

Unrequited

Abigail Roux



I

Victor Bronsen tapped his pen against his temple slowly.

Tap.

The defense lawyer was speaking in a low, monotonous drone. He was new to this district, brought in from somewhere else by the family of the accused man, and he obviously didn't know how short Judge Trammell's temper was when it came to stalling or pontificating.

Tap.

Vic glanced up at the bailiff, Owen Montgomery, who stood stock-still with his blue eyes narrowed, looking at the defense lawyer like he might like to hit him soon. Owen was a big guy, with thick blond hair, a full beard, and wide shoulders that made him look a little like a lion. He wasn't the type of guy you wanted to piss off.

Tap.

Vic saw Owen glance sideways at the judge and Vic tried to repress a smile. Owen's patience was wearing thin, just like everyone else's. Vic liked to think it was because the man had plans after the day was over, but he knew it was just because he was hot and tired. Just like everyone else.

Tap.

The air conditioner was broken on the third floor. There weren't even any windows in the courtroom to open, and the August heat was becoming oppressive as the day dragged on well past lunch.

Vic put his pen down on the table in front of him with a clank that reverberated through the courtroom. He was trying not to slump in his chair, trying not to fidget, trying not to look like he was a wilting prosecutor in a thousand-dollar Italian suit.

He knew he was failing miserably. His short, dark hair was already beginning to curl at the edges as the sweat dried on his neck and forehead. Soon it would be curly all over and he would look ten years younger. At 37, with dark green eyes and a thin, angular face, he was in good shape and had always looked younger than he was. But when his damn hair curled on him, he got carded ordering drinks.

He could feel the sweat running down his back, and he knew soon enough he'd have to get out a handkerchief and start wiping at his face, or the jury would see him as nervous every time he wiped the sweat from his eyes.

But at least he wasn't wearing the heavy black robes the judge was. The heat might win him the case before he even had to say a word if the defense kept rambling on. The man must have one of those air-conditioned suits.

Vic's eyes met Owen Montgomery's and he rolled his eyes. The bailiff winked at him discreetly, his lips quirking but not forming a smile. Vic tried not to smile as he covered his mouth and looked away, forcing himself to concentrate as the heat bore down on the little courtroom.

Owen and everything that came with him would have to wait.

Vic's chin tilted upward slightly each time his body was rocked with one of Owen's slow thrusts, and every time Owen pushed

into him he let out a little huff of air. Sometimes a moan from the back of his throat would join the huff and Owen would tighten his grip and thrust harder.

The breathy moans and the muted squeaks and groans of the bedsprings were the only sounds in the room. They weren't fucking hard enough to make noise with the meeting of their damp bodies, not yet anyway, and Owen rarely made a sound when he topped. As a bottom he was as vocal as you could want, and his words and begging alone would make Vic come if he so desired, but as a top Owen was singularly focused on one thing and one thing alone. He simply held you down, pressed his face into the hollow of your neck, buried himself deep inside your body, and fucked you until he came.

If Vic was lucky he would come with him, clutching his body to his and writhing beneath him. If not, Owen would pull out of him, flop down beside him, and languidly caress him until he came all over himself, thrashing and crying out Owen's name.

"Fuck... fuck yeah," Owen gasped into Vic's ear. "Come on, baby."

That was another thing about Owen; he never said Vic's name when they were together. Baby. Babe. Sweetheart. Doll. Darling. The occasional "come on, you bastard." Just about any endearment Owen could think of. All except for Vic's name.

Afterward, after Owen had gone back to whatever pressing engagement it was that made him leave Vic alone in bed once again, Vic would think back on their encounter and think that it had been good. Not wonderful. Not even particularly memorable. Simply good. Average, really.

If Vic was the one doing the fucking then it was often better in remembrance; he would still have Owen's cries ringing in his ears and he would often have Owen's drying come still on

his skin, because Vic always made sure that he was inside the other man when Owen came. But when it was Owen topping, Vic would never remember anything special about it.

Just that it had been Owen.

And for Vic, that was enough. That was enough to keep him craving more. That was enough to make his heart stutter when he saw Owen's name on the docket for the day. That was enough to make him drop whatever or whomever he was doing to run to a rendezvous when Owen called. That was enough to make him cry Owen's name when he came, no matter whether it was Owen he was with or not.

"Owen," Vic gasped as Owen's arms tightened their grip on him. Vic came with a desperate cry.

Owen panted against his damp skin, thrusting through the spasms Vic's body suffered, and soon Owen was panting and coming as well with a muffled groan.

Vic remained on his back, breathing heavily and keeping his eyes closed as he felt Owen roll off the bed and walk into the bathroom. Vic didn't have to ask to know that Owen would be gone in the next thirty minutes. That was what always happened. Vic understood. Sort of. Owen was a sheriff's deputy with a lot of responsibilities and numerous perfectly good reasons to leave.

It didn't mean Vic had to like it.

"You all right?" Owen asked dubiously when he came back into the room and tossed a towel at Vic. It landed across Vic's head and Vic simply reached up to slide it off and opened his eyes. There was no point in cleaning off; he could just lie there until Owen left and then hop in the shower.

"Yeah," he answered flatly. "You leaving?" he asked, hating himself for asking but needing to know for sure anyway.

“Yeah,” Owen said casually as he pulled on his jeans and looked around for his shirt. He continued talking, telling Vic why he had to leave, what needed to be done, when he’d be leaving town to escort a prisoner somewhere to do something, but Vic found his mind wandering.

In the early days of their more intimate acquaintance, Vic had told himself that he wouldn’t allow it to happen again. He wouldn’t allow Owen to run off and leave him feeling somehow emptier than when he had started. Now, of course, five years later, he was past that.

Empty or not, Vic needed whatever Owen would give him. He supposed that was what happened when you loved someone who didn’t return the feeling. You wound up empty and needy.

Owen never lied to him, never plied him with wine and roses or told him he loved him in order to get him naked, so why should Vic lie to himself?

He had thought a lot about why he always allowed Owen to come back to him, and he had come to an unsettling conclusion. There were three levels of pleasure, so far as Vic could figure.

Physical pleasure—the first and most basic—was the feeling of pliant lips on yours. The sensation of warm hands on your body. A questing tongue. Burying yourself deep inside someone who was wrapped around you. That was what had kept Vic interested when he would have otherwise given up on the flighty younger man he’d met all those years ago when Owen had started taking shifts as bailiff at the courthouse. That, and the fact that work was all he had time to do lately. If it weren’t for Owen’s occasional flybys, Vic would never have time to get laid. He didn’t like one-night stands and he didn’t have time to date.

Emotional pleasure—the second level—that was when it got a little trickier. A hand questing silently across a mattress for yours in the middle of the night. Whispered words of affection. Sitting in silence and watching the sun set from the steps of the courthouse as the jury deliberated, knowing that words need not be spoken between you. Vic had experienced these things with Owen. Precious few times, though. These were the things that had kept Vic hoping through the years, allowing Owen to continue on his merrily oblivious way, hoping that Owen would one day realize what he could have, if he desired it.

The third level, though, that was where Vic found himself now. When the physical and emotional collided and the pleasure turned to pain. The pain of knowing that the bed he awoke in would be cold and empty and still smell of the other man. Knowing that when Owen called up in a week or a month or a year and asked him if he was free, that he would be there without question, without regard for what he needed to be doing. Knowing that whatever he felt for the younger man, the feelings were unreturned and probably always would be.

Physical love. Emotional love. Unrequited love.

Owen leaned over him and frowned as he looked down at him. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?” he whispered as Vic crossed his eyes to focus on him.

“No,” Vic managed with a smile.

Owen’s eyes brightened and he grinned. “You free for lunch tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Vic whispered.

“I’ll call you,” Owen told him as he bent down and kissed Vic on the tip of his nose. Then just as quickly as they’d fallen

into bed together, he was out the door and Vic was once again alone with his self-recriminations and regrets.

The shrill ring of the phone sent Vic bolt upright in his bed. The darkness swirled around him in confusing circles and he kicked his legs, trying to get free of the bedcovers and out of bed in order to pick the phone up and hurl it into a wall.

The phone trilled again and Vic jumped at the sound of it even as he struggled. He cursed and flailed and rolled and finally ended up in an ungraceful heap on the floor beside the bed.

His hand reached out from beneath the tangle of sheets that had followed him from the bed and groped around on the bedside table until it landed on the vibrating cell phone. He fumbled with it to get it under the clinging sheets and answer it. If someone was calling in the middle of the night, then something was either seriously wrong or one of his traveling buddies from the law firm had gotten drunk and forgotten what time zone they were schmoozing in.

“I’m here, I’m awake, I’m here, what’s wrong, what’s happened?” Vic blurted into the phone as soon as he managed to answer it and get it to his ear.

“Hey, Vic!” Owen’s cheerful yell came over the line. “You won’t believe who I get to drive around today!”

“It’s the middle of the night, Owen,” Vic said groggily. “Unless someone’s dead or dying, I really couldn’t care less who you’re driving around.”

“It’s six in the morning, actually, and you should be getting ready for work,” Owen replied with a smile apparent in his voice.

Vic threw the sheets off his head and peered over the edge of the table to find the bedside alarm clock. The time blinked on and off, signaling that at some point over the course of the night Vic’s apartment had lost power.

“Fuck,” he hissed as he stood up and looked around. The heavy blinds kept the light out, and the alarm clock was usually the only thing that woke him in the morning. He had no inner clock to speak of.

“Had a rough night, huh?” Owen asked knowingly.

“Shut up,” Vic grunted as he hurried to get a suit out and go in search of his toothbrush.

“So you don’t want to know who I’m escorting?” Owen asked.

“Shane Simpson,” Vic ventured flatly as he pressed his shoulder up to hold the phone to his ear and free his hands so he could get dressed.

“How’d you know?” Owen asked, sounding slightly deflated over having his fun thwarted.

Vic instantly felt guilty for doing it. Owen may have been a big tough sheriff’s deputy on the outside, but he had a lot of little kid in him. “Just lucky, I guess,” he mumbled as he zipped up his jeans.

Shane Simpson had started his career in the same law firm Vic now worked for, moving onto the bench soon after Vic had arrived and then moving up to be one of the Superior Court judges of North Carolina. As a Superior Court judge, he had to travel all over the state. He came into town maybe once or twice a month. He knew Shane was in town because Shane

was one of his very best friends. They talked at least once a week, meeting whenever they were in the same place for a friendly drink and often ending up passed out on someone's couch and drooling on each other.

Good times.

"Fuck you. You knew he was in town," Owen said petulantly. "You two always go out without me," he accused.

"Not because we don't offer," Vic said defensively. "We always lose you when the first neon light flashes."

"Shut up," Owen laughed. "You up for dinner tonight?"

"Yeah, if we're not all melted into puddles by then," Vic said unenthusiastically.

"Rumor is they're getting the air fixed today," Owen said as the dinging of a car door being opened sounded and Owen grunted into the phone as he flopped into his cruiser. "You mind if Shane comes too? He's at the courthouse today. Some big-time case. He requires a police escort everywhere he goes to keep him safe."

"Yeah, that's fine," Vic said distractedly as he ran his fingers through his hair. "Wait. What?" he asked as it sank in.

"He's under police protection for this one," Owen said in a worried voice. "I don't know what it is, but they're not messing around."

"Jesus Christ," Vic muttered in surprise. He grabbed his keys from the kitchen counter and hurried for the door, taking one last glance around to make sure he had everything he'd need for the day. "And you're all they gave him?" he asked incredulously.

"Ouch, Vic," Owen said with a small laugh.

Vic snorted. "I mean, they only gave him one deputy to watch him?"

"I'm just the escort. Wow, someone's pissy today," Owen murmured as his engine started.

"Yeah, well..." Vic thought about mentioning that waking up alone had a tendency to do that to him, but he bit it off at the last minute. "Sorry," he said instead, as he walked out the door. "Shane and I were planning on meeting later anyway, so dinner works. Where are we eating? Is there a list or something where he's allowed to go?" he asked, only half-kidding.

