek. "I know that sure as I know the sun comes up," she said. "Men, they do make a mess of things where a woman might ought to have been put in charge instead. I'll see what I can do. You get."

But--

"Get, I said!" Bettina clapped her hands together sharply, cross once more. "You're only wasting time explaining to me what I already know, and as for the questions that still want answers, I'll have them soon enough."

Donnell managed to peek over Bettina's thin shoulder and caught a glimpse of aqua blue eyes, wide in alarm. He shrugged to convey his own helplessness in the face of an angry woman, and grimaced in sympathy.

Nathan wrinkled his nose in return; despite his fear and the calamity befallen them in the wake of what they'd just done, Donnell sensed a moment of sympathy between them.

The brief unity seemed to startle Nathan, too, who flinched and hastily turned away.

Donnell heaved a sigh. *Go gently with him?* he asked of Bettina. *For me.*

Bettina dealt him a scornful look. "If you think I'd be cruel, you don't know me as well as I thought you did." She slapped his arm. "Take those dirty clothes down to the washroom and you wash up. Leave me be until I ring that bell again, and if you dare come up those steps before then I will tan your hide 'til a cowboy wouldn't use it for saddle leather, understand me?"

Donnell was not such a fool as to push her any further. Sending up a quick prayer to whoever might be listening that Nathan would survive the next hour, he got in a hep and a hurry. But it was with regret that he hurried away.

I have made such a hash of things, he thought ruefully as he slipped far more quietly than Bettina down the stairs, deviating from the path that would lead him to the saloon and sliding instead into the private domain of cooking pots and storage. *How on earth did I get here from happening to see a beggar looking for work in the streets?*

Some days, life was too much of a mystery for a common man, wasn't it?

Though he had had many a lesson to learn when opening his saloon, Donnell had learned quickly of several small necessities invaluable for keeping on hand. Hammers and nails for that which drunken men broke. Extra barrels of beer that no one save he and Levi knew about in case of shortages. Piano strings. Tobacco and cigars. Fresh shirts.

And, thanks to the one time Levi had split his breeches when muscling out too over-rowdy drunks, an extra pair of trousers. Designed for a larger man, they didn't fit Donnell as he preferred, the extra material hindering his ease of movement. Still, he supposed, they were closer to properly decent than his wont, which proved to be a boon no sooner than he had done up the buttons.

The saloon had been noisy in its way as usual, buzzing idly with the chit-chat of the late afternoon crowd. A thin group, it was composed of drinkers either serious enough to have lingered all the day long or those who'd come for supper instead. Either way, they were talkers, and on the whole there would be the comforting *clink* of glassware and tin forks on tin plates, and an agreeable atmosphere of live-and-let-enjoy.

When the saloon fell abruptly quiet, the short hairs on the back of Donnell's neck stood upright.

"What in'a hell you think you're doing' here?" Levi growled. "Last I checked, you weren't welcome, so you can take your ass right on out of--"

"Let us pray," Michael boomed, his melancholy baritone unmistakable for any other.

Donnell closed his eyes and swore -- fit to singe the hair off a cat. Michael was precisely the last fellow they needed about the saloon that night.

If Nathan heard him, and if he alarmed Nathan and undid the work they'd put in nursing him through his fever -- or worse, if Michael tried to lay claim on him for the sake of Nathan's soul--

Donnell saw, in a flash, that Michael must have come to do exactly that: rescue the innocent from this den of sinners. Michael would *approve* of the marks on Nathan's back if he knew what passed through Nathan's mind. He would likely lay more on there in his efforts to purge Nathan's soul.

And Nathan would not survive, not this time.

Donnell saw all of these things, and more, including the dissolution of his home and the confirmation of Bettina's direst fears.

And then he saw red.

Grateful for his properly dressed and freshly-bathed appearance, Donnell stormed out of the storage washroom, pausing only to thrust out his hand in demand for the shotgun Levi kept loaded beneath the bar.

Levi passed it to Donnell, mindful of its readiness to fire, his grin blazing white against his beard and as full of vinegar and glee as the Fourth of July.

The drinkers and diners who had ceased their talking upon Michael's intrusion now ceased their uneasy movements. Some might have held their breath. Donnell sensed alarm as well as anticipation for the fight in many of them, and that worried him, but he shrugged that off to keep his focus clear.

He thought, when looking down the sights of the rifle at Michael, that it was one of the man's more fetching profiles.

Michael didn't so much as flinch, nor did he betray any flicker of fear. "I've come for the boy," he said. "I have seen, in my heart, the dark sins that poison him. That cannot be wiped clean in this establishment. Give me the boy, and may God forgive you."

Sometimes one did not have to be capable of speech to make his point. Donnell nudged Michael's cheek with the barrel of the rifle and clicked his tongue.

Get out.

Michael turned so that the barrel prodded his nose instead. "The Lord will see this temple of sin razed to the ground," he said, quiet as a church mouse, dangerous as the serpent in the Garden. "Repent while ye may. Bow your heads and your knees and you may yet be redeemed."

Donnell sneered. He'd heard enough of that, and seen what torments belief in one's own condemnation had wrought on Nathan. To make himself clear, he spat on the floor.

To shoot Michael now would have been to sling a premature noose around his neck. Though it burned Donnell with the injustice, he lowered his rifle and pointed at the door, mouthing his words with vicious emphasis: *Get. Out.*

Michael smiled, serene and holy. "Then until we meet again, sinner. God will judge your soul, and I'll rejoice to see this Gomorrah fall."

Donnell sneered. *Never while I'm alive.* He jerked his chin at Levi. *See him off the premises.*

A few of the drinkers applauded when Levi tossed Michael bodily out. That went a considerable way toward improving Donnell's mood.

Now, if only Bettina could soothe Nathan's troubled spirits, Donnell's world would be well on its way to right again.

A beer slid smoothly to Donnell over the bar and Levi lowered his rumble to a pitch where none could hear him save for Donnell, saying, "Not that I ain't behind you every scrap of the way, mind, but you ever considered that yon Michael might cause real trouble someday? Town's mostly made of wood. He ever takes it in his head to strike a match--"

Then I'll shoot him myself. Donnell shook his head. He mimed shooting a rifle so Levi would get the gist of his thoughts. He flapped his fingers in imitation of flapping jaws and rolled his eyes. *Michael values his own hide too much to put it at risk. He'll only ever talk.*

"Talk's dangerous too," Levi warned.

Levi had never learned to interpret Donnell's signing any too well. Luckily, he knew enough of reading and writing to allow for improved written communication. Donnell swept the side of his hand over the empty bar to indicate an open blank slate, and began to sketch letters that formed words in the emptiness.

I know. I apologize for endangering you, Levi. If you want to go, I won't stop you.

Levi reared back as if stung, and looked deeply offended. "Like hellfire I would," he retorted. "What kind of man do you think I am?"

Donnell resisted the urge to sigh. Seemed as if wherever he turned, those he cared about and tried to protect were constantly getting the wrong idea, twisting even his silence into misapprehended speeches.

He waved his hand "no" at Levi and resumed spelling. *For your own safety, Levi. This is my grave I've dug. No call for you to lie down in it too.*

Levi hmmphed.

I would not see you hurt for my sake. Donnell spelled with extra emphasis, growing angry. *I want you to be safe.*

He paused to quaff his beer, its cool crispness a balm to his dry throat. Agitation had parched him for longer than he'd realized.

While he drank, Levi visibly thought and when he put down his half-empty glass, Levi leaned closer to Donnell and spoke, saying, "Where d'you think I could go, if I wanted to? I got nothin' but what's right here."

Donnell scoffed. *You're still young, you're healthy. Don't know why you stuck around so long in the first place. Ought to go find yourself a pretty new wife and raise six or seven fat children.*

Levi barked a laugh. "That's a riskier business than stayin' here, you ask me." He firmed his stance. "You started this dust-up, but I'll see it through, and don't you try and convince me otherwise, you hear?" He nodded decisively. "That one up there ain't the only boy who reminds me of my son."

Donnell hesitated. He wanted to ask what about the son Levi saw in both he and Nathan... but he suspected he knew.

"We all got our own weights to carry," Levi said quietly, the defiance draining out of him to reveal a tired man in his middle years. "Some of us, the lucky ones, we get our second chances. And that's all I have to say."

He stepped back, crossing his meaty arms over his solid chest. A bear straight from the mountains could not have offered greater, firmer determination. "Now. Best you head on back up and see to him. Make sure Bettina's left a strip or two on his hide." He frowned when Donnell winced at his choice of wording. "Somethin' the matter?"

Donnell schooled his expression into calmness with an effort and waved dismissively. He thumped his breastbone. *Good beer*, he spelled on the bar.

Levi snorted, tickled. "So belch like a man," he scoffed. "You need anything else down here tonight?"

No. Donnell slid off his barstool, hesitated, and quickly spelled *thank you* before wiping the slate blank again.

"You're welcome," Levi said to Donnell's turned back.

The warmth of Levi's approval carried Donnell clean up the stairs, where the fresh air sweeping through what must have been his opened bedroom window cut a swath across the narrow corridor and abruptly chilled him deep. *Nathan?*

Had he climbed out the window? Donnell lunged forward, frantic, plunging into the room--

And clattered to a stop. Bettina was nowhere in sight; mayhap she'd finished here, or gone on some errand of her own. Nathan lay where Donnell had seen him last, only very changed. His lank hair had been tamed, trimmed short, and the cropped curls seemed clean and looked as if they would be soft to the touch. He lay on his back, a fresh, white nightshirt buttoned properly up to his throat, crisp, clean sheets tucked under his arms, the flesh of which seemed darker in comparison to the linen but still oh, so pale.

The slight rise and fall of Nathan's chest gave Donnell to know that he yet lived; that, and that alone. The translucence of the fragile skin over his temples revealed a tracery of blue veins beneath. His lips had fallen slightly apart, the lower lip drooping. Though not small and not a boy, Nathan carried about himself -- even in sleep -- a peculiar innocence, the likes of which Donnell had never seen in one of Nathan's years.

A besmirched lamb, Donnell thought as he tried to step silently backward, not wanting to wake Nathan. *No matter how old he is, he's fragile as frost. Not for the likes of me.*

No, I'll see him well, and I'll send him -- where? North? -- in an apprenticeship somewhere. Far away from Michael's righteous scourge.

Far away from me.

It's for the best.

Donnell took another step back -- an ill-considered one. The heel of his boot caught at the door's frame, thumping far too loudly in the hushed stillness of his bedchamber.

Nathan's eyes opened, aqua blue brilliant even in the encroaching dim light of dusk, ensnaring Donnell all over again and as thoroughly trapping him as if he had had no better intentions and as if he had the right to give his heart without putting Nathan's life and mind at risk.

He held his breath, praying Nathan would fall back into the arms of sleep and let him make his escape.

The powers that held sway over their world did not see fit to grant Donnell's request. Nathan turned to Donnell, slowly and inexorably, aqua blue stunning Donnell into stillness. If he had possessed the power, he would have looked away to prevent Nathan from seeing the need and hunger Donnell knew to be writ across his face, he would have, but he was not that strong.