"Nope. You pick it, man. Here comes Shane. Tell you what: you call me tonight when you're ready to eat and then we'll go from there."

"All righty," Vic agreed easily as he got into his own car.

"Talk to you soon, man," Owen said as he prepared to hang up.

"Is that Vic?" Vic heard Shane's distant voice ask.

"Yeah," Owen answered.

"Let me talk to that bastard," Shane demanded, and Owen handed over the phone without another word. "Vic!" Shane's voice boomed into Vic's ear, making him wince and grin at the same time.

Shane had grown up on the South Carolina coast, near Charleston, whereas Vic was a displaced Yankee from upstate New York. When Vic had first met Shane, he'd kept asking him questions just to hear him answer them in his genteel, coastal Southern accent. Vic didn't even know how to describe the accent, other than it was a strange and wonderful thing that sounded like something out of *Gone with the Wind*. He only pronounced his R's if they were followed by vowels. He made words with two syllables into words with five. He drawled and

spoke slowly enough that you hung on every word waiting for the next. Vic absolutely loved to hear Shane speak. Everything he said sounded both classy and antiquated at the same time. Even if he was cussing a blue streak as he watched baseball.

“Hello, my shiny thing!” Shane said happily. “I thought I told you to leave Owen out of this. It was just going to be you and me and a romantic moonlit dinner at Subway,” Shane mused teasingly as Owen sniggered.

Vic snorted in amusement.

“Candles, wine, squirty vinegar,” Shane continued in a grand manner. “Groping in the bathroom. Turn here, kid. Aphrodisiacs of your choice. I tell you what, buddy boy,” he said to Owen without taking the phone from his mouth. “A handful of M&Ms and Vic will follow you anywhere.”

Vic was laughing silently and trying to catch his breath without letting Shane know that he was actually laughing. That was true, really. Give Vic chocolate and he was yours for the night at least, if not more. How Shane knew that, Vic couldn’t guess.

Shane was an interesting character, shy and reserved and modest and just about the most humble person Vic had ever known. Until you got to know him. Then his true intellect, wit, and, quite frankly, weird sense of humor shined through and you began to see an almost completely different person. He was still modest almost to a fault and he was easily embarrassed when in front of strangers, but in private he was morbidly humorous and a little crazy. He and Vic played off each other well, when Vic was right in the head.

This greeting of Shane’s was fairly typical, though Vic and Shane had never shared even so much as a kiss in their five or so years of knowing each other. Shane enjoyed teasing Vic and Vic quite honestly enjoyed the teasing. He was a well-respected

and successful public prosecutor; not many people had the stones to tease him about anything.

Vic didn't even know if Shane was gay or not. Every now and then Vic would get a sense that he might be, but he could never be certain and he certainly never planned on asking. Shane knew that much about him, and if he'd wanted to share he would have by now. They rarely talked about things like that anyway. Shane had never been married, and occasionally would mention a disastrous date, but never the gender of the person he'd been seeing. If Vic was a betting man, he'd have said Shane was gay.

But there was a reason Vic had never been to Las Vegas.

"M&Ms, huh?" Owen questioned as Shane laughed.

"How was your trip?" Vic asked with a little laugh.

"I'll tell you when I've got drunk enough to handle remembering," Shane said with a groan. "Owen's flailing. Hold on," Shane said with a sigh, and Vic could almost see the man taking the phone and holding it to his chest as he continued to speak. "Why do you not know where you are?"

"I'm out of my district, man," Vic heard Owen respond.

"You've lived here all your life!" Shane protested. "Turn there."

"Here?"

"I don't know. It looks familiar, though. Jesus Christ, I hate this town, Vic," Shane lamented as he brought the phone back to his mouth.

"You're lost, aren't you?" Vic asked with a laugh.

"Yes. I would be worried, but Owen has the survival instincts of a cockroach," Shane murmured into the phone.

"I heard that," Owen said petulantly.

“Of course you did. You’re sitting right there,” Shane told him.

“You could at least try to whisper it,” Owen responded.

“Then it wouldn’t be half as fun to say,” Shane pointed out.

Vic grinned and took a deep breath of the cool air rushing in through his open car window. “I’ve got to drive. I’ll see you at the courthouse in a bit,” he said as his chest tightened with excitement and his head began to feel a little light at the thought of seeing them both.

He saw Owen maybe once a week, if he was lucky. In a way he dreaded those moments. He almost always got his heart trampled over when he spent any amount of time with Owen, but Vic had come to accept that as inevitable. Perhaps what made it worse was that Owen didn’t know he did it.

If Vic had suspected that Owen knew he loved him and still treated him like a casual fuck, it would have given Vic reason to stop the cycle, to tell Owen that he couldn’t be used like a helipad for whenever Owen needed to land somewhere and just move on and be happy.

But Owen didn’t know how Vic felt. He thought Vic did the same thing he did—enjoyed the fleeting moments and moved on—and so Vic let him in and out of his life as he pleased, hoping to one day have the other man see differently. Vic couldn’t fault him for not knowing if he’d never had the nerve to tell him.

What that left Vic with, however, was heartache of the highest order. The plus side was that Shane was always good for comfort, the few times a month Vic saw him. His presence soothed the ache, probably because his presence often involved alcohol of some description, but Vic didn’t care. He would face

the heartache for the rare chance of enjoying time with his friends. He would face it for the rest of his life for those precious few stolen moments of almost love.

“Hey, Vic, can you give Shane a ride back?” Owen asked as they stepped out into the cool air of evening. The day had dragged on and on and lunch had been a crusty sandwich out of the vending machine. A nice dinner out with friends had been a welcome change.

Shane stepped to the side to light up a cigarette, and he looked away tactfully as Owen and Vic stood talking.

“I thought you were on escort duty,” Vic responded in a low voice.

“Only to the courthouse,” Owen said with a shake of his head. “Can you get him back?”

“Sure,” Vic answered, hiding his disappointment skillfully and smiling as Owen gave him a brief farewell hug. He watched as Shane shook Owen’s hand and said goodbye, and Vic and Shane stood side by side as Owen walked quickly to his cruiser, breaking into a jog as he crossed the side street they’d parked on. His shift started in an hour and in Charlotte, he was at least that far away from his district. He would need to hustle to get home and change in order to make it. Vic had hoped he’d be able to see him after his shift ended, but Owen hadn’t mentioned anything of the sort.

Vic supposed he’d just wait until the next time Owen pulled court duty.

Shane handed his half-smoked cigarette to Vic and Vic took it without even thinking, taking a long drag and then handing it back to Shane.

“Thought you quit,” he said to Shane with a little smile as he blew the smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

“I could say the same,” Shane remarked with a raised eyebrow as his eyes traveled from Vic slowly back to Owen as the man waved at them once more from his car before pulling away.

Vic turned and stared at Shane. Shane met his eyes expectantly. He was about Vic’s height, but broader along the chest and shoulders. His eyes were a deep green, striking against the tan of his skin, and his dirty-blond hair had begun to gray slightly at the temples. Vic heartily approved.

“What do you mean?” he asked him in an almost-normal voice.

“Do you really think I don’t know, Vic?” Shane asked incredulously.

Vic blinked at him and Shane sighed and threw the remainder of his cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with his toe.

“Litterbug,” Vic mumbled automatically.

“Doormat,” Shane retorted as he took Vic’s elbow and led him toward the car.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Vic muttered as he walked up to the driver’s-side door and unlocked the little blue hybrid.

“Uh-huh,” Shane answered as soon as he got into the car. “If you don’t want to talk about it then we won’t,” he said, looking out the windshield of the car thoughtfully.

Vic looked at him carefully then decided to take the out he'd been offered and started up the car. "You coming home with me?" he asked.

"My hotel smells like feet," Shane answered. Vic snorted before he could stop himself. "So if you don't mind the company," Shane continued hopefully.

"Love to have it," Vic assured him.

They drove in silence for a while, Shane rubbing the pad of his index finger thoughtfully across his eyebrow as Vic drove. "This one of those solar-powered hybrids?" he finally asked.

"Yeah," Vic answered suspiciously as he glanced at his passenger.

Shane was frowning down at the vents thoughtfully.

"You really don't want to talk about it?" he finally asked as he looked over at Vic dubiously.

"I really don't want to talk about it," Vic affirmed without taking his eyes off the road.

"Good idea," Shane finally decided. "I'll just wait 'til you're drunk," he added happily.

Vic couldn't help but smile.

It was several weeks after Shane's visit that Vic's phone rang in the middle of the night. He rolled over and raised his head groggily, peering at the clock on the bedside table. It really was the middle of the night this time, just a little past three a.m.

His stomach flipped as he reached for the phone. His job didn't require off-hours calls. This had to be something bad.

"Bronsen," he answered, his voice rough with sleep.

“Hey, Vic,” Owen greeted quietly. “I know I woke you. I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “But I was wondering: have you been over at my place recently?”

“Your place?” Vic repeated in confusion. He rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand and pushed up onto his elbows, shivering as the cold air hit his bare shoulders.

“Did you come to my apartment for something?” Owen asked slowly.

“No. Why?” Vic answered in growing concern. He couldn’t actually recall ever having been in Owen’s apartment.

“Someone’s been here,” Owen told him in a low voice. “I’m calling around, making sure it’s not someone I know.”

“Someone’s been there, like, broken in?” Vic asked worriedly.

“I gotta go, Vic,” Owen told him, and Vic heard the very distinct sound of his gun being drawn from its holster.

“Owen, wait,” Vic said quickly. “Call for backup first!”

“I’ll call you later, man,” Owen told him. Then the call clicked off.

Vic looked down at the phone in his hand with a sinking sensation in his stomach. There was nothing to do but wait.

An hour after being so rudely awoken by Owen’s call, Vic sat staring into the distance from the balcony of his condo. He wasn’t really seeing anything because he was too tired to make his eyes focus, but he was also too tired to move or blink, so there he sat.

He had been waiting for the promised call from Owen, and he was afraid to go back to sleep for fear of missing it. Deep down he knew the call wasn't coming, but he couldn't force himself to not hope that it would.

Owen was... easily distracted. Vic had lost count of how many times he'd said he'd call and then the next time Vic heard from him was when Owen caught court duty again.

"Hope springs eternal," he murmured bitterly as he watched the shaky rays of the sun illuminate the east. But it was enough to keep him staying awake instead of going back to sleep like he desperately wanted to.

The cell phone in his lap began to vibrate and ring and he started violently, having forgotten that it was still there. He had been clutching it ever since Owen's call, hoping that it would ring and he would hear Owen's raspy voice again, telling him that he was safe. He fumbled with it and sent it clattering to the floor and almost under the railing of the balcony and over the edge.

He scrambled to retrieve it as hope fluttered in his chest, but then he sat back and stared at it morosely as it rang when he saw on the display that it was Shane Simpson calling him. He'd called Shane earlier in the evening about a last-minute invite to a summer conference that was coming up in a few days. The man hadn't answered, and Vic hadn't left a message. That had been hours ago, though. Why Shane was just calling now, Vic couldn't say. He flipped open the phone.

"Vic? What's wrong?" Shane asked as soon as Vic hit the speaker button.

"Hey. Nothing's wrong, man," Vic answered with a little smile. "I was calling about the conference," he said as he stretched and grunted quietly.

“Conference,” Shane repeated in a flat voice.

“It was around eleven or so,” Vic told him, knowing exactly what Shane was thinking. He’d probably woken up to go take a piss or something and seen the missed call blinking on his phone. He would only have called back at this time of night if he’d thought Vic called recently, thinking it was an emergency. He had no way of knowing Vic was waiting up like a fool for a call that wouldn’t come.

“You shithead,” Shane said with a sigh of relief, and Vic heard him grunt as he flopped down onto something. Probably his bed. Bed sounded good. “You’ll give a man a heart attack doing that.”

“No reason to do that until I know I’m in the will,” Vic said flatly as he hefted himself up and moved back inside.

Shane offered a tired little chuckle, but he remained silent, waiting for Vic to come out with the reason he was awake at such an hour. Vic walked carefully through the dark room, shuffling his feet to avoid running into anything. He failed miserably and cursed colorfully when his toe made contact with the leg of a table. He continued to curse and grunt as he moved around, and he could almost hear Shane’s frown.

“You all right?” Shane finally asked worriedly.

“Yeah. I think I just broke my toe, though,” Vic said absently as he reached the bed and sat down gratefully. He pulled his foot up close to his face to examine his mangled toe in the darkness as he held the phone to his ear with his shoulder.

“No, I mean... it’s four in the morning, man. Why are you up?”

“Oh. Oh! Yeah. Sorry, uh... I got a call from Owen about an hour ago. His apartment was broken into. He was calling to

see if it was just someone he knew coming in and forgetting to lock the door or something.”

“Oh,” Shane said as he repressed a yawn. Vic yawned as well after hearing the sound. Shane was usually an early riser, but it sounded as if he needed sleep too. “Is he okay?”

“I guess so. Apparently he’s too damn stubborn to call the police since he is one, so he checked it out himself.”

“Fucking dumbass,” Shane mumbled as Vic heard the sheets rustling in the background. “How’d that go?” Shane asked wryly once he was settled.

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard back from him,” Vic mumbled.

“Oh,” Shane grunted noncommittally. It seemed Shane was of the same opinion as Vic that Owen had merely forgotten to call him back, rather than something being wrong. That was just the way Owen was. Life of the party, but not very reliable unless he was in uniform.

“Yeah,” Vic said with a sigh.

“You were saying about a conference?” Shane ventured as he repressed another yawn.

Vic fought another yawn. “Stop that,” he scolded. “You’re making me sleepy.”

“You should be sleepy,” Shane informed him unapologetically. “Are you going to the conference? The one in Raleigh? I didn’t see your name on the agenda.”

“I was a last-minute add-on, apparently,” Vic told him with a sigh. “I was wondering if I could bunk with you. Hotels are all full.”

“Sure,” Shane answered immediately.

“You got any time off coming?” Vic asked Shane suddenly.

“Yeah, actually,” Shane answered, perking up a bit. “I was planning on taking it right after the conference is over.”

“Oh yeah?” Vic said with interest as he sat back up. “How long?”

“Four weeks, baby,” Shane said with relish. “Heading to the beach all by my lonesome to see how drunk I can get. Why?”

“Want to stick around Raleigh and distract me for a few days before you head out?” Vic asked with a slight blush.

“I guess so,” Shane said with a hint of suspicion. “Why?”

“Because.”

“That’s not a reason,” Shane told him flatly. “I won’t be party to anything illegal... again.”

“Being heartbroken’s only illegal in certain parts of the world, man,” Vic mumbled.

“I see,” Shane responded slowly. “Finally giving up on him?” he asked carefully.

“I’d like to say yes,” Vic said softly. “But I’m a realist. It’s going to take something drastic.”

“Like... copious amounts of alcohol?” Shane said hopefully.

“Something like that,” Vic said with a sigh.

“Okay, I can handle that. I’ll send you the room information and I’ll see you there,” Shane said with an affectionate laugh before hanging up.

He hadn’t said goodbye, but then Shane rarely did.

“Just push the goddamned button,” Vic grumbled aloud as he stared at the display on his cell phone. Owen’s number was already punched into the phone. All he had to do was hit the button to send it. He was afraid to do it though. It had been four hours and he had heard nothing from the other man. He had probably just forgotten about Vic’s request that he call him. He was probably busy, dealing with the police and possibly going through his apartment to see what was stolen.

He didn’t need to be bothered.

Vic sighed and pushed the button anyway, and as he sat listening to the phone ring he tried desperately to quell the sick feeling it gave him. Contacting Owen always made him nervous. He supposed it was some subconscious fear of rejection. He was just fine when Owen initiated contact, but when he had to do it he always worried about bothering him or calling at a bad time or hearing that distracted “I’ve got better things to be doing than talking to you right now” voice that Owen tended to get when something was on his mind.

“Hello,” Owen mumbled before Vic could change his mind and hang up the phone.

“Owen,” Vic said after licking his lips nervously. His voice sounded nice and steady though, just as calm and cool as it always was.

“Hey,” Owen said groggily. “Oh! Fuck, I was supposed to call you, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” Vic said as his stomach twisted unpleasantly. He recognized it as a mix between anger and his feelings being hurt. He had never been angry at Owen before; it was a decidedly new feeling.

“Sorry, man. It completely slipped my mind,” Owen offered with a yawn. “I’m fine. Place got broken into, but they didn’t take anything important.”

“That’s good,” Vic said in a clipped tone, growing angrier despite knowing that what Owen told him was exactly what happened before he’d ever called. He’d hoped differently, that maybe one of the many thoughts on Owen’s mind after finding that everything was intact would be to call Vic and let him know he hadn’t been shot by some burglar in the middle of the night.

At least he knew how high he was on Owen’s totem pole. He had undeniable proof that he was just an occasional fly-by rather than a lover. Or hell, even a friend. He didn’t even warrant a call to say he was okay.

“Glad all your shit’s all right, man,” he said succinctly before Owen could say anything else. “I’ll see you at work,” he offered coldly.

He hung up the phone without bothering to say goodbye.

Shane’s luggage was piled up beside the hotel room door, ready to head to the beach. Vic’s was packed up as well, ready to head back home to his empty apartment.

The North Carolina Conference of Superior Court Judges had gone smoothly. Dull as dishwater, as Shane had so succinctly put it. Computer training classes, lectures on media relations for judges, judicial independence, updates on dispositive motions, and so on.

Vic’s part in the lectures had been to present and lead a panel on evidence, specifically dealing with opinions and expert

testimony. It had been marginally interesting. Well worth the chance to get away from home for a while.

Shane was spending one last night in town before he left, treating Vic to a nice dinner out.

Vic wasn't sure whether he was glad for Shane's company or not. Part of him was. It was keeping him from calling Owen and losing a little more self-respect. And he was almost pleasantly surprised to find that the longer he went without talking to Owen, the angrier he became. He didn't know if it was an overreaction or just an emotion being magnified by the helpless, lonely feeling that came with unrequited love.

He looked up from his plate suddenly and interrupted Shane during the middle of a sentence. "Do you think I'm overreacting?" he asked.

Shane waved a hand through the air and sat back slightly. "What?" he asked, nonplussed.

"About Owen," Vic answered with a frown. "Should I be pissed?"

"About what now?" Shane asked in confusion.

Vic sighed and rolled his eyes, looking away at the next table and the couple dining there.

"Vic," Shane muttered as he leaned closer. "Can you even tell me what I was talking about?" he asked with a frown.

Vic glanced back at him, his cheeks coloring slightly. "Baseball?" he ventured with a wince.

Shane narrowed his eyes and pointed his finger at Vic. "Lucky guess," he accused.

Vic smiled slightly, but then closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he offered sincerely. "God, he's driving me

crazy,” he said in frustration as he leaned forward and put his head in his hands.

“Get hold of yourself, man,” Shane scolded in a low voice.

Vic groaned and sat back in his seat. It would have been funny to hear Shane deliver that line in any other situation.

“Is this about him not calling you back?” Shane asked dubiously.

“Yes. No. It’s more than that,” Vic muttered as he picked up his fork and poked at his rice. He looked up at Shane with a frown.

“Are you sure it’s him you’re pissed at, Vic?” Shane murmured.

“What do you mean?” Vic asked.

“I mean... you say he’s using you, but you’re the one who lets him,” Shane pointed out gently. “You sure it’s not *you* you’re pissed at?”

Vic inhaled deeply and nodded, looking away again.

“Does he even know how you feel about him?” Shane asked hesitantly. He sounded almost as if he didn’t want to know the answer.

“I don’t know,” Vic muttered. *He should*, Vic thought, even though he’d never told him.

Shane was silent, watching him as he pushed his food around his plate and told himself to stop brooding.

He sighed and smiled slightly. “Thank you,” he said as he looked up at Shane. “I can always count on you when I need a swift kick in the ass,” he said wryly.

“Trust me, it’s my pleasure,” Shane assured him.

Vic's phone began to vibrate in his pocket, and he muttered an apology as he fished it out and looked at the backlit screen. "It's Owen," he said in surprise.

He looked up at Shane as if for guidance. He knew if he answered it, he would head right into whatever Owen wanted. He would forget that he was angry until afterward, then he would become even angrier for allowing it to happen again. It was a perilous downward spiral.

Shane raised an eyebrow at him. "Answer it, don't answer it," he advised as he held up two fingers. "Two simple choices."

Vic scowled at him. It wasn't that simple. He looked down at the phone in his hand hesitantly.

"Vic," Shane said in a low voice.

Vic looked up at him. Shane was shaking his head.

"Don't answer it," he ordered gently.

Vic stared at him as the phone vibrated again. Then he set his jaw stubbornly and put the phone back in his pocket. Shane smiled slowly at him, and Vic returned it with a proud grin.

"Phase One completed," Shane intoned with a laugh. "Now just go throw the phone in that fancy koi pond over there and we'll go get drunk."

Vic snorted and shook his head. "Phone stays dry. But I'm open to the getting drunk part."

"Deal." Shane grunted as he slipped a few bills into the black envelope the server had left and then stood. "Come on," he said as he took Vic by the elbow and dragged him out of the restaurant. "I have an evil plan," he informed Vic nonchalantly as they walked to Vic's car.

“Does this one involve socket wrenches and teeth whitener again?” Vic asked worriedly.

“No,” Shane answered firmly. Vic saw him trying to repress a grin.

Shane had never really struck Vic as the Your Honor type. He was laid-back and friendly, most of the time, unlike a lot of the judges Vic dealt with. He was more apt to wear worn-out jeans and a Jimmy Buffett T-shirt when he wasn't in court than he was to wear a suit and tie. He was comfortable with himself and let things come as they may, seldom worrying about what lay ahead, happy almost to a fault. And he compartmentalized well: this problem belongs with work, and I won't let it bother me when I'm not there.

He was the type of man Vic sometimes wished he could be.

“What do you have going the next month?” Shane asked him suddenly.

“What?” Vic asked in bemusement as the little blue hybrid beeped at their approach.

“Obligations and that kind of thing. What do you have?” Shane asked as he lowered himself into the car and sighed heavily.

“Uhh... just work, really. Couple of cases with a rookie prosecutor that I'm sitting for. Why? Is this part of your evil plan?” Vic asked suspiciously.

“Come with me,” Shane said as he rolled his head back and forth, cracking his neck.

“What?” Vic asked with a little laugh. “Come with you where?”

“To the beach. We’ve both got years of fucking vacation days built up. Take a couple weeks. Get away. Go lie in the sand somewhere and stay perpetually buzzed for a month.”

“Are you shitting me?” Vic asked incredulously. He looked over at Shane, who was watching him expectantly, and he laughed at his friend’s spontaneity. Had he not just been thinking that he wanted to be more like Shane? What better way to try than to spend more time with him?

“You know what?” he said finally, thinking of the borderline depression he had sent himself into in the past few weeks, unable to do anything with himself but mope around. He was bored with his work, he was alone and lonely and rapidly losing his self-respect. One of the few bright spots lately had turned into a serious burr under his saddle. And now he was mixing metaphors. Hell, he didn’t even have houseplants to water. Why the hell not?

“Yeah, okay,” he said with a nod. “Let’s go.”

“Beautiful!” Shane exclaimed happily, though he didn’t sound surprised that Vic had agreed.

Vic smiled. Shane knew him too well.