Nathan inhaled softly, sharply. Luminous yearning and a man's adult hunger heated the blue of his eyes. "Are you an angel, or are you a devil?" he asked, fever-husky. "If you damn me, will you save me? I burn for you." He smiled for the first time, albeit bitterly. "Are we both angels fallen to earth without our wings?"

Maybe. I cannot say.

Nathan's lips twitched; his chest shook. Donnell thought it might be laughter. "I know almost nothing of you, whereas you must know much about me, though not everything. Not all of it. But more than any other who isn't trying to kill me."

Donnell inclined his head in agreement.

"And yet you want me. Your hands on me, your mouth." His cheeks flared pink as Nathan persisted. "You want to lie naked with me and take your pleasures." He swallowed, a painful sound. "As I want you to."

Donnell's heart ached even as heat rose to simmer in his groin, his body firmly decided despite the kinder misgivings in his head. *Yes*, his emotions answered for him, moving his hands of their own volition. *More than anything.*

He was certain Nathan couldn't understand his hand speech, but equally sure that Nathan comprehended him without fault.

Nathan visibly summoned his courage to ask this next, "Would you force yourself on me?"

What? No!

"Not ever?" Nathan persisted.

No. Donnell shook his head and stilled his hands, perplexed, yet with an ever-increasing unnerved sense of anticipation. The crucial moment was close enough for him to taste the uncertain spice of dividing destinies. What Nathan said next, and how he chose to respond, would change their lives.

Nathan fell silent. Donnell knew the signs and understood that Nathan was gathering thoughts on his tongue like heavy grapes, and would not speak again until he burst -- and that would be soon, and it would seal their fates.

For the long seconds in the meantime, however, Nathan lay quiet.

And Donnell waited to see what would become of his heart.

Chapter Seven

"There are things you should know about me," Nathan said, abruptly, biting his words into small, sharp-edged slices, turning his face from Donnell. Small white lines appeared at the sides of his mouth, reflecting the tense unease of his speech. "Abbot Innocent. Did I mention that name while I was ill?"

No. Please, you're not well yet. And hush. It's hard to make amends when you're not listening to me.

"Stop!" Nathan half-laughed, the stretching of his lips over his teeth bereft of humor. "I don't understand. Bettina... she told me you couldn't speak." He bit his lip, as if he thought he was rude to address this. "I didn't know, when you first approached me. I was impolite."

Donnell snorted. As if propriety was anything of a concern by then!

Nathan seemed to understand that at least, but his discomfort deepened rather than eased. "Forgive me," he mumbled, looking down at the coverlet, picking at a loose thread. He laughed again without any cheer. "I'm forever saying the wrong thing, and you cannot say anything at all. Life is strange."

I can speak, in my way. You just don't understand me. Yet.

Donnell tugged at his hair, driven half mad by his inability to make himself clear to Nathan. If he'd only kept pencil and paper in his bedchamber as a matter of habit! Then again, when had he ever had occasion to need to hold an extended conversation when he only used this room for sleeping, and that always alone?

Wait, wait, wait. He waved at Nathan, drawing his attention.

"What is it?"

Donnell hoped Nathan would understand. He approached the wall by the headboard of the bed, cautious of getting too close and alarming Nathan, and "wiped" the slate clean as he did when communicating with Levi over the bar.

Nathan squinted, perplexed.

To simplify his point, Donnell drew, in large and exaggerated letters, NATHAN, and pointed to him who lay in his bed.

Nathan's confusion cleared. Donnell noted, with a flutter of heightening interest in his lower belly, that when Nathan forgot himself enough to grow excited, his weariness momentarily faded and the aqua blue of his eyes became radiant, nearly glowing. "I understand you!" he exclaimed. "We can talk!"

Donnell could have laughed for glee. YES, he wrote with his finger, savoring Nathan's exultation.

Nathan sobered abruptly. "And so disintegrates the last obstacle between us," he murmured.

Donnell wasn't so sure of that. There were far greater barriers to wrangle with here than speech. Though he thought less of himself as a man for wanting so strongly when Nathan was ill and upset, his need for the taste of Nathan's lips and the touch of his hands only grew and never faded with each look at his troubled guest. Still, he shrugged, leaving his meaning open to interpretation.

Nathan drew in a breath, visibly gathering his strength, and began at the ending. "Before I encountered you on the street, I had been cast out of the only home I'd known for twelve years."

Donnell drew up sharply, dismayed. He'd suspected something very much like this, but the reality that someone had been so cruel to a gentle soul such as Nathan burned him with its injustice.

Nathan either didn't see Donnell's reaction or ignored it. "Abbot Innocent knew that in my heart, I lusted, and not after women. I craved men. He could not countenance this sin, so he mortified my flesh--"

And not for the first time, Donnell thought darkly.

"He told me to go. So I went. By the time I reached Nazareth I had walked for-- I'm not sure how far in miles; perhaps twenty or thirty? I'd traveled for days. I lost count of how many."

Donnell rapped his knuckles on the wall to draw Nathan's attention, then scribbled, HOW DID YOU SURVIVE?

"Not easily. Abbot Innocent would say I had the luck of the devil." A ghost of a smile glimmered on Nathan's lips. "As I walked, I found a scant handful of leavings from wagon trains along the side of the road. I liberated a tin cup, and later I found a small creek for water. It rained once or twice. Never much, but enough to keep me going."

Donnell could not imagine the awfulness of that journey, blistered by heat, footsore, weary to the bone, yet knowing if he dared to stop he might as well have signed his death warrant.

"If I could survive, then it would be a sign from God that I might be redeemed. If I died, then God had turned his face from me. And that would be the end."

Donnell could not help growling in anger -- not at Nathan, but at Innocent.

To his dismay Nathan seemed to interpret that as a personal condemnation, and slumped more deeply into the pillows. "You understand now. I am a sinner," he said after a long, weighty silence. "To them, I did not deserve to live. I wonder, myself, if they weren't right."

THEY WERE WRONG, Donnell wrote emphatically as he scowled. He hadn't much use for religion, and the bleakness in Nathan's words only reinforced his conviction that while God might be good, men were sorry, evil sons of bitches. WHAT HELLHOLE WAS THIS TO PRODUCE SUCH CRUEL LEADERS?

Nathan read Donnell's expression and didn't refute his thoughts. "The only home I knew," he said simply. "I didn't have a way out before they cast me away. It was not pleasant, though it was said to be holy. We had little to eat, little to wear, little to rest on. Abbot Innocent said it was to purge us of selfish desires. Ascetic was the word he used."

Donnell snorted. Eloquently. Sounded like "ascetic" was another word for starving and breaking down a body without good reason.

Nathan chuckled dryly. "But I survived. I survived much. The cholera that took my family. I'm from Kentucky, originally. Abbot Innocent had been traveling a circuit, seeking acolytes; not long afterwards he came west and chose an abandoned Spanish mission to found his dominion. Kentucky. It seems so far away now. You'd never be able to tell from my speech, would you?"

Donnell tilted his head in thought. He could hear, just a bit, the slower cadences that

spoke of a Southern heritage.

Nathan sobered, touching his throat. "I studied. I worked hard. I hoped that when I earned the collar I could go free."

Then he wasn't a priest? Donnell sketched the sign of the cross over his heart and pointed to his own throat, then to Nathan's.

"I wore a collar, yes, but I was not ordained, no. Not yet. Abbot Innocent said he would not grant me that honor before he knew I was pure." Nathan flicked his fingers as if casting aside the collar he'd never worn. "You see how that turned out."

ENOUGH, Donnell signed. He didn't want to hear about what had happened to spur Innocent to evict Nathan. He could guess just fine.

Nathan ignored him. "There was another acolyte. Martin. He was Innocent's favorite, but two-faced; he laughed at Innocent behind his back. He seemed free to me, enviable, and... and he was beautiful." Nathan murmured this next too quietly for any but Donnell's sharply honed hearing to pick up. "Nowhere near as marvelous as you."

In the midst of the darkness gathered around this conversation, Donnell's heart lightened.

He settled quickly. PLEASE. ENOUGH. He underlined the words with bold strokes of his finger and banged his knuckles on the wall.

"Does it bother you to hear this? You?" Nathan queried, looking genuinely confused and so striking in his fragile state that Donnell burned for him and had to rein in the urge to kiss Nathan's sorrows away.

Donnell nodded instead, simple and to the point.

"But you own a saloon. Surely you've seen worse."

YES. AND I NEVER LIKE IT. Donnell crossed his arms. AND IT ONLY HURTS YOU TO REMEMBER.

"You can guess the rest, then," Nathan said, conceding the argument. "I only want to hear one part of it from you, so I know you understand me, and what I've done. Your confirmation of understanding why Abbot Innocent condemned me for an unredeemable sinner."

The similarities in this foul Innocent's imprecations and in Michael's, still ringing coldly in Donnell's ears, repulsed him. Why did men of God so often think cruelty and killing cleared a path to their versions of righteousness? Why had they no joy in life, but only sorrow? He drew his lips back over his teeth in a grimace.

He didn't want to answer the question, but Nathan persisted in his asking. "Can you guess why he called me one of the damned?" he demanded, struggling to sit upright. "If you can, then tell me so."

Donnell gave in, in turn, and pointed to himself. He wrote slowly, deliberately, BECAUSE OF THAT IN YOU WHICH CRAVES MEN SUCH AS ME. He followed that up immediately with, INNOCENT WAS WRONG TO CALL IT A SIN.

Nathan snorted, the bitterest possible mockery of a laugh. "So you say."

SO I KNOW. AM I DAMNED, TOO? AM I SUCH A SINNER?

"No!" Nathan blazed briefly with indignation. "No. You helped me when no one else would. You are a good man."

Donnell spread his hands before returning, THEN SO ARE YOU.

Nathan shook his head and looked away.

Donnell gathered his courage -- he, who'd fought and won the right to own and manage a business frequented by the mad, bad, and dangerous! -- and moved to touch Nathan with all the growing tenderness he felt for Nathan, careful not to taint his caress with damnable pity no proud man wanted, regardless of how low he felt he'd fallen. PLEASE BELIEVE ME.

"I can't. Not yet. There's more. I want to tell it. Why don't you want to hear?"

Donnell pinched his lips together in frustration. YOU SHOULD LIE STILL. YOU'RE NOT YET WELL.

"Will I ever be, when I want what I want?"

Donnell sighed. He sat on the edge of the bed, foregoing the nicety of a request to do so. It was his bed, after all.

Nathan fidgeted with slight unease, but his lips twitched in a brief, rare smile, and he slanted a shy glance at Donnell, aqua blue glimmering.

Nathan flexed his hands. They were a scholar's hands, long-fingered and slim, capable of great gentleness. Donnell thought that if Nathan cared to learn, they would manage finger-spelling with great dexterity.

Donnell rested his palm on Nathan's knee. Nathan twitched slightly, as if startled, but relaxed a heartbeat later and dared another smile at Donnell. "You are a kind man, aren't you?"