“We’ll buy you a bathing suit when we get down there. We can leave tonight,” Shane outlined contentedly. “Hey! We can take the long way, drive down the coast and see all those places no one will go with me to see!”

“You’re a crazy fuck, you know that?” Vic said affectionately.

“Hey,” Shane grunted at him. “I need a break, you look miserable, and we both need a tan. Doesn’t sound so crazy to me.”

II

The various places that no one would go see with Shane turned out to be a variety of tourist destinations around the Outer Banks. Despite all the time Vic had spent in North Carolina—almost his entire adulthood—he had never been to the Outer Banks. There were a lot of things he'd always wanted to see: the array of lighthouses that lined the barrier islands, Jockey's Ridge, the Wright Brothers National Memorial, the Lost Colony. His list of what he'd like to see went on and on and he hadn't ever really realized it.

Vic had managed to talk Shane down from leaving that night, though. He'd argued they would need a plan of attack before leaving and the hotel room was paid for already. So they'd sat down and done some research, planning the best route and what could be seen without too much effort. The trip would require two full days of travel and one night in a hotel, but it would be worth it.

They left late the next morning, heading toward Manteo, North Carolina, at the northern tip of the Outer Banks. It took nearly all day to get there, and by the time they drove through the main drag of the whitewashed little township, it was getting close to dinnertime.

"Should we try to go see the Lost Colony first, or eat?" Vic posed as he maneuvered the roadways and the crazy tourist traffic.

"It's a national park, right? It probably closes at some point," Shane reasoned.

“Lost Colony it is,” Vic agreed as he turned, following a sign that headed them toward Roanoke Island.

There was a smattering of cars in the parking lot when they finally reached their destination, most with out-of-state tags and roof racks full of luggage. Vic and Shane both eased themselves out of the hybrid, stretching and groaning.

“I hate your car,” Shane muttered as he joined Vic in front of a wooden information placard.

“We’ll get some bungee cords and I’ll tie you to the roof rack,” Vic told him distractedly as he read the information behind the Plexiglas.

Shane grumbled and rubbed at a spot on his back, and Vic reached forward and grabbed one of the brochures offered to tourists. It was the same design he’d seen in other national parks. He flipped it open, scanning the information about the history of Roanoke Island and Fort Raleigh and the Lost Colony. He knew the bare bones of the story; that the settlers here had disappeared, never to be heard from again. It was one of the great mysteries of history, and America’s oldest.

“Park closes in an hour,” Shane pointed out as he nodded at the information. “Should be enough time to see it.”

Vic nodded and turned the brochure sideways, peering at the little map inside. He folded it back up and waved it around at the trail, just a few yards from where they stood. “After you,” he offered.

They started off into the wooded area, following the sidewalk until it abruptly ended and became a dirt path. They carried on, stopping at each wooden stand that held information, reading the anecdotes as they went.

When they came to a mound of earth in the middle of a small clearing, they made their way toward it to examine it. The

depression within the raised mounds of earth was perhaps ten feet on each side, roughly square, and Vic realized suddenly that *this* was Fort Raleigh.

Shane stood in the middle of it, looking around as he came to the same conclusion. “Can you imagine this being your last line of defense?” he asked, raising his hand to indicate where the wooden stockade fence must have been, high atop the mounds. “It’d be like trying to fit three dozen people inside your car,” he said in an amazed voice.

Vic laughed softly and shook his head, trying to imagine what the fort had looked like with the stockades.

“Shit,” Shane muttered as he walked out of the depression again. “No wonder they had to clear out,” he said, shaking his head as he found the trail and started off down it. Vic jogged to catch him and they walked side by side down the wooded trail.

“How do you get lost on an island?” Shane mused as he looked around them.

“They didn’t get lost,” Vic pointed out in amusement. “They disappeared. There’s a difference.”

“Gone is gone,” Shane argued as the underbrush began to grow thicker. They pushed through it, sweating in the humid evening as the sun began to set.

It quickly grew dim amidst the trees.

“Think maybe we should head back now?” Vic asked. They hadn’t seen anything but little plaques talking about what type of tree they were standing under and how the settlers may have gathered acorns. The fort had been fascinating just to see how small it actually was, but Vic would not have driven out here just for that. They’d soon wandered away from the little information plaques, not bothering to read them when they came to them.

Shane mumbled something and looked behind them, narrowing his eyes. “Where’s the trail?” he asked as he glanced at Vic.

Vic looked around, shrugging as he began to fan his face with the brochure he’d been holding. “I think we may be off the map,” he said as he pointed toward a lighter area ahead. “Keep going. We’ll break out eventually.”

When they found sunlight and followed the trail toward it, breaking out of the wooded area onto a sandy trail, Vic was surprised to find them standing on a beach. He looked out across the sound to see land on the other side. Boats and condos lined the other island. To their right, on their island but across a wide tributary, was the back side of an amphitheater. Vic knew they performed an outdoor play here. That had to be where they did it.

“I don’t think this is the trail,” Shane commented wryly.

Vic turned to glare at him. “We’ll just backtrack,” he suggested as he gestured toward the way they’d come. “Come on; it’s hotter than hell,” he muttered.

They wandered around looking for the trail, or any semblance of a trail, or even anything that looked like it once had been a trail, and finally when they came to a small clearing, Shane stopped them and held up his hand.

“Are we lost?” he asked with a smile.

“Shane,” Vic warned.

“Have we managed to get *lost* at the Lost Colony?” Shane posed as he began to laugh.

“That’s not funny,” Vic told him, though he was smiling slightly. He fanned himself with the crumpled brochure, then wiped at the sweat running down his cheek. It was hot and muggy beneath the shelter of the trees, where no wind could

reach them. “I’ve got to start working out again,” he told Shane, slightly out of breath as they stood there.

Shane shook his head, using the back of his hand to wipe at his forehead. “Just remind me never to go camping with you. You’re bad luck,” he claimed as he picked a direction and started off again.

Vic followed, grumbling. When they finally broke free of the trees again, they stood on a well-manicured lawn, looking at the backs of the buildings that made up the restrooms and information centers and research offices of the park. The parking lot stretched out on the other side of the buildings.

“Thank God,” Shane grumbled.

“How the fuck did we circle behind the park?” Vic asked as he wiped at his face again, pulling away bits of the spider web he’d managed to walk through.

“I don’t care,” Shane declared as he looked at Vic. He barked a laugh suddenly. “What’d you do to your face?” he asked as he laughed.

“What? What’s wrong with it?” Vic asked as he poked at his face experimentally.

“You’ve got black all over you,” Shane snickered as he swiped his thumb over Vic’s cheekbone. It came back stained a gray-blue color.

Vic looked down at his fingers. His thumb and forefinger were stained dark.

“Vic, you didn’t really need war paint,” Shane cackled as he took the brochure Vic had been holding. The ink had rubbed off onto his sweaty fingers, and every time he’d wiped at his face, he’d smeared streaks along his skin.

“Son of a bitch,” Vic muttered. Then he began snickering as he wiped at his face with the heel of his hand. “Where is it?” he asked as he looked at his hand again.

“Here, let me.” Shane stepped closer, taking Vic’s face in his hands and swiping at the skin with his thumb.

Vic was caught by how the oddly tender gesture made his stomach tumble. He blinked at Shane in surprise, his chest fluttering a little as Shane’s fingers rubbed the ink away. They were surprisingly rough for a man who spent all his time sitting in a courtroom, but they felt good against Vic’s skin nonetheless.

He’d never had that reaction to Shane before. Shane didn’t seem to notice, his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to wipe the worst of the ink away. Vic swallowed hard, closing his eyes under the pretense of not being poked in the eye, and he just let himself enjoy the attention.

“Well... you’re presentable now anyway,” Shane told him after another moment or two. His voice wavered with amusement. “Maybe we should find a hotel with a shower first, then eat,” he suggested.

Vic opened his eyes, looking at Shane in a slightly different light for a moment. “Yeah,” he finally agreed as they both turned to head for the car.

When they checked into the first inn they came across, a building made to look like an old Tudor mansion with exposed beams painted along the outside, they both were dirty, sweaty, and slightly giddy from the prospect of food and air-conditioning that wasn’t solar powered as they drove.

The woman gave them a dubious glance as she processed Shane’s credit card. “Been a long trip, huh?” she finally asked as she handed Shane his card back.

“You have no idea,” they answered in unison.

“These tourist trap places bother me,” Shane grumbled as they sat at a table near the windows along the water. The restaurant was full of fishing-themed decorations: nets draped the walls, large crabs and small painted buoys hung along them. Other walls were adorned with wooden signs, the type found in beach stores like Wings and Pacific, with cute little sayings carved into them.

“So why are we eating here?” Vic asked in amusement. He enjoyed Shane when he was grumpy, and he wasn’t sure why. It was endearing, to watch a generally happy man search for something to complain about.

“Because it was close,” Shane reminded with a disgruntled huff.

Vic merely smiled at him. Shane narrowed his eyes then broke into a grin he’d obviously tried and failed to contain.

“At least *you’re* happier,” he observed, sounding pleased with himself.

Vic took a moment to analyze the statement. Then he nodded in agreement. He hadn’t thought of Owen all day. And it had been a good day. He pursed his lips, trying to conceal the surprise he felt at that realization.

“I guess some things are better when they end,” he said as he moved his shrimp around with his fork.

Shane watched him carefully. “You really mean that?” he finally asked dubiously.

Vic looked up at him curiously.

“I mean... you’re saying if Owen called you right now and asked you to come back, you wouldn’t go?” Shane clarified.

Vic immediately shook his head. “I am determined,” he said forcefully. “It’ll be better if we both just move on to other things. Better things. That’s my goal for the next month. When I get home, I won’t need him anymore.”

Shane was silent in response. When Vic looked up at him to see his reaction, Shane was watching him speculatively.

“What?” Vic asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“I think you might actually mean that,” Shane observed, his eyes narrowed.

Vic nodded again, emphatically. “Life’s too short to spend it pining away for something you’ll never have.”

Shane jerked just slightly in reaction, blinking and looking away to break their eye contact, but then he nodded and reached for his drink to take a sip. “You’re right,” he said approvingly when he put the glass down.

Vic wondered about the reaction, hoping he hadn’t somehow hit a nerve. Despite all the years they’d been friends, Vic still really didn’t know much about Shane’s past or his personal life. Shane was the type of man who talked about the here and now. He wasn’t cagey or hesitant to answer questions; he just didn’t bother talking much about the past.

Vic watched him, musing over how little he knew about a man he considered one of his best friends. A lot of their time spent together, in fact, was filled with comfortable silences.

Vic returned his attention to his plate, risking one more thoughtful glance at Shane as they ate.

“It’s the crack of dawn, Shane. What the hell are we doing up?” Vic asked tiredly as they got out of the car and looked around the nearly deserted parking lot. It was just now eight a.m., but the sun was already bearing down on them and the humidity was off the chart.

“I figured if we hit the outdoor places early it wouldn’t be so hot,” Shane answered apologetically. But not only was it already hot, it was so early that the sun hadn’t yet had the chance to burn away any moisture. Vic’s clothing was already sticking to him. Vic looked at him and Shane shrugged. “Live and learn?” he tried with a hopeful smile.

Vic rolled his eyes and smiled. “Come on,” he said as he grabbed a bottle of water and slid it into his pocket. He and Shane headed for the entrance to Jockey’s Ridge, walking past the building with the restrooms and toward a sidewalk with signs pointing the way.

Printouts encased in plastic warned visitors to drink plenty of water and heed the heat warnings. Vic groaned.

They started up the wooden walkway and were immediately met with a staircase that led up at least three stories high.

“Fuck, no,” Vic said immediately. “Isn’t there an elevator or something?” he whined as Shane laughed and took his elbow.

“Come on, Counselor,” he instructed as he pulled Vic toward the stairs.

“I thought Jockey’s Ridge was just sand dunes!” Vic protested. “What the hell kind of sand dunes need a mile of steps?”