I try to be. Donnell nodded to Nathan and squeezed his leg gently in silent permission to proceed, heartened with still more hope. Perhaps this *would* work. He indicated that if Nathan should have more to say, then he would listen.

And hope.

"It is so strange to me that I should finish up here, treated more kindly than ever before in my life, after so much fuss." Nathan slowly, ever so slowly, covered Donnell's hand with his own. The movement both startled Donnell and kindled a brightly-burning hope within him.

On an impulse, he laid the forefinger of his free hand on Nathan's chest and spelled his reply there instead. WHAT?

Nathan would not look at him. "I want you." He took a deep, shaking breath. "There it is. I want you, and everything I've been ordered to believe tells me that..."

He compressed Donnell's hand too hard, causing Donnell to wince in pain, but he did not shake Nathan away.

"If I am damned," Nathan went on, forcing the words out with great effort, "Should I not enjoy my ride to hell? But how should I be cruel enough to take you with me?"

Donnell had had enough. He addressed Nathan as directly as he was able to, finger-spelling part of his words, mouthing others, and gesturing where he hoped his meaning would be clear.

Sharing affection will not damn us. But even if we did consign ourselves to hell for what we both -- I too -- want, what if I was willing to go? And if I did not think it was damnation, but a gift?

To that, Nathan could seem to find no answer. He gripped Donnell's fingers and remained as equally mute. His limbs trembled, the emotions too strong for one recently so ill.

Rest. Donnell tried to push Nathan down on the bed. *You will be sick again.*

Nathan overrode his protest, too intent on confessing his perceived sins. "It would have been far better for both of us if you had not returned this -- this passion," he said.

Perhaps so. Donnell couldn't deny that.

"It would be better if you had never cared at all. Then I could have kept my cravings secret, or when I fell, you would have disdained me and I would..." He gulped. "I would be safe. Would I? God, Donnell. I speak of needing to purge my poisons but I lack the courage to use the knife. Help me."

Donnell could take no more, and Nathan's beseechment caught him at the precise moment when his control over his pity and desire broke. He knelt by the bed, all in a rush, and reached out to caress Nathan's face before Nathan saw him coming and could have the chance to duck away from him.

Caught, Nathan shuddered. He made one false start, his breath hitching, before he managed to say, "If I ask you to, will you abandon this and leave me be?" In direct contrast to the question he posed, Nathan leaned into Donnell's touch, his lips parting in a quiet sigh of yearning for more.

Yes. But you don't desire me to walk away and leave you here. You were glad when I rescued you, before you remembered your fears.

Nathan pressed his cheek into Donnell's hand. "It's true," he confessed, barely whispering. "You make me want to fall, and not regret."

Donnell stroked lightly over Nathan's cheekbone, too prominent in his thin face. *But the choice is yours. I will not force my wishes onto you. I am not like the Abbot, who would chisel away your soul. I will never treat you that way and I will not allow it from others; this I swear.*

Nathan laughed, choking on his bitter mirth. "Don't make promises you can't keep. I heard him. The preacher. Earlier. He's like Innocent, and he wanted me. What is it about *me* that brings them out to for the chase?"

It doesn't matter. They can't have you.

Nathan laid his hand over Donnell's. "I wish I could believe that."

Outside the opened window of Donnell's bedchamber, the heat of the day simmering into night reached the point at which the skies could bear no more, and broke. Jagged brightness of heat lightning coupled with its dry thunder startled both into jumping.

"Rain?" Nathan queried, trying to turn over and look out.

No.

"We need rain."

We always do.

"Rain to quench the thirsty ground."

Donnell knew they were no longer discussing the weather. He fixed his full attention on Nathan, drinking in the sight of him, from the rumpled tangle of his freshly-cropped curls to the paleness of his lips, to the pulsing vein in his throat, to the rapidly rising and falling movement of his chest.

He laid his hand over Nathan's heart and felt the hammering. *Speak to me.*

Nathan moistened his lips. "I cannot ask. I can't."

No, he couldn't. Donnell saw that clear as star shine on a cloudless night. Regardless of how much he wanted Donnell's touch, his lips and his hands, denial had been beaten into him, leaving scars old and new, raw and raised, thick and thin, up and down his spine from neck to the top of his buttocks. Every lash a warning to never want this. To ask for it would have been unthinkable. Donnell doubted Nathan could even form the words inside his head, or that he'd crumble this far when not weakened by his long journey and fever.

If Donnell let this moment pass them by, if he told Nathan no right now -- even for the sake of not straining himself -- then there would be nothing between them, ever. Nathan would sleep, and in the way of things, he'd feel nothing but shame and horror in the morning, same as his initial reaction, only stronger now and there to stay. He'd push Donnell away, a sheet of ice would fall between them. A proud man like Nathan would likely sneak out before he was fully well, and then he'd be anyone's prey.

Specifically, Michael's, or at least Michael's ilk.

Perhaps it was overly melodramatic of Donnell for his mind to follow this track. Perhaps not. He'd seen enough of the dark, ugly nature of mankind; the chain of events he saw in the blink of an eye were not unlikely.

Donnell would not lie, if asked, and say that his body's yearning for Nathan had nothing to do with his decision. Yet it was not the whole, and at that moment all his worries coalesced into one single, shining word: *love*.

He loved Nathan, for reasons good or ill, and men of decent hearts didn't let the ones they loved destroy themselves. An ill-regarded, unlovely servant had taken a dead whore's mute, fatherless son and raised him healthy and whole.

For the sake of love, that whore's son would do no less by the man he'd already rescued.

The long and the short of it was this: Nathan *could not* ask. Nor would Donnell force anything upon him.

But Donnell could *give*.

Nathan watched Donnell through aqua blue eyes gone shiny with uncertainty, perhaps already thinking he'd pressed an unwelcome case. Goose.

He didn't realize he was smiling until Nathan's forehead creased in worry. "You're laughing at me."

No. Donnell tapped his forefinger to Nathan's lips to silence him. Without giving Nathan a chance to think any further, he bent from the waist, braced his forearm on the pillow by Nathan's tousled head, and laid his lips over Nathan's.

Nathan inhaled sharply, his thin chest arching as he reared from the unexpected embrace.

He's known more curses than kisses in his day, this one, Donnell thought even as he cupped Nathan's cheek, ghosted his thumb over the bird-fragile bone beneath, and waited for Nathan to relax.

He traced the tip of his tongue over Nathan's frozen lips, patient as he could be with burgeoning need making itself known in his body, coaxing Nathan's mouth open.

Has he never consciously done this before? Perhaps not. Only in his forbidden dreams.

He must come to know, now, how much sweeter the taste is when he takes a deliberate sip from the well. Donnell stifled a laugh at his own expense. *I should set that to music and hire a soprano to sing it.*

Doesn't matter. Open for me... there, there's a good man...

Slowly, shyly, with a shiver that told him Nathan had called upon all his courage, Nathan's lips parted to allow Donnell entrance. One thin hand found its way to the nape of Donnell's neck and rested there as tentatively as if it would fly away at any second. And that, Donnell would not allow.

He lifted away from the kiss, pleased when Nathan involuntarily protested with a slight moan, and happier still to see Nathan's blue eyes had lost their glaze of fear and warmed with a nearly luminous wonder.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," he said, resting his fingertips over Nathan's lips, kissed softer now, pliant. "Shhh."

"Shhh," Nathan whispered in return. His throat worked as he swallowed roughly, then drew the tip of Donnell's finger between his lips and sucked. Only for a second, watching Donnell all the while to see what Donnell made of his daring.

Donnell made quite a lot out of it. When Nathan's tongue shyly slipped over his fingernail, he hissed for a different reason altogether, his cock rushing to full hardness so robustly that the change in blood flow dizzied him.

"What's wrong?" Nathan struggled to rise.

"Shhh." Donnell rotated his neck, working out the tension. He'd retreated far enough back from the peak that he could return his attention to Nathan, and so he soothed Nathan's uneasiness first with another light kiss, tongue dancing briefly inside, before withdrawing

to place his hand on Nathan's chest, palm down and fingers spread, pushing him firmly against the bed.

Over Nathan's sternum, he finger-spelled, *LIE STILL*.

"But I--"

"*Shhh*." Donnell kissed Nathan until Nathan got the idea and relaxed as far as Donnell thought he was capable of. Still wary, still terrified, but willing -- that was what mattered.

Once he was satisfied that Nathan would not rise up again, Donnell hoped Nathan trusted him by now and took a chance on moving. Moving as slowly as he would around a frightened colt, Donnell carefully climbed onto the bed while never once ceasing to kiss Nathan for longer than a second at a time. He slipped one leg over both of Nathan's and slid into a straddling position over him, keeping Nathan distracted all the while by seeking out one small, flat nipple and pinching it full.

When their lips parted once more, Nathan's pupils were blown wide, only the thinnest ring of blue remaining visible around their drowning darkness. His chest heaved, rising sharply and shuddering in the fall. His lips remained open, as pink as his cheeks; together with his aura of tarnished innocence, he had the look of a potentate's prized catamite newly drunk on some foreign, exotic wine.

"What," he asked, out of breath yet finding the strength to mirror Donnell's touch with his palm on Donnell's chest, "what do I..."

Donnell shook his head. *Nothing*. He covered Nathan's hand with his own, his pressure light, then transferred both to Nathan's chest and pushed down. *From me. To you*. He hoped Nathan would understand.

Nathan did, it seemed. His eyes fluttered shut with a moan Donnell read immediately as part relief and part eagerness. Donnell had Nathan's absolution and his permission, and now it was out of his hands. In Donnell's.

And Donnell meant to give Nathan the best he had to offer. He touched his lips to the pulse beneath Nathan's jaw, drawing the first letters with his tongue: *from me. To you* once more.

He moved to make good on his promise, carefully warding against sudden gestures, inching his way down Nathan's body. Though he burned with the urge to tear open the

buttons on the nightshirt hampering his progress, he opened one at a time, sometimes with his fingers, sometimes with his lips. In all cases, he rested his lips lightly over the skin revealed beneath; when he reached Nathan's navel, he feathered his tongue around the small indentation and thrust it quickly, teasingly inside.

Nathan cried out, bowing up. He caught Donnell's shoulders and tried to pull him away, then just as quickly pushed him back down again. Donnell chuckled against the light trail of hair beginning below the spot he'd teased.

When he had progressed below Nathan's waist, Donnell nosed into Nathan's belly to distract while he lifted the nightshirt gently away from Nathan's groin. *Ohh*. Long, slimmer than his, with a clear bead sliding down the rigid shaft, more pooling at the head. Paler than his, too, his own touch no doubt more often shunned than not -- he would surely have associated any pleasure with shame.

No more.

Donnell inhaled the musky smell natural to Nathan left over after the bathing, and laid hands on his thighs, pushing his legs open with a careful eye to seeing how he responded; Nathan seemed lost to the sensations with no room left for fear, hesitant yet animal pleasure ruling him. He let Donnell maneuver him without protest or complaint, but rather with a mixed groan of need and sigh of satisfaction when Donnell settled between his legs, his knees raised and his bare feet planted flat on the bedding.