“Really big ones,” Shane said with relish as they started up the wooden stairs.

By the time they got to the top, they were both breathing heavily and sweating profusely. There was a strong wind that cooled their skin, combating the sunshine, but it wasn't nearly enough. The hem of the shorts Vic wore whipped around at his thighs, and his T-shirt plastered to his chest and stomach as the wind pummeled them.

They looked around the expanse, both silent as they took it in. These weren't sand dunes—they were mountains! Vic stared, openmouthed. Piles of sand rose in every direction, divided by valleys where the wind hadn't yet swept away the footprints of those who'd come before them.

On one peak a group of people seemed to be taking a class. As Vic watched, a man attached to a hang glider ran off the side of the sand dune and sailed into the air.

"Cool," Shane drawled as he eyed the flying man.

"Hell, no," Vic said immediately. "My feet don't leave earth," he declared as he looked around again. There were no steps to get down into the first valley. Just a steep wall of sand as you stepped off the wooden platform.

"First one to the bottom?" Shane asked with a grin.

"I refuse to break my neck rolling down a sand dune," Vic said with a shake of his head.

"Spoilsport," Shane muttered as he stepped off the platform and immediately slid four feet down the side of the sand dune. He managed to keep his balance, laughing as he began making his way down. With each step he picked up speed and soon he was hopping through the sand, practically running down the hill.

Vic watched until Shane made it to the bottom, smiling crookedly. He decided to throw caution to the wind and follow suit, so he leapt from the platform and hopped his way down

the side of the sand dune just as Shane had done. By the time he reached the bottom, he'd picked up enough speed that trying to stop would inevitably end up hurling him face-first into the sand. Shane grabbed him as the ground evened out, both of them nearly losing their balance and laughing like schoolchildren playing in a sandbox.

Once Vic righted himself, he was again struck by how natural Shane's arm around him felt. His breath on Vic's neck as he laughed was a welcome feeling too. Vic didn't move, hoping to prolong the moment. Shane stepped back, his hand lingering on Vic's back as he looked up at the nearest sand dune. It towered over them, and they stood looking at it, their arms around each other.

"Well," Shane finally said determinedly, letting his hand slip off Vic's back. "Ready?" he asked with a gesture to the top of the sand dune.

Vic groaned, and they began the difficult climb up the sand, helping each other up, occasionally sliding back in the loose sand, and struggling until they were both crawling on hands and knees to the top.

Once there, though, they didn't even try to regain their feet. They just stayed on their hands and knees, staring out over the view. This one was by far taller than the platform, and they could see almost the entire site that bore the name Jockey's Ridge.

The name elicited images of a straight line of dunes, like you saw along the beaches, only bigger. A ridge of sand dunes. They were anything but. Vic had never imagined they were like this: clustered and widespread and larger than he could have ever guessed. The water lay just beyond the last dune in the distance.

They sat down in the sand, sweat dripping off them and mixing with the fine sand to stick to their bodies. They would worry about that when they got back to the car, though. They sat together in silence, watching the would-be hang gliders as they fought the wind, watching as other people scaled the sand dunes and made their precarious ways down them, watching the world go slowly by.

The sun beat down on them as they passed the bottle of water back and forth, and finally Vic could feel his nose and cheeks burning.

“You about ready?” he asked Shane softly.

“I think so,” Shane answered happily. “If our goal was to get sand in every imaginable crevice, then... mission accomplished,” he added as he struggled to his feet and wiped at the stray sand clinging to him.

Vic laughed as Shane helped him to his feet. “And the day’s just begun,” he crooned.

The first thing Vic thought when they drove into the massive parking lot of the Wright Brothers memorial was that he was grateful it was on flat land and devoid of sand.

That was before he saw the hill.

The location was mostly flat, with a wide open field where the Wright Brothers had tested their airplanes and eventually taken to the skies. A large building sat to the side of it, housing a museum and visitor’s information. Vic and Shane bypassed the building and followed the path that would walk them out toward the field. It was just before noon, and there were people

everywhere. They didn't want to be herded into the building with everyone else and get stuck in the crowd.

The field stretched out before them. Signs requested people to stay on the walkways. In the distance, on the far end of the flat field, there was a hill.

"That's a big hill," Shane said in a flat voice as they stared at it.

Vic groaned loudly. On top of the hill was the monument, and on either side of it a graceful, arcing pathway led around and up the hill.

Vic looked down at his flip-flops. "If I'd known we were mountain climbing today, I would have come prepared."

"Quit your whining," Shane scolded, but he didn't look very enthused about taking the long walk up the path either.

They looked at each other critically, each wondering if the other would be willing to forego the hill in favor of just saying they'd seen the field. Vic shook his head.

"We drove all the way down here," he reminded.

Shane pursed his lips and then groaned just as Vic had. They started off together toward the big hill.

"We're stopping at the first tourist trap we see and I'm getting a drink with an umbrella in it," Shane declared as they walked. "The kind that tastes like fruit and when you stand up after drinking one they hit you with an invisible hammer."

The distance to the hill stretched out in front of them, becoming longer and longer as they walked in the sweltering sun.

"Me too," Vic agreed.

When they got to the top it was nearly twenty minutes after they'd arrived. They looked around them silently. People

swarmed the monument on top of the hill, sitting on the benches that surrounded it, gulping down water, some of them even eating lunches they'd packed. Kids ran around with boundless energy.

Vic peered at the monument, wholly unimpressed as he tried to catch his breath.

"Well," Shane finally said under his breath. "At least we can say we saw it."

Vic snickered and nodded toward the opposite walkway, the one that led down. "Ready for liquor?"

"Oh, yeah," Shane said with relish, and they started down the hill once more.

They stopped at a Walgreens and bought baby wipes, using them to wipe off the sweat and sand and grime. Vic didn't feel much cleaner, but they had a long drive ahead of them, and being covered in sand and sweat was not the way Vic wanted to go.

They ate at another tourist trap that Shane claimed made his teeth itch, but the drinks were good and strong and they sat there talking and eating hush puppies until Vic was sure he could stand without meeting the hammer.

Then they were off, driving south along the barrier islands toward Shane's cottage on the ocean. They stopped to see each lighthouse, foregoing climbing to the top of each one in favor of just driving through the overflowing parking lots to peer up at them and then moving on each time.

Every store they came to seemed to be named after the pirate Blackbeard in some way; every possible permutation of many of his aliases or anything to do with him graced the signs

they passed, the most common being Edward Teach and the Queen Anne's Revenge. They all sold pirate souvenirs and OBX stickers and floppy straw hats. As they went farther south, the stores thinned out until the occasional country food mart and gas station were the only places they saw.

Hours of driving later, they almost missed the ferry they hadn't known they were going to have to take, but after a half-hour wait for the next—and last—ferry of the day, they were soon sailing off to the next barrier island where they would finally come to Shane's cottage.

Rather than sitting in the car or inside the little lobby of the ferry, Vic stood at the railing in the front, bending into the breeze, rocking with the violent motion of the ferry, face upturned as the sea spray cooled his face.

"I think I was a sailor in a past life," he told Shane as the other man joined him at the edge of the railing. They had to shout to be heard over the roar of the wind and water.

"Yeah?" Shane said curiously, a tinge of amusement in his voice. He held to the railing until he got his feet under him, then let go when he was sure he was steady and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his shorts.

"The sea calls to me. Always has," Vic murmured by way of answering. He was blushing slightly as he said it. Shane was a little too grounded to really believe the past life type of thing, but he was also a good enough friend to humor Vic if he wanted to talk about it.

"I never would have thought of you and the sea," Shane said thoughtfully as he looked out over the water. "You and ships, maybe. That sort of fits. Were you a happy sailor or did you drown?"

“I doubt I’d be drawn to the sea if I had drowned,” Vic laughed.

He didn’t even know if what he said was plausible or if it was just too much new-age bullshit from the law firm’s touchy-feely retreats he’d been soaking in. He liked the thought of something calling to him, though, something that went deeper than just this lifetime.

He hummed and smiled. “What calls to you, Shane?” he asked curiously. Vic felt Shane shift beside him, probably turning to look at him, but Shane remained silent and Vic finally turned to see that the other man was leaning on the railing and looking at him calmly.

“I don’t know,” Shane finally answered softly, so softly that Vic almost couldn’t hear over the noise. “Never thought much of it.”

“Nothing calls to you?” Vic asked incredulously. “Nothing out there makes you just want to... breathe it in and become part of it when you see it?”

Shane looked at him thoughtfully for several moments, and then he transferred his clear green eyes back to the roiling ocean. “I suppose not,” he finally answered.

Vic watched him for several moments, suddenly inexplicably sad. Surely something impassioned Shane, other than his Gamecocks and Braves, of course. But something had to be out there, speaking to Shane and calling him. Shane was far too alive to be devoid of passion.

They had an entire month together—four weeks in which neither man had any responsibilities other than to sit on their respective asses and drink—, and Vic promised himself that would be one of his goals, finding Shane’s Shiny Things.

The only other goal he had at the moment was to make certain he got home and no longer needed Owen, and Vic was pretty sure that having only one goal and not reaching it would do some damage to his ego. Having two goals was better.

Maybe he'd make it a goal to make more goals. That upped the count to three.

Shane glanced over at him and snorted. "Does it bother you? That I have nothing calling to me?" he asked him in amusement as he saw the frown still on Vic's face.

"A little, yeah," Vic admitted. "I mean, I thought I led a meaningless, depressing existence. Yours is even worse," he teased.

Shane barked a laugh and shook his head, unable to come up with a response.

"What say we get shitfaced when we get there, then, and think of something for you to love?" Vic suggested as he threw his arm around Shane's shoulders.

Shane laughed again and nodded, and they watched the ocean roll by together.

Four hours and a torrential rain later, Shane and Vic were practically crawling through the front door of Shane's house on the coast of North Carolina. It was south of the more popular destination of the Outer Banks, for the very reason Shane and Vic had just discovered. Too many tourists, too many hills, not enough umbrella drinks in the world to compensate for the crowds and hassle.

Here it was quieter, not yet commercialized. The house wasn't glamorous, but that had been exactly what Shane had

wanted when he'd bought it; a nice run-down old beachfront cottage with no lawn to mow and no neighbors to bother him.

It had been built before the environmental protection laws prohibited the destruction of the sand dunes, and when they walked through the living room and out onto the little deck behind, it was quite a shocking sight to see the ocean just there, almost at their feet. No sand dunes to block the view. Just... a house sitting in the sand.

There was a short walkway and a deck, one that Shane had added several years back, with a hot tub in the corner. But the deck was more to protect the inside of the house from sand and water than it was anything else, and to keep people from wandering off the beach into the hot tub.

"Wow," Vic said quietly as he looked out over the dark water. He'd been invited many times, but this was his first trip here.

"Next hurricane to come through will take her with it," Shane mused. He didn't sound very upset, almost like he accepted the little house's fate and was prepared for the day. "The riptides have been bad the last few years," he added as he headed down the walkway and stepped onto the sand.

Vic followed, shielding his eyes from the sun as he peered down the beach. A red flag flapped in the breeze several hundred yards away, where the public beach access was, to warn swimmers to stay out of the water.

"Guy at the grocery store said two guys got pulled down just yesterday," Shane murmured distractedly as he squinted and shaded his eyes from the sun.

"The Atlantic's a mean bitch," Vic told him as he walked out even farther and went all the way to the edge of the scant saw grass. He looked down at the white sand, then back up at

the roiling ocean with a smile. The sun was just falling below the horizon, setting the ocean ablaze. Vic loved the ocean in any form. He loved the sound. He loved the smell. He loved standing here as his feet sank into the sand and watching the waves crash one after another.

He glanced over at Shane and smiled wider. And he couldn't ask for better company right now.

III

“I can’t sleep for shit,” Vic griped as he flopped himself into the brightly painted Adirondack chair beside Shane.