Amazing. Untouched. Courageous, for that was what acting -- even passively so -- despite one's fears really meant. He stole Donnell's breath away.

Donnell gritted his teeth to force away the urge to reach down and take himself in hand to ease the searing ache in his groin. Be damned if he'd focus all on himself and scare Nathan half out of his mind. If Nathan ever *had* seen another man climax before, Donnell doubted the experience had been pleasant.

He aimed to change that, starting with Nathan's own transportation.

Nathan's stomach muscles began to quiver, small groans escaping him; his body sensed what was coming even if his brain dared not hope. His erection strained toward Donnell, seeping two more drops of clear slipperiness.

Donnell was only a man, and he could only resist so much. He flicked his tongue over the head of Nathan's cock to taste. Nathan reacted almost violently, hips surging up; without

wasting time on thought Donnell caught Nathan and eased his lover back down to the bed even as he slid his lips tightly over the head of Nathan's cock and down as far as he could take Nathan in.

He sucked, eyes closing in bliss -- it had been too long, and no one had ever been sweeter in their saltiness -- and kneaded Nathan's hips to keep him grounded. With his mouth busy, Donnell reached up to splay his hand over Nathan's chest and wrote, with one finger, *from me to you*.

Nathan groaned, the deep earthy wrench of roots breaking free from earth, and grasped Donnell's head. Donnell relaxed his throat quickly, letting Nathan thrust deeper, and held his breath while urging Nathan on with pointed jabs of his tongue.

"Oh God," Nathan chanted, once and again, then again and faster, slurring the blasphemy into a paean while he fucked Donnell's mouth; Donnell hung on and rode as he was ridden, grinding his aching groin into the mattress without conscious decision for the sake of easement.

"Now," Nathan said, a hiccup of a syllable. "Now, oh God, it's now--"

His fingers scraped painfully on Donnell's scalp, ragged nails scratching the tender skin; Donnell forgave him immediately and forgot just as quickly in the immense satisfaction of gulping down Nathan's release, thick, salty mouthfuls. Some escaped, trickling away from the corners of his lips, and when he had to release Nathan's cock lest he hurt Nathan he dove down and lapped the wasted drops off the sheets.

He paused, briefly, struggling to catch his breath. His throat burned, but far less than his unattended cock, and no amount of exhaustion would stop his near-reflex reaching for his sex to relieve the pressure.

"Wait," Nathan rasped, as raw-throated as if he'd been the one to suck Donnell and not the other way around. He tugged weakly at Donnell's hair. "Up here. Please. With me."

Donnell would not have thought it possible to let go once he'd had his hand around his cock, the first harsh stroke sending shudders through him, but Nathan had asked and he would *not* say no.

Keening silently, he crawled back up the length of Nathan's body and draped himself over Nathan, letting Nathan twine slender arms around him and kiss him with enthusiastic clumsiness quickly giving ground to skill. Donnell tentatively rubbed his

cock against Nathan's spent organ, shoulders sagging in quick relief when Nathan moaned and rose up to meet him.

He had not thought it could get better, but in the next heartbeat Nathan had torn his mouth away, muttering "No, no, let me..." and thrust his hand between them. When he wrapped his unsteady fingers around Donnell's cock and dragged them from the base to the head, the ingenuous lack of skill and the power in his touch undid Donnell.

He butted his head against Nathan's chest and opened his mouth in a howl that would have brought down the rafters, had he voice to give a volume, and lost control, emptying his pent-up seed in heavy spurts over Nathan's belly and legs. Nathan's spent cock twitched, making a valiant effort to fill, drawing a wild soundless laugh from Donnell before his vision dissolved in kaleidoscopic patterns of light.

When he came to himself, Nathan had dragged him higher at rest on Nathan's body, his head tucked beneath Nathan's chin. He rose and fell with the surges of Nathan's breathing, his own equally ragged, both sounding as if they had run a race.

If that were the case, then Donnell considered he would call them both the winners.

When a light pressure atop Donnell's head told him Nathan had kissed him there, he revised his opinion and declared himself champion of all. Nathan had not been able to ask, no.

Nathan had given. That meant far more.

Satiated and lazy, Donnell nuzzled the base of Nathan's throat and licked a stripe up to his ear, where he seized the lobe between his teeth and playfully tugged.

"Thank you," Nathan whispered.

"Shhh," Donnell replied, soothing the spot he'd bitten with kittenish licks, already seeing ahead to fertile green fields and games he'd teach Nathan how to play once he'd regained his strength -- and if Donnell had anything to say about it, that would be soon. "Shhh."

Nathan kissed him again and fell into the quiet, the calm in the dry lightning storm that flashed white streaks through the air. They lay together, then, quiet, at peace.

Hushed.

Chapter Eight

One Month Later:

Are you sure he's ready? Donnell pointed past Bettina's narrow, rigid shoulder at the closed door to his bedchamber.

"How many times do you plan to ask me?" Bettina demanded, lips twitching with annoyance. "I say if he wants to work, then you let him work. Things have gone to all kinds of seed downstairs since you chucked it all to go play nurse."

Donnell worried the soft meat on the inside of his cheek and dithered, uncertain. Should he agree with this plan? If he did not, would Nathan rebel?

He suspected rebellion.

Nathan had sworn he could not bear to lie abed another minute, claiming that if he did not set his hands to honest work again he'd not be able to look at himself in the mirror.

Donnell had suggested other, far more enjoyable tasks for Nathan to divert his focus into. Nights spent more in wakefulness than in sleep consumed much of their energy, Donnell teaching Nathan one step at a time how to appreciate all the pleasures his body had to offer both of them.

He'd thought no moment could ever hope to surpass that in which Nathan, of his own accord, took Donnell's cock in hand and, his eyes locked to Donnell's the whole time, stroked him to completion. He'd not known what to do with his dripping fingers at first, but his mind was not lacking in cleverness and, after a second's consideration, shocked Donnell into a second, dry orgasm by sliding his slippery fingers into his mouth and sucking and licking them clean.

Nathan had laughed when Donnell shuddered atop him, and Donnell had rewarded the favor by sucking Nathan's jutting arousal, teasing and toying with him until he begged for completion. He'd swallowed down every drop, fast growing addicted to Nathan's unique taste.

There had been many, many more occasions to enjoy one another, leavening the boredom of convalescence, and Donnell had acquired enough treasured memories to consider himself as wealthy as a king. One favorite was of a night when he knelt above Nathan, tracing the head of his cock about Nathan's lips until Nathan opened like a song bird,

tongue trying to coax Donnell in, hungry enough for the thickness of Donnell's cock in his mouth to forget his still-lingering uncertainties.

Donnell liked those moments best of all, when Nathan's hungers burned his remaining hesitations to ashes and he grew as wild as his healing body would allow, legs twining with Donnell's and hands frantically pulling him closer. When they lost the coordination for anything else but grinding one to the other, knotted so tightly together there could be nothing to separate them but the gloss of their own sweat and their sticky spendings.

Kisses from lips so weary from shouts and pleas, tasting of semen and salt, were the finest kisses of them all.

Donnell had worried at first if their appetites for one another, rapacious and undeniable, would hinder Nathan's recovery, and had tried to rein himself in for one night. He hadn't lasted ten minutes, much less one full night. Nathan had astonished and lit a fire in Donnell by, when denied, kicking off the sheets and taking himself in hand.

When Nathan had arched up, teeth biting a white dent into his lip and strings of come gliding down his fist, Donnell's resolve had broken and he'd lost half-a-dozen buttons in his hurry to race into bed and swallow Nathan's tempting cock down far enough to bury his nose in the crisp, tickling curls growing ever thicker around the base.

After that, Donnell had decided their games an acceptable gamble; fortuitously, they didn't seem to hurt Nathan at all. In fact, their benefits lingered, a higher color lingering in his complexion, a brightness in his eyes, and a far-more-frequent smile on his lips. His hands grew steady and his strength returned enough to let him out of bed for longer and longer at a stretch.

Which brought them to now, and Nathan's insistence on being allowed to work in the saloon. And Donnell's fears that this would prove to be one step too far.

He could hear Nathan humming inside, and darted a pleading look to Bettina.

Bettina only sniffed and stepped out of the way. "If anyone asked *me*, which I might add they didn't, I'd tell them he's fitter than three fiddles, all things considered. He can work if he knows his limits, and I suspect he's stronger than you want to consider." She softened briefly. "You treat a man like him too much like a dainty princess once he's well enough to stand up straight, and he'll resent you, see if he don't."

With that, and a brisk snap of her calico skirts, she strode purposefully away. The morning meal wouldn't cook itself!

And neither would Nathan regain his full strength if Donnell refused to allow him back his pride. Straightening his spine, Donnell shook out the remnants of tension and rapped three times on the door, quick-quick-pause-rap, his signal to Nathan that he was entering.

True, the bedchamber remained his own in name even if it had been tacitly accepted Nathan now lived within as well, but knocking was only polite.

The sight that greeted him struck Donnell so that he stopped in his tracks not two feet inside, staring. Why, Nathan shined up prettier than a new penny, and Donnell had thought him quite appealing before!

Standing with his back to Donnell, Nathan afforded him with a view of his trim backside encased within a pair of Levi's trousers Bettina had cut down to size and Nathan had sewn back together himself -- they'd apparently learned all manner of duties with Abbot Innocent.

Abbot Innocent. The name would always leave a bitter taste in Donnell's thoughts.

He pushed the old scalawag out of his head to better enjoy the sight of Nathan as Nathan finished buttoning his vest and turned around, shy hope in his searching gaze at Donnell. "Will I do?"

You are beautiful.

Nathan pulled a face. "I'm not," he mumbled.

Handsome, then.

Nathan laughed quietly. "Nor that either, but it's a better word for a man."

Donnell let some of the simmering heat and desire Nathan's appearance had woken within him -- never far to begin with -- become apparent, leaning on the doorframe and cocking an eyebrow, sweeping Nathan from head to foot with frank, lustful appraisal.

Whereas four weeks ago, when he'd fallen on the streets outside, Nathan no doubt would have stammered and turned away in confused dismay, now he pinked *handsomely* and dared to turn a bit of his own appreciation on Donnell. "Will I do?" he asked again.

Donnell comprehended that this time the question referred to Nathan's worries about the work; though Nathan had been the one to insist on gainful employment, Donnell could understand the slight attack of nerves. Nathan's first public appearance -- he would need reassurance.

Donnell crossed to Nathan and tipped his chin up, dropping a light kiss to his lips. Donnell traced his answer on the side of Nathan's neck: *yes. None finer.*

A good portion of the tension he carried drained away from Nathan. He returned Donnell's kiss, daring to glide his tongue over Donnell's lip for a half-second, and cradled the back of Donnell's head in his palm. "Thank you," he whispered. "For everything."

Donnell nuzzled the tempting patch of soft skin beneath Nathan's ear and finger-spelled on Nathan's chest, covered though it might be with crisp white linen, *you're welcome.*

Though the general noise and rowdiness of the saloon were as familiar to Nathan as the thumping of his own blood in his ears and, by now, the saturated silence of Donnell's soundless moans when he came, as Nathan reached the halfway mark down the stairs leading toward the outside world, he found himself pausing, unable to go further.