Shane managed to raise one eyelid and peer at him for several seconds before letting it close again and smiling softly.

“I see you take pleasure in my suffering,” Vic snarled as he tried to get comfortable in the wooden chair that Shane had dragged to the edge of the deck.

“I take pleasure where I can get it,” Shane murmured, his voice slurred from sleep and the copious amounts of liquor they had consumed the night before.

“Yeah, well... why aren’t we down there in the sand?” Vic asked for the fifteenth time since they had dragged themselves out of the house that morning.

“Too far,” Shane grunted.

“Uh-huh,” Vic responded flatly as he looked sideways at Shane. “Did you think about *not* pilfering the big-ass wooden chairs from the deck and maybe taking a towel down there instead?”

“Too cold,” Shane claimed without opening his eyes.

“It’s August.”

“Too sandy, then.”

“What the hell, Simpson?”

“Relax, Vic. It’s your vacation,” Shane reminded through a sleepy grin as he rested his head on the back of his own chair. “I’m tired and it’s a long way down there. You looked like you were sleeping pretty well this morning when I checked on you,” he added, his train of thought obviously skipping around on him.

“When I finally got to sleep, yeah,” Vic answered testily. “That mattress is... horrendous. Have you ever actually slept in it or do you use it to repel long-term guests? It’s like sleeping on a plank.”

“Should make the reincarnated sailor in you feel at home,” Shane told him with obvious enjoyment.

“I’d have been better off on the floor,” Vic insisted, ignoring the remark for lack of anything clever to say in response to it.

“Hmm. Mine was okay,” Shane said contentedly, his voice more of a purr than anything else.

“Good,” Vic snapped. “We’ll switch, then.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That can be arranged, Your Honor,” Vic murmured as he shifted in the wooden chair again.

Shane snickered and finally sat up. “I’ve got some of those pills Owen recommended to me a while back,” he said as he stretched his arms over his head and looked out over the dark ocean contentedly. “Melatonin. You put them under your tongue and let them dissolve. Helps you sleep. Makes your mouth scream, though,” he added thoughtfully. “You get used to it.”

Vic’s mind had latched onto Owen’s name and was having a hard time letting go, but he fought any errant thoughts and focused on what Shane was saying. He thought about asking

what your mouth screaming felt like, but he decided to let that comment pass.

“I’ll try those tonight then, if that’s okay,” he said as he rubbed his sore neck.

“Where’re the drinks?” Shane asked without acknowledging Vic’s acceptance of the offer.

“What?” Vic asked as he put on his sunglasses.

“You went in to get drinks,” Shane told him.

“I went in to take a piss,” Vic corrected.

“But you always bring back drinks when you go in. It’s the rule,” Shane said in an oddly innocent voice that made Vic want to laugh despite himself.

“Whose rule?” he asked incredulously.

“My rule. Our rule. *The* rule,” Shane answered emphatically. “You always bring back drinks.”

“It’s nine o’clock in the morning!” Vic told him, finally giving in to the urge to laugh.

“So? Normal etiquette does not apply when your ass is in the sand and your feet are in the water and—”

“Well, drag your ass into the sand and I’ll toss you a drink,” Vic said flippantly as he settled back into the chair.

“It’s really windy out there,” Shane pointed out plaintively. “And the sand is hot.”

“So?” Vic prodded.

“Superheated windblown sand hurts,” Shane told him as he settled back into his chair as well.

Vic laughed softly and closed his eyes.

“What are we gonna do today?” Vic asked after a few moments of comfortable silence.

“You’re gonna go get the drinks,” Shane said confidently.

“Fuck you. What else are we gonna do?”

“I thought we were doing it,” Shane answered happily.

“Beautiful.”

Vic awoke shaking for the third night in a row, so scared that he could barely move. He rarely had dreams at all, not any that he could remember clearly anyway, and never were they as vivid as these past few nights’ had been. Nor so gruesome.

He looked over at the clock by the bed, barely moving his head for fear that the darkness would find him awake and easy to prey upon. He couldn’t remember being this scared after a dream since he had been a little boy. What the hell was his problem?

It was nearly three in the morning. Not late enough to get out of bed without having to explain to Shane that he’d had a bad dream and was terrified to go back to sleep. He could only imagine the incredulous look that would steal over the other man’s face when he heard that.

Thirty-seven years old and having night terrors, he thought in displeasure, the fear not having ebbed enough to allow him to grumble it out loud.

He was still frozen to the spot in which he had awoken. Still shaking. Still clutching the covers to him as if they could ward off evil. Still too frightened to even squeak for help. Was this what panic attacks felt like? When you had one did you know even as you were panicking that you were a fool for doing it?

“Vic?” Shane’s soft voice whispered questioningly from the doorway.

Vic inhaled deeply, gasping for breath as relief washed over him to know that someone else in the world was alive and breathing, but he still couldn’t say anything.

“Vic, you okay?” Shane asked in a louder voice.

“No,” Vic breathed.

“What’s wrong?” Shane asked immediately as he walked into the room and flipped on the light switch.

Nothing happened and Shane cursed softly.

Vic closed his eyes and remembered that there were no overhead lights. The switch was attached to the lamps, and he had cut them both off at the source when he had gone to bed.

“Are you sick? Vic?” Shane asked as he ventured carefully into the room.

“I’m okay,” Vic managed to whisper after hearing the rising panic in Shane’s voice.

“You cried out,” Shane told him as he edged into the dark room, going slowly so as not to trip or ram his toes into anything. “You cried for help. What’s wrong?”

“Nightmare,” Vic managed to say as Shane’s presence began to relax him.

“Oh,” Shane said, sounding slightly let down.

“Jesus,” Vic murmured. “I’ve never had such bad dreams in my life.”

“It’s the melatonin,” Shane said softly as Vic felt the light thump of his hands patting the mattress. “A side effect is that it intensifies dreams. Makes them more vivid.”

“You could have mentioned that,” Vic said flatly as his body began to calm and the shaking subsided. “What kind of sleep aid gives you bad dreams?”

“Doesn’t affect good or bad,” Shane said matter-of-factly as he pulled back the covers of Vic’s bed and sat down beside him. “Just intensifies them, I guess. What kind of dreams are you having?”

“Horrible ones. Bloody ones,” Vic mumbled as he blushed furiously in the darkness and rubbed his face. It was embarrassing to have Shane there, witnessing the freak-out. Comforting, but embarrassing all the same. “People-being-chopped-up kind of dreams,” he said. “Gore and blood and... I think I was attacked by Bigfoot at the end.”

“Bigfoot?” Shane asked with a smile in his voice as he leaned back onto his elbow and lay down beside Vic.

“Pretty sure it was Bigfoot,” Vic affirmed. “He jumped into my car.”

“I’m betting the car ran screaming and left you behind?” Shane asked, barely managing not to laugh.

“Shut up,” Vic muttered.

“Do we need to analyze these dreams for hidden meaning?” Shane asked teasingly.

“It’s not funny,” Vic told him seriously.

“Sorry,” Shane said solemnly as he cleared his throat and settled into the bed. “Wow, you weren’t kidding,” he murmured as Vic wondered what the hell he was doing. “This mattress is horrible.”

“What are you doing?” Vic asked, unable to refrain from asking.

“I’m lying down with you,” Shane replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“I’m not five,” Vic protested.

“No, but you still called out for help in the middle of the night and scared the living shit out of me,” Shane argued. “At least if I’m here I can smack you next time you do it.”

“Fair enough,” Vic agreed sulkily, flushing once more at the thought that he had actually cried out because of a bad dream. In front of Shane, no less. “Hold me?” he asked cheekily, batting his eyelashes and holding his hands clasped under his chin as he tried to cover the embarrassment with a joke.

Shane snickered slightly, but then to Vic’s utter astonishment, he rolled onto his side and slid one arm beneath Vic’s head and wrapped the other over Vic’s chest. Vic automatically turned into the embrace, and before he knew it Shane really was actually holding him, his breath gusting against the back of Vic’s neck as he chuckled.

“Anyone finds us like this, we blame it on the liquor,” Shane said in a low voice full of laughter.

Vic snickered a little in response, and allowed Shane’s comforting presence to lull him back to sleep.

Vic awoke with a gasp and sat straight up in bed, his breathing coming in short, painful bursts and his heart pounding in his chest as the terror overtook him once more.

“It’s all right,” Shane’s sleep-roughened voice told him gently as a hand tugged at his shoulder. “Vic... calm down. It’s okay,” he coaxed as he sat up with Vic and rubbed his back.

“Can we just get up now?” Vic asked shakily. He turned his head to see the clock, which told him that it was just half past four in the morning.

“Come here,” Shane said in a gruff voice, and he tugged at Vic once more.

Vic relaxed back into him and allowed Shane to turn him over until Vic’s head was resting on Shane’s shoulder and his hand was clutching at the thin T-shirt Shane had worn to bed. He was still shaking from another horrendously gruesome dream, and he couldn’t believe that he was making such a scene of himself in front of the other man. He wasn’t exactly the fainting maiden type, usually.

Regardless, he was glad that Shane was there, and glad that he was comfortable enough with their friendship to hold him like he was and keep the dreams at bay.

“Not many men would hold a friend after a nightmare,” he mused quietly as Shane held him tightly.

“That’s not true,” Shane said sleepily, his body already relaxing as sleep overtook him once more. “No one in his right mind would leave someone like you alone when you needed him,” he mumbled.

Vic tensed, his mind almost immediately going to Owen. But to his surprise, his thoughts quickly jumped back to Shane, lingering on how natural it felt to lay here with him. He felt like Shane’s priority right now, and he had rarely gotten that feeling in the past five years. He held his breath and waited for Shane to say more, but nothing more came. Soon Shane’s soft, regular breathing told Vic that his friend was asleep once again.

The comment had obviously been pointed, whether Shane had intended it to be or not. Vic told himself that he couldn’t

help what Shane thought of Owen, or of him. Not now, anyway. But maybe he had a chance to change Shane's opinion of him. He knew one thing: he didn't want to be judged by the way he let Owen treat him.

Vic sighed, letting it go for the moment as his body relaxed back into sleep.

"Hey," Shane said groggily as soon as Vic opened his eyes. His head was no longer resting on Shane's shoulder; in fact, they were no longer touching at all, but they were both lying on their sides, facing each other. Vic smiled lopsidedly at the other man.

"Morning," he replied roughly.

"You were right. This mattress is shit," Shane said flatly.

Vic snorted and closed his eyes again. "That mean you're not switching with me, then?" he asked wryly, his voice hoarse with sleep.

"No," Shane said immediately. "I mean yes, that's what it means. But I'd be willing to share the good mattress," Shane offered after a moment of thought. "No groping me, though. I know how you operate."

"Deal. Deal deal deal," Vic agreed happily, crooning the words as he rolled onto his back. He could already hear his back and neck muscles singing Shane's praises. "Give us a kiss," he requested cheekily as he turned his head to Shane and puckered his lips comically.

"Get away, you silly bastard," Shane muttered as he placed his hand over Vic's face and pushed him away. Vic gave him several smacking kisses and then an outright lick on the palm of his hand for his trouble. "Ugh," he said in disgust as he

pulled his now-wet hand away and then wiped it on Vic's shoulder.

Vic snickered as Shane scooted away from him, the other man cussing at him right up until the point where he tumbled off the edge of the bed.

"I thought I was your shiny thing!" Vic wailed dramatically as he flopped himself across the mattress and snuffled against the pillow.

"Fucker," Shane grumbled as he stuck his head up over the edge of the bed and glared up at Vic. "Go brush your teeth. Then we'll talk."

Vic stood chest high in the water and watched in amusement as Shane paced at the water's edge. He would come in eventually—his pride wouldn't stand for it much longer—, but watching him try to work up the nerve to put his toes in the cold water was entirely too amusing. The storm they'd driven through to get there had brought with it mild weather and cold, calm water. It was absolutely heavenly.