He swayed, overwhelmed of a sudden by the raucous racket. Rough, gruff male voices shouted for their breakfasts, this one wanting potatoes and onions, that one swearing to heavens and Betsy he could smell fat pork and vowed he'd kick the kitchen's door in if they held out on him; another demanded coffee; still another voiced a nasty complaint about everyone else who spoke too loudly for his sore head.

The bartender Levi, who Nathan had met briefly from time to time and stood in a little awe of, bellowed over all, warning them to sit their asses down and behave or they'd leave empty-bellied on the tip of his boot.

Slamming doors, shouts from the street, even the temperamental neigh of a rare horse: all these combined to dizzy Nathan and rattle his nerves.

It wasn't that he feared activity -- no, he craved a chance to move, to breathe air not confined within Donnell's -- their -- bedchamber. Nor did he quail at the thought of earning his pay; he was no slugabout.

What alarmed him, he thought at first, was the knowledge that many unfamiliar eyes would soon look upon him. Opinions that were certain to be nowhere as kind as Donnell's would weigh him in a quick balance -- and if they found him wanting? What if he *did* fail, as they would expect him to, and disappointed Donnell? Nathan didn't think he could bear it.

Then, beneath the clamor, Nathan detected a small tinge of distaste at the notion of working in a sinner's den, and was ashamed. Ruthlessly he stamped the small, weakling's misgiving down; it stemmed from Abbot Innocent's lessons and he would have none of that. The "sinners" Innocent condemned had proven far worthier than the righteous.

He'd made his choice; he would stay his course.

And he would not let Donnell down.

Paused at his side when Nathan stopped, Donnell looked at him with his head tilted to the left, his normally expressive eyes for once unreadable. He had had ample time to learn how little Donnell missed, however, and knew Donnell could most often read his thought as if he were transparent as glass.

Skin warming with embarrassment, he looked away. "Why you don't hate me sometimes, I will never know."

Donnell jabbed him sharply in the soft part of his side. Startled, he turned back around, nearly slipping on one of the narrow runnerless steps, and saw that Donnell was no longer poker-faced, but angry. He tapped Nathan's lips and shook his head.

Never say that again, he signed, using the language Nathan had begun to understand as well as spoken words. He hadn't thought he could learn so quickly, but perhaps it was down to the ever-strengthening bond between them. *Never, do you hear me?*

"Would you have hated the man I was, if I had fallen completely to Innocent?" Nathan blurted without foreknowledge of what he was going to say. "If I was who Innocent wanted me to be?"

Donnell wrinkled his nose. *Why even ask? You're not that man, and you're greatly changed. Changing more all the time.*

"You trust me so? How do you know I won't stray off course?" Nathan persisted, driven by worry over his second's distaste for the saloon.

In answer, Donnell kissed him, trailing his mobile fingers in a line up Nathan's back, stopping when he tickled the short curls at the nape of Nathan's neck.

Because you love me, as I love you, Donnell signed without shame when he released Nathan. *And because you are worthy of my trust.*

"Shhh," Donnell said when Nathan would have protested further. "Shhh."

Nathan bowed his head and sought an inner strength. This work was honest work, and far better to labor for plain, decent folks than to slave for the cruel elite. When he examined his heart after Innocent's stain was washed away, he found no disdain for the task he had set himself.

Good. He would *not* let Donnell, the man who now owned his heart, down.

He summoned up the boldness to kiss Donnell in return, in thanks. "Time we got to work, then."

Three steps further down, Nathan stopped yet again. His mind, quicker now that he did not labor so constantly beneath Innocent's strictures of virtue, had whirled during the short span of movement. There was one more thought he had to broach, and that *now*. It should have been addressed before.

Donnell, one step further down, turned to cock a questioning eyebrow at Nathan. *My angel*, Nathan thought, struck as ever by the fine beauty of Donnell's features and the intelligence radiant within his eyes. Anyone who thought Donnell simple just because he couldn't speak was a fool.

He thanked God for Bettina, who had thought Donnell worth saving as an infant. As Donnell had thought him worth the effort of bringing back to life.

Donnell waited patiently for Nathan to speak.

Nathan reached for Donnell's hand, which Donnell gave him willingly, without hesitation. With Donnell's elegant fingers held captive within his grasp, Nathan found the courage to bolster his conviction and spoke. "They don't know about us, do they?"

Donnell wagged his hand to and fro. *Some do. Some don't.* He traced a question mark on Nathan's forearm. *Why?*

"Would those who don't already know castigate us for what we are to one another?"

Donnell shrugged, snorting eloquently. *Maybe. So what?* Then, he hesitated. As easily as Donnell could read him, occasionally Nathan could read Donnell with equal ease and understood that Donnell had been stayed by a sudden fear for Nathan's sake.

Nathan took a deep breath. "Don't. Come what may, Donnell, I don't care about any threats to me." He held up his unoccupied hand. "Let me finish."

Donnell huffed, albeit with amusement. *Go on.*

"Even if there are those who would hate us, or try to cause us harm... if I am asked any questions, I will not lie."

Donnell's eyes widened.

"It's dangerous. I know." Nathan lifted Donnell's hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles. "But I am done with lying, and pretending to be who and what I'm not."

Impulsively, he dropped Donnell's hand and threw his arms around Donnell's waist, hauling him up the step that separated them and crushing their lips together. Donnell's tension softened even as his cock hardened, thrilling Nathan with the instant, firm pressure against his hip. His sex stiffened in turn, nudging Donnell's in a manner that drew hisses from both of them.

Donnell broke the kiss, pretending a sternness that his grin belied. He wagged a finger at Nathan. *Behave. Plenty of time for that later.*

Nathan's declaration had emboldened him. "I know. But... I wanted it now." He kissed Donnell's forehead as chastely as a brother. "And I wanted you to know I will look at you while we work, and want you all day long."

Donnell swallowed visibly, his throat working, and signed with mixed awe and regret, *you are a terrible tease.*

"No." Nathan laid his head on Donnell's shoulder. "It's not a tease. It's a promise."

Satisfied and shored up, Nathan made to move past Donnell down into the saloon proper and make good on his word.

Donnell stopped him one step down, their positions reversed, and grinned wickedly before hooking his fingers in Nathan's belt and tugging him back up.

"What?" Nathan had time for only the one word before Donnell hooked his knee around the back of Nathan's legs. Nathan's shoulders crashed to the wall, automatically gripping Donnell's hips to hold them steady while Donnell ate at his mouth, tongue gliding slick, wet, and deep.

When he backed away to let Nathan breathe, Donnell nearly glittered with mischief. *Here's something for you to remember while we work*, he signed, and thrust his hand inside Nathan's trousers. Nathan arched, biting his lip to keep from shouting.

Ye gods and little fish hooks. What sort of fool would ever deny a passion like *this*?

Chapter Nine

Nathan made his debut in *Treighton's* with a panache that made Donnell swell from such pride he thought the buttons on his vest were in danger of bursting off. Head held high, shoulders straight and his demeanor unafraid, Nathan crossed the plank floor as if to the manor born and approached Levi behind his bar with one hand held out in greeting.

Levi, for his part, stayed put and dealt out a hefty dose of hairy eyeball, scanning Nathan from curls to the new boots Donnell had insisted he accept as a gift, and hmmphed as if he didn't care much for what he saw.

Nathan's smile faltered. "Good morning to you," he said gamely all the same.

"Hmph," Levi reiterated. He looked deliberately past Nathan to fix Donnell with his skepticism. "This is what you brung me to help tend bar?"

Had he an extra foot of height, fifty more pounds of muscle, and a snowball's chance in hell of budging Levi an inch, Donnell would have shaken him until his teeth rattled. What in the devil had possessed him? And as angry as he felt, Donnell was almost hurt. Where was Levi's "he reminds me of my son" now, when it was needed most?

Nathan held his ground. "I am, sir."

"On the boss's say-so," Levi grumbled. He picked up a clean cloth and wiped his hands, though he hadn't dirtied them. Addressing Nathan again, he asked, "Ever poured a glass of liquor in your life? Ever learned how to build a head of foam on beer?"

"No, sir."

Donnell's pride did not abate, but he envisioned himself showing Levi the door in three seconds. Levi's long tenure at *Treighton's* meant precisely nothing if he couldn't show Nathan the simplest of courtesies and--

Wait.

Unable to keep it up any longer, Levi betrayed himself first by grinning, teeth whiter against the darkness of his beard, and then by guffawing.

With eloquent gestures, Donnell compared him to the posterior end of a horse and what it excreted, inviting him to have a hearty helping on his way to see Satan.

Levi waved him off, still snickering. He still didn't take Nathan's hand, but clapped him heartily on the back instead. Nathan visibly shook off his alarm and punched Levi in the shoulder.

"Just a little fun," Levi said in cheerful response to Donnell's temper. "I'll take care of the boy like he was my own."

He's not a boy, Donnell signed, not completely mollified.

"I reckon I know that much well enough," Levi said with a pointed glance to the ceiling, in the direction of Donnell's bedchamber. "I got ears and it ain't always noisy in here when there's goings-on upstairs. Also, there might be a call for a leetle more caution on the steps..." He tapped his neck, in response to which both Donnell and Nathan flinched, checking for love bites. Donnell saw a faint mark on Nathan, and winced when he encountered a sore spot of his own.

Nathan flinched. Levi waved off his concern. "Most everyone around thinks Donnell's kept busy with a pretty slip of a lady he's kept secret up there."

His good humor slipped a fraction as he eyed Donnell. "Didn't know what you wanted spread about, and there *were* questions," he explained. "I figured wasn't no sense in having a mob storm upstairs with their suspicions before yon boy -- excuse me, *man* -- had the strength to fight 'em off."

Donnell shook his head, dismayed. Well, he'd have been a fool to think no one would notice or that gossip's tongues wouldn't wag. Regardless of what they'd been told, there were still plenty who'd *think* otherwise.

Yet no one had tried to break by Levi, had they? And not a soul currently in the saloon right now seemed to care a whit, far too busy shoveling costly eggs and hominy grits in their maws to do more than glance up at them unconcernedly.

They might yet manage to live peaceable for a good while still. Provided Michael didn't poke his nose in.

Donnell sketched a cross in front of him. Before he'd finished, Levi was shaking his great shaggy head. "Not a peep out of that one since last time you sent him packin'," Levi reassured him. "He's gone and got himself busy trying to pray the sin out of the fancy ladies at the edge of town."

Nathan seemed uncertain, and that would never do, so Donnell chose to accept Levi's reassurances and patted Nathan on the back to add his own. *Go on. You'll be fine*, he signed. *Levi's the best barman in the West*.

Levi took note of Nathan's easy comprehension. He grunted. "Maybe I ought to apply myself to learning more of that," he said, waggling his fingers. "Reckon himself here can teach me whilst I teach him how to draw beer. And speakin' of which, I'm not payin' you back a red cent of what's owed for the ale I drunk when you had me singin' every night. Man has to wet his whistle."

Donnell chuckled. *Consider us even, then*.

"I will." Levi shooed Donnell away with his towel. "Get movin' now. I got work to do, and I want to hear some tunes I ain't croakin' out my own self."

Nathan nodded at Donnell, reassuring him, and Donnell had to accept that. With a final warning point at Levi telling him to behave himself, he turned his back and headed for his piano.

Looked as if no one had touched his sweet lady while he'd neglected her so. One touch to a key pleased him with its pure sound; she hadn't lost her tune too badly to offend his ears.

Donnell placed his fingers over the keys, inhaled deeply of the rich saloon smells of whiskey, beer and leather, let himself bask for a moment in the warmth of the sunlight streaming through his window-with-a-view, and began to play.

Returning to his music, with Nathan across the way from him doing a *fine* job, was a taste of perfection. This was what a homecoming should be.

Though Donnell could have easily lost himself completely to the music, his uncontrollable joy in pounding out vigorous tunes suited for raucous sing-a-longs and his lingering pleasure in coaxing out old ballads, he kept an eye out for Nathan all the morning long.

Nathan didn't do too badly for himself, despite never having so much as tasted hard liquor since he was knee high to a grasshopper and bold enough to steal a swig of white lightning. He had a quick mind and could put two and two together before he was called

to answer "four". Levi only ever had to show him how to mix a fancy drink once, and he'd learned by observation alone how to pull a proper beer.

He didn't like the taste of any of them, which tickled Donnell as much or more than Levi, who developed a trick of asking Nathan to sample each new concoction so he'd know the flavors inside and out. Donnell took pity on him when Levi started mixing random fancies with more of an eye toward nastiness than sales potential and told him with definitive gestures to quit wasting good alcohol and get back to some real work.

For his pains, Levi ribbed him hard, calling him a lily-white lady with no sense of fun, which Donnell let slip right off his hide. He appreciated far more the real reward, that of Nathan mouthing "thank you" to him the second Levi's back was turned. The poor lad looked faintly green around the gills.

Donnell worried for Nathan's health an hour afterward, right up until Nathan snuck a double pinch of cayenne pepper in Levi's beer before Levi foolishly quaffed without checking his mug first.

Nathan's laughter, ringing bright and clear, provoked Donnell to a fit of unrepentant Vivaldi.

By noon, time for those who had the time and the money and the inclination to come by for a meal, Donnell had slowed his tempo to contemplative Mendelssohn and a far more vigilant observation of Nathan. He attempted to look as emotionally removed as an ordinary owner keeping tabs on a green hireling, eyes peeled for mistakes instead of seeking reassurance.

Even to himself, Donnell had to admit he did a piss-poor job.

He didn't know how word had gotten around that the former "drunken tramp" had regained a "shameful amount of health" and landed himself a job in this establishment, but it was all abuzz on every other gossip's flapping tongue. Folks Donnell had never seen before, ladies in their finery all a-glow over their daring at entering these forbidden grounds, and those he had seen about, men in fine suits with fat cigars, all hummed with delighted horror and disgusted distaste as they sat and consumed his wine, his whiskey, and his beer, and wasted most of Bettina's good food with their noses wrinkled.

Donnell hadn't known he had it in him to hate so fiercely or with such a passion. It took every drop of willpower he could spare not to smash the piano keys with his fists and point every man Jack and lady Jill out of his establishment.

For Nathan's sake, he held his peace. He could protect Nathan now and save them a mere minute's frustration, or let him take care of the matter himself however he saw fit without further shame.

Still, it was a near thing to disaster when Donnell caught sight of two impeccably clothed young matrons whispering behind their hands about how "tasty" Nathan had turned out to be when clean and properly clothed.

Mine! he seethed.

As for Nathan himself, he seemed to take no notice of the humming chatter. When the crowd of diners outweighed the number of drinkers, he slipped away from the bar without being asked and found a clean new apron, a pencil and a sheet of paper, and made himself useful taking food orders. His diction was no less perfect than a Bostonian lawyer's, and his manners precise as a well-trained princeling, yet humble as that prince's footman. He smiled and tugged his forelock, recorded every request perfectly, and walked at a smooth, speedy clip with nary a misstep to betray any lingering physical weakness.

Donnell was, he thought, the only one to espy the hot flakes of pink over Nathan's still too-sharp cheekbones, and understand the deep humiliation burning away inside him.

Donnell waited through the last interminable notes of a foolish Parisian ditty about nothing, stood as if he hadn't a care in the world, and wove a neat path through the crowded tables to the storage room. He paused only for a quick gesture to Levi, coupled with a nod of his head.

Levi nodded back.

Inside the darker, cooler storage room, Donnell found a reasonably comfortable seat upon a crate and composed himself to wait for Nathan to arrive when Levi bid him go in. Allowing a man his pride, that was one thing. Offering him no comfort to shore his sagging spirits on, that was quite another.

He wouldn't fight Nathan's battle for him -- unless Nathan asked -- but he would succor the wounded. Donnell chuckled to himself. Hadn't he spent the last handful of weeks proving he had no mean skills at nursing?

Nathan's head ached abominably. Though he would not complain about it to anyone without being so commanded, the sips of hard liquor he'd taken to please Levi -- who Nathan had known full well was pranking him -- made his lips and tongue numb and his stomach uneasy. His legs burned from their unaccustomed hard exercise, as did his arms from carrying platter after heavy platter.

His jaw hurt him most of all, from the grinding and gritting of his teeth necessary to keep a pleasant smile pasted on and to pretend he heard nothing of their comments about him.

Was there anything about him they didn't find worth slicing to pieces with their tongues? He'd heard more idle speculation about his prowess in bed than he'd have thought any woman who called herself proper would know, and though he found himself deeply offended by being compared to a stud horse, it was the other talk that filled him with anger.

Drunkard. Layabout. Good-for-nothing. He'll lapse within a week, you'll see. No-good idler. He'll have his hands in the till before the month's out. Too pretty for his own good; better keep an eye on our daughters. It'd be like his type to leave some girl with a big belly behind him when he goes.

Those stung more viciously than bees and bit more sharply than angry dogs, but what nearly caused Nathan to empty a beer over a pompous, bewhiskered rascal's head was this: *he'll bring this house down over that simpleton mute owner's useless ears, and serve the fool right for thinking he could run a business.*

After hearing that particular choice tidbit, Nathan had turned on his heel, color blazing hot in his ears. He couldn't stay here, could he? They'd never stop talking. If it was only gossip about him, then he could bear it -- but if they used him as a means to slander Donnell, who'd shown him nothing but kindness and introduced him to love... perhaps he should go. It would be the gentlemanly thing to do -- or the coward's -- perhaps both, but if he left, they'd have one less reason to mock his savior.

Donnell would hate him for it, but Nathan thought in this weaker moment that it would be better to be hated if his leaving spared Donnell any darker consequences.

At that moment, Levi caught his attention with a sharp whistle. He jerked his thumb at the kitchen, indicating Bettina needed help. Grateful for the chance to escape, Nathan nodded and headed hence immediately.

When his foot was on the threshold, Levi broke a glass. Nathan whipped about, ready to help clean up the shards if needed. Levi shook his head as he bent down to pick up the pieces while the drinking crowd hooted at his expense.

Under cover of the bar, Levi pointed again, changing his direction. Instead of directing Nathan to the kitchen, he indicated that Nathan should go to the storage room.

He probably wanted another glass, Nathan reasoned, accepting his task. Either mission got him out of the spotlight for long enough to cool his temper, and was a welcome distraction.

No less welcome was the cooler temperature of the darker room, its heavily plastered walls and lack of dusty sunlight combining in an oasis of calm. Nathan shut his eyes and sighed; he leaned his back to the plaster and pressed his cheek to its roughness and breathed deep of the clean air.

A rough scratch sounded, followed by a hiss and a crackle. Nathan's eyes flew open, alarmed by the unmistakable sound of fire, and landed on Donnell, who sat cross-legged on a beer crate with a candle in his hands and kindness mixed with rue in his welcoming grin.

"Thank God," Nathan breathed, drinking in the sight. "You're a welcome sight."

Donnell pointed to himself. *Me?*

"Yes, you, and well you know it, too."

Then come and join me. Donnell scooted over on the crate and patted the space remaining in invitation.

"I shouldn't. Levi broke a glass and he'll need a--" Nathan broke off when Donnell twinkled mischievously at him. "Was this a set-up?"

Donnell shrugged as gracefully as a Frenchman. *Could be.* He gestured again to the space beside him, thumping his palm on the slatted wood. *Come sit with me.*

Nathan considered the appealing invitation and the far-more-pleasant ways in which he could spend a few moments of his time than fetching glassware. Fetching notions of vigorous activity gave way fast to the reminders of his aching muscles, but they inspired a true desire within him.

He approached Donnell quietly, without preamble, and knelt at the man's feet, resting his head on Donnell's knee. From Donnell's abrupt stillness, he figured Donnell hadn't expected this, but he did not disappoint. He faltered for only a second before setting his candle aside in its secure holder and dropping his hand to Nathan's head instead, sifting through Nathan's cropped curls.

They sat together quietly for a moment. Nathan wondered how wretched it made him to be glad Donnell couldn't pester and pepper him with questions like no-see-ums or gnats crackling in his ears. Though even if Donnell had been able to speak, Nathan knew him to be the sort who wouldn't harry a tired man with questions.

"Shhh," was what Donnell said instead, stroking Nathan's head. He shifted position, enough to let Nathan cradle more comfortably next to him, and tweaked his ear to show affection. "Shhh."

Nathan wound his arm behind and around Donnell's left calf, pinning him fast even as he held himself closer. "Am I worth it?" he asked, mostly to himself, barely aloud.

Donnell's leg jerked; Nathan flinched back in surprise, certain that he'd almost been kicked, instinctively ready to beg forgiveness. And indeed, Donnell did look angry, but his hand, tipping up Nathan's chin to better meet his eyes, was gentle. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head, his meaning clear: *don't ever ask that again*.

In Donnell's eyes, Nathan was worthy. He needed no better medicine to salve his wounded spirits.

He shook off Donnell's hand only to lay his lips briefly to the wrist; while he had Donnell distracted, he stroked his way up Donnell's taut calf to his thigh, not stopping until his fingertips rested over the finely carved wooden buttons on Donnell's fitted trousers. Cut close to the skin as ever, they kept no secrets, especially not from Nathan. He traced the length of Donnell's cock, quiescent but rising fast, and shouldered his way more firmly between Donnell's legs.

Donnell sat still as a church mouse. Momentarily worried about his reaction, Nathan peeked up to check -- then grinned broadly at Donnell's dumbstruck expression. "You didn't think I had the nerve, did you?" he whispered, fingering open the first of the buttons. "You've taught me well. Now let me say a proper 'thank you'."

Blinking, dazed, Donnell shook his head before peering at Nathan and signing, *not as payment. Never as an obligation.*

"I want to," Nathan wheedled, clumsier on the second button with Donnell's filling cock straining the fastening tighter, but succeeding on his third try.