Vic chuckled to himself and splashed a little, kicking off the ocean's floor and floating over a wave, allowing his toes to breach the water's surface briefly before he set them back down once more.

"Water's just right!" he called, stifling a chuckle as Shane glared out at him.

"It's freaking cold, man!" Shane called back.

He was right, of course. The water was so cold that it had made Vic lightheaded as he made his way past the breakers, and he had shivered uncontrollably for several minutes,

gasping for breath whenever a wave would hit skin that wasn't submerged. He had suffered all this in silence, knowing that one squeak about how cold it was would drive Shane right back to his little beach chair and Vic would never get him in the water.

"It's fine after a while," Vic coaxed.

"Yeah, well so is being sober, but you don't see me rushing to do that anytime soon," Shane called back.

"You're not afraid of seaweed, are you?" Vic asked tauntingly.

Five years ago Shane would have visibly bristled at the taunt, and he would have waded in just to prove that he wasn't frightened of anything. Now, though, he simply made a *pffft* noise that Vic heard all the way from where he was. Several women walking down the beach chattered and giggled, and Vic saw Shane roll his eyes as he realized that the only way to avoid any public embarrassment was to come into the water.

Vic grinned widely as Shane finally slumped his shoulders and walked into the water that was lapping at his toes. He stifled his laughter when he saw Shane gasp and close his eyes as a wave splashed the upper portion of his body.

Shane opened his eyes and glared at Vic again, trooping forward still and finally making it past the breakers and submerging his body up to his shoulders before swimming the rest of the way out to where Vic floated.

"I h-hate you," he told Vic through chattering teeth.

"You know, they probably didn't care that you were being a pansy," Vic said thoughtfully as the women walked by and Shane shivered next to him.

"I hate y-you," Shane stuttered.

“This was your idea, now,” Vic scolded, waving his finger through the air and sprinkling Shane with water.

“My idea c-consisted of getting a t-tan and g-getting consistently drunk,” Shane protested as his jaw began to lock on him. “W-wet and cold had nothing to d-do with either.”

“You’re pitiful, you know that?” Vic said with a laugh.

“If I am, then it’s y-your f-fault,” Shane stuttered as he shivered and submerged himself all the way until his nose touched the water.

“Loosen up,” Vic told him with a laugh as he waded over to him.

Shane bobbed his head up out of the water and lifted his chin as Vic neared him.

“If you’re all tight then you’ll just shiver more and more until your teeth all crack,” Vic advised.

“I’ll c-crack *your* teeth if you even think about d-dunking me,” Shane growled as he eyed Vic warily. He wasn’t very threatening, crouched low in the water and looking up at Vic like he was, but Vic stopped moving and gave the other man his most innocent look, which, judging from the way Shane then snarled at him, was not very convincing.

“I won’t dunk you, because then you’d hit me, and I’d bleed, and then we’d get attacked by sharks,” Vic told him as he started moving once more. He placed his hands on each of Shane’s biceps and rubbed up and down slowly as he lowered himself to Shane’s level. He gasped a little as the cold water hit his neck. “Just loosen up. You’ll be okay in a sec,” he said as Shane watched him warily.

“I was bitten by a sh-shark once,” Shane said haughtily.

“No you weren’t. You fell off your mama’s kitchen table when you were little and cut your leg open,” Vic told him with a laugh. “And you like to tell gullible lawyers that it was a shark bite so they’ll think you’re tough and scary.”

“Heard that s-story already, huh?” Shane asked with a grin and a shiver.

“Every time we have too much to drink and you can see the ocean,” Vic told him affectionately as he rubbed Shane’s arms harder and they bobbed together in the gently rolling waves. The flag flying today was a green one or they’d probably already have been taken by the riptides.

“Why are we out here when it’s this cold?” Shane practically whined. At least his teeth had stopped chattering.

“Because it’s relaxing. Shut up. And stop shivering,” Vic told him as he let him go. He kicked off the ocean floor and relaxed back into a full body float.

Shane stood there shivering, watching him as Vic floated with his face up to the sky, and smiled blissfully at the peace offered by the sound of the ocean and nothing else in his ears. Then, just before Vic sensed the trouble coming, Shane moved, placing his hand over Vic’s face and shoving him beneath the calm surface of the water.

Vic flailed and tried not to snort water up his nose as Shane held him there briefly, and when he popped back up Shane was laughing merrily and backing away from him with his hands held out in front of him.

“It’s relaxing, Vic,” he reminded condescendingly.

Vic leapt at him and tackled him, wrapping his arms around Shane’s shoulders and doing his best to pull the man’s feet off the sand and drag him under. Shane planted his legs wide and wrapped his arms around Vic’s torso, attempting the

same thing and handling it in a much more professional manner, and within seconds Vic was under water again.

When he came back up he floated with his feet just above the ocean floor, not even bothering to struggle as Shane held him close to his body in order to prevent his attacking again. He blinked the water from his eyes and glared balefully at Shane as the man snickered and grinned.

“Jackass,” Vic declared as he sputtered water and tilted his head to avoid banging his nose against Shane’s.

Shane breathed out heavily through his nose as he tried to stop laughing, and Vic closed his eyes to avoid getting more saltwater in them. Shane had yet to let him go, and the other man still shivered slightly as Vic relaxed in his embrace. He once again let himself fall into the now-familiar feeling of Shane’s arms around him, enjoying how good it felt and the little jolt of pleasure in his chest that it caused.

He gasped in surprise when Shane’s nose nudged against his cheek and the corners of their mouths brushed ever so slightly.

Was Shane about to kiss him, or had it just been the passing wave that had pressed them close together? Vic immediately dismissed the idea as silly. Shane wouldn’t kiss him, not out here in the middle of the ocean like this. Not when... they were holding onto each other, their naked chests pressed into each other like this. Not when Shane had spent the night holding him to ward off nightmares. Right?

Vic gasped again when Shane’s lips brushed against his, not a kiss, but certainly a gesture of intimacy that Vic and Shane had never shared. It seemed like time ceased to be as he felt the other man’s heart race in time with his and waited for another move to be made. What the hell was going on here?

This was Shane. Shane, who he'd known for five years, and who'd never once displayed a hint of interest.

Shane seemed to be holding his breath as his mouth hovered right at the edge of Vic's, barely pressed against the damp skin. Finally, he tilted his head just slightly, and Vic thought for certain that he was going to kiss him. He was slightly shocked to realize that he wanted Shane to kiss him. There had always been a sort of latent attraction there for Vic, but he'd always been too caught up in his self-destructive tailspin with Owen to ponder it. Vic had let anything he felt for Shane slide into an easy friendship with no regrets. Now, though, this was definitely not a friendship kind of moment.

Vic parted his lips slightly in expectation of a kiss, but almost as their lips were about to touch, a swell floated them up and slightly apart. Shane's head slid away as they floated in the trough between the first wave and the next. He didn't move to try to kiss Vic again. He buried his face instead into Vic's neck and mumbled, "You're warm," as he pulled Vic closer.

Vic inhaled deeply, disappointment ripping through him quickly before he recovered his wits and murmured, "Told you it gets better."

"I can't imagine how it could," Shane whispered back to him.

Then Shane pulled away suddenly and turned to make his way back to the beach without another word. As he watched him go, Vic was already in the process of wondering if he had imagined it all.

IV

Vic stepped through the open sliding glass door and squinted into the relative darkness of the little cottage, looking for Shane. He had watched from the water as Shane had completely bypassed their chairs and gone straight up the walkway to the house, and he had known that if things were left unsaid about what had just happened, or not happened really, then there would be problems. Vic's main problem was that he'd wanted that kiss more than he'd ever known.

"What the hell, man?" he asked incredulously as he stepped into the cold living room, still dripping wet and gasping when the air from the air conditioner hit him.

"What? I was coming back. I just got more beer," Shane told him innocently as he stepped around the L-shaped counter and walked toward him slowly, holding out a bottle as he did so.

"Not... not.... What was that?" Vic demanded in frustration, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder at the sea behind him.

What may have been dread flashed through Shane's eyes, and he lowered the beer he'd been offering and looked away uncomfortably. Vic remembered the day in the car when Shane had so kindly let him off the hook as they'd been talking about Owen, and he wondered if it wasn't time to return the favor. He knew that they could drop it here and now by mutual consent, and it would never be spoken of again. It would be chalked up

to too much beer and too much sun and it would simply fade into a funny anecdote.

But no... no, Vic couldn't let that happen. He had wanted that kiss entirely too much to let an explanation for it not having happened just slip away. He didn't want this opportunity to fade into anything. He took a step closer and looked at Shane pointedly, silently demanding that the other man meet his stare. Shane looked at him briefly and winced.

"I'm sorry," Shane finally said softly. "Don't know what I was thinking. Must have been the—"

"Don't you dare blame anything on alcohol," Vic said softly as he stepped closer.

Shane looked almost frightened then, and Vic could practically read his thoughts. Had he made a stupid move and screwed up the friendship? Vic knew this was what the other man was thinking, because he had thought the same thing after that first reckless kiss he had given Owen five years ago. They had been drunk on tequila, sitting around the veranda of some bar in the city late one night after a difficult day in court, when Owen had confessed to having a slight crush on Vic. Seconds later, Vic had been holding Owen's face in his hands, trying to crawl down his throat and set up camp. Right after they had parted, Vic knew he'd had the same look in his eyes that Shane did now.

"Were you... were you going to kiss me out there?" Vic asked carefully.

Shane flushed and looked away again. "Thought may've crossed my mind," he mumbled as he looked down, avoiding Vic's eyes as best he could.

Vic stepped closer, into his line of sight, and leaned forward slightly. He knew he should just let it slide, save Shane

the embarrassment and save his body the torment of wondering what Shane would feel like next to him. Beneath him. Inside him.

Shane's head jerked up and he inhaled sharply as Vic forced himself into his personal space. "What are you doing?" he whispered with difficulty as Vic's nose brushed gently against his cheek.

"Hoping that it'll cross your mind again," Vic whispered, letting his lips move ever so slightly against the skin of Shane's face as he spoke.

Shane was having difficulty breathing as Vic got closer, his breaths coming in short, quick gasps as Vic tilted his head slightly and allowed his lips to brush over Shane's. When Vic parted his mouth and let his lower lip drag slowly over Shane's, Shane quit breathing entirely. His eyes drifted closed and he tilted his head back slightly, his mouth parting as their lips met gently for the first time, barely grazing at the edges of their mouths.

Vic edged forward more, closing his lips finally in a soft kiss at the corner of Shane's mouth, and Shane exhaled in a short little burst of air as Vic's hand touched his hip gently. Another soft kiss, and Shane tilted his head back down and returned the touch to his lips tentatively, his body taut as a bowstring in case Vic changed his mind suddenly and he had to beat a hasty retreat.

Vic placed several more light, chaste kisses on the corner of Shane's open mouth as the man struggled for breath, his lips closing gently over Shane's and tugging coaxingly, trying to get him to return the kisses. Finally, he let his tongue lick lightly at the corner of Shane's mouth, still tentative but wanting more. Shane reacted almost instantly by tilting his head to the side suddenly and gripping Vic to him. He crushed

their mouths together in an openmouthed, hungry kiss, and Vic moaned in surprise as he was swept up in Shane's sudden burst of barely controlled passion.

One of the beer bottles Shane held in his hands fell to the ground as Vic wrapped his arms around Shane's body, and Shane did the same to him, holding him tightly as their tongues met in slow, languid laps over and over, teeth nipping at salty lips as they tried to get closer and closer to each other. The other bottle fell to the ground and clanked against the leg of the coffee table as it rolled and spewed beer all over the floor. Shane's hands slid up Vic's body to trap his arms where they were and tangle in his hair as he pulled Vic closer.