Still Donnell stayed his hand, though he groaned silently when that meant his hand rested over Nathan's, applying pressure to his cock. Laboriously, he finger-spelled, *is the drink affecting your judgment?*

"No," Nathan replied in all honesty. "Only giving me the courage to act." He applied a firmer pressure. "Let me?"

Donnell seemed to struggle internally, then lifted his hand away with a shaky flourish. *Yes. Please.*

Giddy, Nathan set to with a will. He'd be hard put to choose a favorite of his own among the delights Donnell had introduced him to -- like selecting a particular sweet amongst a confectioner's shop stuffed full -- but he loved Donnell's reaction to this best. Donnell seemed astounded that Nathan had developed a taste for his cock, that Nathan had come so far in such a short time, and to make Donnell's eyes roll back in his head with each new trick learned made Nathan proud from tip to toe.

You amaze me, Donnell signed as Nathan worked the last button open and eased the rigid cock out, exhaling with pleasure as the full weight rested in his hand.

"No more than you," Nathan replied, running the tip of his nose along the topmost curls surrounding Donnell's flushed hardness. "Shhh."

Donnell snorted. Not finished, he tugged at Nathan's hair to make him pay attention. *They're the fools*, he signed. *Not you. Never think you're less of a man because of where you came from.*

"I won't." Nathan pulled free. "Not anymore." He licked the head of Donnell's cock almost daintily, enjoying the harsh gasp Donnell made and how he squeezed his eyes shut. "Consider your employee to be on his lunch break, sir."

Donnell's lips parted in silent laughter; he tilted his head back while his trim belly quivered. Radiant with his own happiness, Nathan took advantage of the moment while Donnell was distracted to draw Donnell's silky erection into his mouth and suck.

The taste and rich odors of salt and musk filled Nathan's senses, drowning out all else save for the knotting of Donnell's hands in his hair and the gripping pressure of his knees as he clamped them around Nathan's shoulders. He let himself drown, enveloped by cool air, heated skin, and the noisy rasping of Donnell's breathing. He stroked Donnell's hips the way he himself liked it best, gentling Donnell down while urging him on.

A particularly sharp tweak had Nathan wincing and backing off. He looked up as he wiped his lips to see Donnell looking as drunk as he, signing something too rapid for Nathan to understand. Donnell hissed between his teeth and tried again when Nathan shook his head in incomprehension. He nudged between Nathan's legs for good measure and mouthed, over-deliberately, *MESSY*, adding a kick to Nathan's knee to emphasize his point.

What... oh! Nathan's cheeks flamed. He'd barely given his own urgent need any conscious thought, all his might focused on Donnell, but by sweet mercy if he hadn't already stained the cloth with spreading dampness. If he'd lost control, he'd have ruined the trousers and everyone would have known for certain what they were up to.

For a moment, Nathan bridled, thinking he wouldn't obey the request. So what if they could all see he'd taken his pleasures?

Then, he thought about Donnell's livelihood and the hypocrisy rampant among the diners. The men who visited whores by night and their wives who looked the other way would raise flaming pitchforks against sodomites that blatant.

He wanted to consign them all to hell and stand by his earlier declarations of intent.

For Donnell's sake, he nodded roughly and undid his trouser buttons. The sense of freedom at having their knobbly pressure removed drew a soft moan of appreciation from him.

Touch yourself while you suck me, Donnell directed, looking relieved even as he darkened with devilish arousal.

"Already planned on it," Nathan muttered, shutting them both up at once by sliding his mouth over Donnell's cock and taking his own firmly in hand. Both stiffened, shocked briefly still by the pleasure.

Nathan got to work, his hunger urgent. He hadn't lied when he said he wanted a bellyful of Donnell for his lunch. He rested one forearm on Donnell's thigh and braced himself there, all the better to fist his cock with rough strokes as the same time as he bobbed up and down Donnell's shaft, daring to prickle lightly with his teeth and lash roughly with his tongue.

Donnell breathed in quick, short gasps, his hips shuffling forward as he thrust into Nathan's mouth. Nathan ceased to move and knelt still. He let go of his cock long enough to seize Donnell's hands and position them on his cheeks, waited for Donnell to get the idea, and groaned happily when Donnell held his head still to fuck his mouth.

Beneath his arm, Donnell's thigh muscle quivered; inside his boots, Nathan knew his toes would be curled tight. Anyone could come in at any moment, theoretically, and if the saloon fell quiet for some strange reason, no one could mistake the noises they made for aught but rutting. He growled around his mouthful of cock and pumped his shaft, sliding fast and slick on his own lubrication.

Wickedness seized him. When Nathan sensed Donnell was close enough to the edge that a whisper's breath would push him over, he drew away and whispered hoarsely, looking up at him, "I want you to fuck me tonight."

Donnell's mouth opened in a silent howl, he tugged Nathan's hair hard enough that tears of pain sparked in Nathan's eyes -- pain immediately forgotten as Donnell loosed his seed and painted Nathan's face with sticky white, clumping in his eyelashes and dripping down his cheeks in slippery ropes. As Nathan gasped, heavy drops fell on his tongue. He squeezed his cock too late and followed suit, emptying his load on the floor between them.

He collapsed, spent, against Donnell, careful not to smudge Donnell's trousers with semen. Donnell would have none of it and hauled Nathan insistently up to his knees, then made Nathan wish he had the strength to spend all over again when he licked Nathan's face clean.

Mine, he traced with his tongue-tip, writing it over Nathan's forehead. *You are mine*.

Nathan closed his eyes, satiated and at peace. "And you are mine."

Donnell assisted Nathan as assiduously as a butler in a fine house in making certain the pair of them were immaculately polished before they emerged from the storage room. Which was to say that although loose-limbed and mostly lost in a dreamer's daze, Nathan allowed Donnell to fuss over him, tucking his shirt back in his breeches, adjusting the fit over said breeches over his backside, and smoothing out wrinkles.

To his regret, by the time he had finished, Nathan had come to. He retained a hazy warmth that brightened his aqua blue eyes and a languid smile and heightened color in his cheeks, all of the changed combined to give him the appearance of a man in full, vigorous health.

He also looked precisely like a man who'd come straight from his lover's bed. Donnell regarded the changes with a moment's uncertainty, then decided: to perdition with it. If he himself was meant to have a pretty girl squirreled away for his own pleasure, then there would be no harm in spreading it about that Nathan enjoyed her charms, too.

And if anyone guessed, he would deal with them then. He half wondered if some didn't already know; he knew others among his clientele frankly wouldn't care as long as he kept the beer and whiskey flowing. It wasn't as if lonely men such as they hadn't shared similar relationships when women were scarce. He'd heard plenty of whispers in his day.

He tweaked the hang of Nathan's shirt over his shoulders one last time, kissed him quickly, and stood back to enjoy his handiwork.

"Will I pass muster?" Nathan asked, as cheerful and carefree as the boy he had not been allowed to be during most of his years.

Yes, Donnell signed. Then, as an afterthought, *how old are you?*

Nathan looked surprised. "You never asked before."

Donnell tapped the side of his head and made a face, putting out his tongue.

Nathan slapped his hand: a love tap. "Stop that," Nathan said, displeased. "You're not a fool in any way, and I'll have words with anyone who says differently."

Donnell tried and failed to hide a surge of pleasure. Not that he needed anyone to fight his battles for him, but be damned if it wasn't good to have a peer and a lover who'd stand so steadfastly by his side. He didn't know many husbands and wives who could claim the same.

How old are you? he repeated.

"Twenty-one," Nathan replied. "I think. I was born in 1875, New Year's Eve. My mother used to tell me so." He stopped. "I haven't thought of her in ten years. Thank you."

Donnell understood. He'd never known the woman who birthed him, for she'd died not two hours after he emerged from her, and no one had bothered to take a picture of a soiled dove. Bettina could only describe her in the vaguest of terms, but Donnell had ceased to let that bother him. Bettina was his mother in all respects that mattered.

But if he had lost her at the age when the foul Abbot Innocent had stolen Nathan...

He understood Nathan's motive for thanking him, and obeyed an impulsive compulsion to press a kiss to Nathan's lips. *You're welcome.*

Before they could get maudlin, Donnell coughed and patted Nathan briskly on the chest. *Let's go. There's work to be done.*

Nathan clapped Donnell on the back. "Then go we shall. After you."

Chapter Ten

"What mischief might the two of you be makin' now?" Levi queried, sitting down with a heavy thump at an otherwise empty table next to the window and Donnell's piano.

Nathan was the one to answer, carefully finger-spelling at the same time. "Lessons, sir."

"Ah, I see." Levi's eyebrows crawled toward his hairline. He sucked on his mustache, apparently lost in thought. "Occurs to me I owe you an apology, Donnell."

Donnell frowned. *Why?*

"Ain't it obvious?" Levi waved at the pair of them. "I worked for you goin' on two years now, and I never bothered to learn more than how-de-do and fare-thee-well."

You know more than that.

"Maybe a bit here and there. That ain't the point," Levi huffed. "Disrespectful, that's what I was, not learning your way of speech."

I haven't minded. I don't expect people to drop everything to learn.

"See?" Levi pointed. "I didn't understand a bit of that."

"What do you think he said?" Nathan queried, leaning forward. The clear light of intellectual curiosity in him burned bright.

Levi's face crinkled as he thought. "That it didn't bother him none...?" he hazarded. "I told that mostly from his shrug, though."

"You got it right."

"I did?"

Donnell nodded. Nathan took up the explanation for him, signing as he went. Donnell allowed it, pleased by Nathan's initiative. "He uses some words, but really it's more... concepts, I guess you'd say. Ideas."

"Huh." Levi digested that. "Knew an Apache once whose name you got out in three bites, but I was given to be told it meant a whole lot more than that, something about him being

a son of fire and thunder who'd done his people proud. That the kind of thing you're meanin'?"

"Exactly so!" Nathan glowed with his enthusiasm. "A lot of what he's teaching me is drawn from their talk."

Donnell nudged Nathan in the side and signed to him.

"What's that mean?" Levi asked, confused.

Nathan grinned mischievously. "This," he said, flawlessly copying Donnell's gestures, "translates to 'Levi, quit acting like an ass, if you want to learn, then sit your hindquarters down and learn'."

Levi blinked at them, hornswoggled, then guffawed, slapping his knee. "Fair enough, brat! Fair enough. I don't expect I'll be so quick a study as him, there. What were you 'fore you come along this way? Teacher or a scholar?"

Nathan missed a beat before replying. "Neither, but I learned to be a quick study all the same."

"Huh." Levi regarded him sideways. "Reckon it's none of my business, then."

"That's not what I meant, I--"

"No, but it was sure enough me pokin' my nose in again." Levi awkwardly cleared his throat. "There's secrets I ought not to bother."

"I don't mind telling you," Nathan answered bravely.

"Yeah, but I ain't askin', not unless it's somethin' I need to know." Levi shook his head decisively. "But if you won't let it go, then let me tell you what I've already figured. You ain't had an easy life. I've seen the marks on your back, if you'll pardon my sayin' so, and I expect you did learn fast less'n you earned another beatin' for being slow."

Nathan exhaled. Donnell could sense his relief, and thought it not at all peculiar. Levi had figured the truth, or the most part of the truth, and thought no less of Nathan for it. Probably more, as Nathan had escaped and made a better life for himself.

He elbowed Nathan. *See? Nothing to worry about.*

Nathan poked him right back. *Who was worried? Not me.*

Donnell rolled his eyes. Levi cackled. "I do believe I'm gonna enjoy learnin' this proper," he said. "Now. Show me how to flirt with those signs. I know you know *that*, too."

Flirting with ladies or gentlemen? Donnell asked slyly.

Levi understood him and hooted. "Ladies, please and thank you. I've thought about findin' myself a new wife the way you said I ought to. Man can't mourn forever."

Then I'll teach you, and gladly, Donnell signed, sensing Nathan's approval even as surely as he sensed the warmth of Nathan's body aligned closely to his. *We'll begin with compliments...*

"I don't want to know what he just said to me," Bettina warned them, warily skirting Levi on her way to snatch Donnell by the ear.

Ow! he protested. *What in God's name are you doing?*

Beside him, Nathan bristled.

"Put the teeth away, bull pup," Bettina reproved. "This one's in need of having his hindquarters paddled."

What did I do? Donnell rubbed his sore ear, baffled.

Bettina folded her arms over her narrow chest. "It seems to *me* that when the arrangements were made around here for that one's employment, there was talk of his helping in the kitchen when yon barman had no need of him. And what's this I see?"

Donnell and Nathan traded guilty grimaces. Levi had shooed Nathan off some while back when the drinking crowd had dwindled down to three or four truly dedicated swillers, and by rights Nathan *should* have hustled straight off to lend Bettina a hand. Strong and wiry though she might be, a pair of tough young arms would be a boon to her.

Instead, he'd pulled a low stool up beside Donnell's piano and watched him plink out a simple tune, Donnell slyly teaching him without out-and-out saying so. Nathan, it

appeared, had a tin ear, but that didn't do away with their enjoyment. He'd been in the process of murdering some Chopin when Bettina emerged, skirts switching and steam all but pouring from her ears.

I truly am sorry, Donnell signed.

"As well you ought to be. What kind of an employer do you call yourself?"

Donnell would have paid good cash money for a hole to crawl into.

"Well?" Bettina snapped, glaring not just daggers but Arkansas toothpicks at him. "I'm waiting."

Nathan looked as guilty as a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I'm sorry," he muttered, standing. "I'll go. It won't happen again, ma'am."

"Hmph!" Bettina stuck her nose in the air. "It had better not. But if I ever do catch you out here again, it had better sound a lot more like this--" whereupon she ran through the clearest, sprightliest jig imaginable, impossibly quick on the keys-- "and not like *this*." She pounded the ivories with one skinny fist and put both hands on her hips. "If you're going to entertain us, then you do it right. Understood?"

Donnell had clued in to the joke first, and was torn between giving both Bettina and Levi a piece of his mind; he ceased to care so much when he saw Nathan light up from within when he realized Bettina was only teasing, just as Levi had.

Cracking a smile of her own, Bettina reached up to fiddle with the lapels of Nathan's collar, smoothing them down. "There. I got my dig in, and that's the last we'll say about your not holding up your end of the bargain." She slowed, pinching the material between forefingers and thumbs. "You'll know I'm not the kindest soul around. More often than not I'm sharpish and shrewish, and you're more likely to get a kick than a kiss, and--"

Nathan bent swiftly to kiss her cheek. "And you're fibbing fit to shame the devil," he said as he rose, leaving Bettina blushing and speechless. "You've the kindest woman's heart in town. I won't hear you say otherwise." He winked at Donnell over his shoulder. "And neither will the finest gentleman around."

"What about me?" Levi protested from his position behind the bar.

"Drink your beer."

Later in the day, as the last of the sunlight began to shade toward dusk, Donnell looked up to give the high sign to Levi to relax his guard and scanned the room for Bettina. She'd have begun serving folk herself when Nathan disappeared, but he didn't see her. Nearly all of the crowd had departed, no doubt bored when their entertainment abruptly ceased.

He turned toward Nathan, intending to drop some light comment regarding the fickle fancies of men and how they'd soon cease to think anything about him at all, leaving them to enjoy life on their own terms, and had his hands up ready to sign when a flicker of movement caught his attention.

It wasn't much. A glimpse of dusty black, the raggedness of an ill-kept white beard -- and a dark, nasty glare -- and then it was gone.

Michael. Passed by without stopping, but in definite observation of the saloon. Donnell guessed Michael thought he'd throw a little fear into them by stalking grimly past. Ha! Not so. Donnell cared not a whit for a grouchy crow when he had so much else, much more vibrant, to occupy his energies with.

Starting with the depths of aqua blue.

And yet...

A stillness at Donnell's side alerted him to Nathan's alarm. He turned back quickly, scanning Nathan's face and finding it drained of color, his lips parted and his breathing quicker. He shook Nathan's arm to snap him out of his upset, and signed *what is it? What's wrong?*

Nathan licked his lips, and did not look away from the window where he too must have seen Michael pass. "Nothing," he replied; Donnell did not believe him for an instant. "Someone I thought I knew."

What? Donnell shook him harder. *Do you know Michael?*

Nathan seemed to speak from a hundred miles away. "No. I don't know any Michael." He summoned a weak grin that wouldn't have fooled a blind grandmother.

Ah. Donnell understood. *He reminded you of Abbot Innocent, didn't he?*

Nathan's ears reddened. He looked away, deafening himself to Donnell's questions.

They'd have none of that. Donnell could not leave Nathan his pride if it meant him forever fearing even the most annoying of gadflies such as lunatic Michael. He caught Nathan by the chin and forcibly turned his head around, refusing to let go when Nathan protested.

Pay attention to me, Donnell signed with painstaking clarity. *There will always be those who wish to lay another's claim on you.*

Dejected, Nathan neither nodded nor shook his head, but merely looked doleful. Resigned.

They can't have you, Donnell said plainly as he could. *And if they come for you, well, I'll fight. And so can you.*

Nathan stared at him. "I couldn't."

You damn well could. Here. Donnell drew his pistol out of its holster and offered it to Nathan, butt first.

Nathan looked back and forth between pistol and Donnell, wary, clearly suspecting some kind of trick. Donnell waited, showing Nathan that he did not plan to back down on this.

Finally, Nathan accepted the gun.

You've seen enough men hold weapons to do it right, Donnell scolded when Nathan's grip didn't suit him. *Your fingers like so -- and your thumb there -- don't point it at me unless I've done something to deserve it, now!* He grinned and slapped Nathan lightly on his hip.

Nathan managed to return the humor, though still wary. "What am I meant to do with this? It's your gun."

Donnell shrugged. *All I have is yours. Don't protest; if you don't understand that already then you're a fool, and I know you are no fool.*

Nathan fidgeted under those words. "I haven't done anything to deserve what you give me."

I never said you had to earn a thing. Now point that gun properly.

"Where should I aim?" Nathan readjusted his grip, impressing Donnell with how quickly he learned.

Donnell considered the question, pointing at last at a section of wall near the back missing a patch of plaster. It needed replacing anyway. *There.*

Though he frowned, Nathan obeyed. "Why?"

Imagine that patch of bare wood is Abbot Innocent.

Nathan flinched, nearly fumbling the gun. "I beg your pardon?"

Careful. Do as I said. Picture Abbot Innocent standing in front of that plank, as real as life. No, now, don't start to shake. Donnell dared a public, half-second kiss to Nathan's ear. "Shhh, Shhh, Shhh."

Nathan summoned a weak smile from somewhere. "Shhh," he replied. He raised his gun, nowhere near polished as a gunslinger but steady enough. "Now what am I to do?"

Shoot.

"Are you mad? Discharging a gun inside a public house? Even I know better than that." Nathan drew his lips back over his teeth. "Is this a game?"

So suspicious, Donnell chided, though he understood well enough why, and planned to work on weeding out the dare-nots Abbot Innocent had sown thickly within Nathan. *It's no game. Point and shoot.*

"I can't. It's dangerous."

True. Donnell relented. *But if Innocent were here, and you had that gun in your hand, what would you do?*

"I -- I don't--"

Yes, you do. Donnell walked behind Nathan, aligning his arm with Nathan's and sighting along the barrel before slipping around to his side to continue signing. *Abbot Innocent is here. He's come to lash you for your sins. Beat you bloody. What do you do?*

"I can't shoot," Nathan whispered. "Don't ask it of me."

Donnell caught sight of Bettina preparing to enter the main room; he stopped her with a gesture and waved her back. Though her nostrils flared, warning him he'd catch it from her later, she stayed out of harm's way.

If you won't shoot for yourself, who will you shoot for? Donnell pressed. *Will you shoot to stop him from taking another child?*

"Donnell, stop this. Please."

Donnell caught the edge of steel beneath the reediness of Nathan's fear and pushed one last time. *Abbot Innocent is here, and he's come to hunt me down for claiming you. What do you do?*

The blast of the gun took even Donnell, who'd been waiting for it, by surprise. Nathan coughed, eyes wide as pie saucers through the smoke and powder. He turned to Donnell, shocked at what he'd done... then, slowly, slowly, and surely, he began to grin.

Donnell laid his hand over Nathan's, then took back the gun. *And I'd do the same for you. Not Abbot Innocent, nor anyone as addle-brained as Michael, will ever lay hands on you again. Do you understand me now?*

"I do."

Donnell didn't think it was only his fancy that showed him Nathan standing straighter and prouder after that. *What do you say?* he teased.

Nathan bent to kiss Donnell's forehead. It was a silent "thank you", but spoke volumes. Then, he added, "And I say 'Shhh'."

Donnell could not have heard anything to satisfy him more. They'd do, he and Nathan. They'd do just fine together, come what may. And in the meantime, they'd run one hell of a saloon together, wouldn't they?

Bettina threw up her hands and stomped away. Donnell exchanged a glance with Nathan that turned into a mutual chuckle.

"Will she be angry long?"

No. She never is. Donnell nudged Nathan's side. *Make sweet to her later, and she'll smile again.*

"I'll do that." Nathan paused. "What now, though?"

Donnell had his answer ready. *Work. There's lots to be done, and then we'll take to our bed early. Does that suit you?*

"How early is early?"

How soon can you be done with your work?

"Watch me and see." Nathan snuck the quickest of kisses, leaving Donnell's lips tingling from his touch nearly before Donnell had sensed him there. "Come on, then! I'll clean the tables. Will you play something while I'm busy?"

Donnell pinched his sweetheart's bottom and made for his piano, where he played the first reeling jig that came through his fingers. He watched Nathan while he played, savoring the sight of Nathan's enjoyment, tapping his fingers on plates in tune as he worked.

Yes. I think we'll be just fine, he and me.

And Donnell played on, all right with his world and his heart, while he drifted away on the music.

THE END