There was no battle of wills, as Vic would have expected from his headstrong friend, but rather a give-and-take back-and-forth that thrilled him beyond anything he had felt in quite some time. Shane's arms around his were strong and yet somehow intriguingly unconfident. Vic let his hands run over the smooth, slightly burnt skin of Shane's back tentatively, wanting so much more even as his mind reeled over what they somehow found themselves doing. They both pulled back slightly after what seemed a delicious eternity of contact and clung to each other, each breathing hard and unwilling to release the other.

"I don't... know what to say," Vic gasped as he hid his face against Shane's cheek and held Shane close to him to keep him from being able to look him in the eye.

Shane breathed heavily against his neck and nodded silently.

"I had no idea," he said with a little laugh as Shane tried to pull away. Vic held him there, unable to meet his eyes just yet. These were the types of conversations that should be had in the dark, lying in bed where you can stare at the ceiling and

hide your embarrassment from all but the night. “How long have you...?” He searched for the right word and failed.

“Wanted you,” Shane supplied breathlessly. Vic nodded. “Years,” he answered in a pained voice.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Vic asked in disbelief.

“I knew you were hung up on Owen,” Shane admitted. “I didn’t want to complicate things. Vic...” He pulled away a little more forcefully, and Vic looked down at his sandy feet in a momentary panic as Shane held him at arm’s length and looked at him. “You okay?” Shane whispered, and Vic looked up at him through his lowered lashes.

“You’re a damn fine kisser,” he murmured with a weak smile.

Shane’s hand rested against Vic’s cheek briefly and then he smiled crookedly and began to chuckle.

Vic couldn’t help but grin a little at the unexpected reaction. He snorted incredulously just before Shane kissed him again. Vic moaned in surprise and allowed Shane to control the kiss this time, distantly observing that the other man was more confident in his actions now.

Vic sighed brokenly into Shane’s mouth and Shane’s breath hitched slightly. When he pulled back it was just enough to allow them to speak, their lips still brushing together as they did so.

“What the hell are we doing?” Vic whispered in confusion.

“I don’t know,” Shane answered in the same tone of voice. “I know what I want to do,” he added in a barely audible whisper.

Vic would have thought he imagined it once more if he hadn't been able to feel Shane's lips moving and his breath gusting across his own lips.

"But... this shouldn't..." Shane trailed off and backed away slightly as he tried to formulate his words.

Vic couldn't help himself, and before Shane could continue, Vic pressed their mouths together with just a little nudge of his chin.

Shane's breath hitched again, a delightful sensation in Vic's mouth, and Vic let his hands slide slowly down the sides of Shane's rib cage until his fingertips rested just beneath the wet waistband of Shane's bathing suit. He half-expected the intimate touch to scare Shane away, but instead Shane's kiss became even more heated and hungry.

Their bodies leaned into each other, damp skin pressing into damp skin, and by the time Shane finally grudgingly pulled away, Vic's mind was already trying to chart the most direct path to the bed.

Shane leaned his forehead against his as Vic's dazed mind tried to catch up with the abrupt halt, and he stepped away before Vic could stop him.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably and looked down at the floor as Vic swayed. Vic watched him lick his lips slowly as he bent over and retrieved the two bottles of beer he had dropped.

"I've made a bit of a mess," he murmured, as if talking to himself as he bent over the little puddle of spilled beer.

Vic opened his mouth to question why they were no longer groping each other, but Shane seemed to have taken Vic's tongue with him when he pulled away and Vic couldn't utter a sound.

Shane turned and walked slowly away, and Vic watched him toss the now-sudsy quarter of a beer into the trash can and put the bottle that hadn't yet been opened back into the refrigerator. He closed the door and then stood there in front of it, his hand still on the handle as he kept his head down, as if deep in thought.

Vic licked his lips, tasting the salt again, and he held his breath, waiting for something. Anything.

As Vic watched him, Shane raised his head and took a deep breath. Vic continued to stare at him intently as he turned around and finally met Vic's eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak then shut it again. Vic almost leapt out of his skin when the metallic tingling of one of their cell phones broke the tense silence. It was Vic's phone, but he stood there staring at Shane, waiting for him to speak instead of going to answer it.

"You should get that," Shane said softly as he turned to reach beneath the sink and retrieve a dish towel.

Vic stood stock-still for several more moments, listening to the phone ring and wishing to God that Shane would say something else.

"Might be important, Vic," the other man finally added as he came back around the counter with two rags to clean up the spilled beer.

Vic nodded wordlessly and walked dazedly into the bedroom to find his phone, giving Shane one last look over his shoulder. He rarely used the phone for personal business and not many people outside the firm had the number, so when Shane said that it might be important he was probably right.

It had better be important, to have interrupted what Shane was about to say.

When Vic got off the phone with his secretary and came back out into the main room, Shane was nowhere to be found. The beer spill had been cleaned up and the towels were now lying in a little pile on the counter. The sliding door that led outside was closed, and so was the door to the other bedroom.

“Shane?” Vic called softly, almost afraid to find the other man. He had barely been able to concentrate on what Sophia was saying to him he had been so distracted with worry over what effect his and Shane’s reckless actions were going to have on their friendship. The rest of their relaxing vacation might just be shot to shit.

Unless they could clear the air and get a lot of beer into both their systems very quickly. Or proceed along the path they’d set out. Vic wasn’t sure which one he preferred.

“Shane?” he called again.

He knocked lightly on the bedroom door, not able to remember whether it had been opened or closed before. When he got no answer, he opened the door carefully to peer inside. The room was empty, and Vic pulled the door closed again before going to stand in front of the glass door. Shane sat out there in one of the large wooden chairs, unmoving as he sat with a beer in his hand, staring out at the dark water of the eerily calm ocean.

Vic slid the door open and was met with the sound of the waves and the scent of the sea and the blast of heat off the sand as he stepped onto the deck. His eyes never left Shane as he slid the door closed behind him and walked forward slowly.

How did one go about doing this anyway? Perhaps it would be easier if Vic had ever had any inkling that Shane was

attracted to him. Yes, that might have made it easier, if he had known that their relationship had the possibility to turn this way. He'd been completely unprepared for this, completely unlike when the situation with Owen had formed.

Vic realized with a little jolt as he came up behind Shane that that was the first time Owen had crossed his mind as anything but a fond memory since early that morning, when Shane's words had brought the younger man to mind.

"No one in his right mind would leave someone like you alone when you needed him," Shane had said.

Looking back on it, it sounded quite a lot like something Vic would have said to Owen, straddling the line between friendship and love. Was that how Shane felt about him?

How many signs similar to that could Vic have possibly missed while lost in his own lovesick haze?

"You okay?" Vic asked softly as he stood beside Shane's chair and put his hands on his hips, looking out at the ocean rather than down at his friend.

"I'm a bit of a bastard, aren't I?" Shane said with a finality that told Vic he'd come to that conclusion some time ago.

"Why do you say that?" Vic asked, his tone certainly more calm than he felt.

"I know you love him, Vic. And still I..." He pressed his lips together and shook his head as if disgusted with himself. "I'm not much of a friend to you, at any rate."

"What... what are you talking about?" Vic asked incredulously as he came around and stood in front of Shane, looking down at him as he cast a shadow over him.

Shane looked up at him blankly, and Vic knelt so that he was resting his forearms on Shane's thighs and looking up at him.

"Shane, you're the best friend I think I've ever had. Certainly the only man I'd climb up mountains of sand with," he added with a small smile, hoping to cheer Shane up by making light of their time together.

Shane smiled sadly at him and looked down at his hands, and Vic realized then just what Shane had said.

"You know... you don't have to worry about Owen, right?" he asked tentatively.

"Any other men you're hopelessly in love with?" Shane asked wryly.

"I think the key word there is hopeless," Vic murmured as he fell back with a grunt and sat on the warm wood of the deck. He looked down at his own hands and sighed. He'd convinced himself that it was the best thing to do, breaking off anything but his friendship with Owen, and he was still sure of that decision. It didn't make the melancholy of loss any easier to deal with, though.

"He's a fool," Shane said bitterly.

Vic's head shot up to look at him in shock. He had never heard Shane say anything even remotely negative about Owen in the five years they had all known one another. He'd never heard him say anything negative about almost anyone, and he sat for criminal cases every day.

"He's a fucking fool for what he does," Shane declared. "If he doesn't know you love him, then... then he's a fool. And if he does, then he's a bastard," he told Vic decisively.

Vic leaned back to look up at Shane as if seeing him for the first time. Where was this bitterness coming from? Vic had

harbored thoughts along similar lines, but he knew why he was bitter.

Was it really possible that Shane had feelings for him that went beyond the physical? Was it possible that all these years Shane had been stoically silent about how Vic and Owen carried on, all the while being in love with him?

“Something you need to tell me?” Vic asked suspiciously, thinking back on Shane’s words and wondering if he really wanted to hear what Shane had to say.

Shane blinked at him once and then sighed heavily. “No,” he said stubbornly.

Vic frowned disbelievingly, but then nodded slowly and sighed as well. “Okay then,” he said softly. “What now, huh?” he asked as he stretched out on the deck and circled his knees with his arms, choosing to drop all the uncomfortable subjects and offer Shane the out he had been unwilling to offer before. “Hot tub, beach, or beer?”

Shane looked at him warily for several moments, obviously thinking that there was a trick and that Vic was going to come back with another question any second. After a moment of deliberation, he gave Vic a small smile and said, “Any combination including the latter will do me fine.”

V

Vic and Shane were lucky in that not only were they both exceptionally blessed in the art of holding their alcohol, but also in that they forgot and forgave easily. By nightfall their passionate embrace of the afternoon was yet another laughing matter, and they sat giggling together at the edge of the back deck as they passed a bottle of beer back and forth. It was their last one, hence the sharing, and they would have to go out in the morning for more.

“Shows you how desperate I am,” Shane slurred as he took the bottle from Vic and took a short gulp. “Drinking beer-flavored backwash.”

“Yes, but you didn’t seem to mind the slobber when your tongue was exploring my tonsils,” Vic replied as the bottle was handed back to him.

“Yeah but... you still have your tonsils?”

“No, actually, now that you mention it. Figure of speech, really. Descriptive prose and... uhh....”

“Right, right. What were we talking about?”

“Umm....”

Tonight, though, tonight they were far too gone to care that their supply had run dry. The night sky was dark, the low clouds covering the moon and stars, and the only hint of the overwhelming ocean before them was the sound it made as it reached its waves toward them and the phosphorescent glow of

the waves. All in all, it was a wonderful night, the silences once more comfortable despite the strange events of the day, and Vic closed his eyes and turned his face toward the sea spray.

“It’s nice to sit here like this,” Shane said suddenly.

“I know,” Vic agreed appreciatively. “I meant what I said before,” he said, his eyes still closed as he enjoyed the sound and the smell of his surroundings. “You’re a good friend, Shane. Great friend.”

“And you’re drunk,” Shane snickered, making Vic grin and scrunch his nose up happily as he giggled again.

Anyone else, and Vic would have been uncomfortable with this. If it had been anyone else he had come here with, he would have been uneasy about the sudden change to the relationship. But not Shane. Shane was steady and constant, and even though there was a little lingering tension over the kiss they had shared, they weren’t allowing it to change anything. Not tonight, anyway. Perhaps the copious amounts of beer had helped.

“You about ready to turn in?” Shane asked in a slightly slurring voice.

“Mmhmm. You still gonna protect me from the bad dreams?” Vic asked with a lazy smile as he finally opened his eyes and looked over at Shane. His sore muscles prayed that Shane would still let him share the good mattress.

Shane snorted and nodded his head, groaning as he hefted himself to his feet and swayed precariously on the edge of the deck. “Whoa,” he said with a snicker as he wheeled his right arm through the air in a desperate vie for balance. “Long way down from up here,” he remarked of the roughly eight-inch fall after he had steadied himself. It probably did look pretty far when you were as wasted as they were.

Instead of risking toppling over and having to sleep in the sand where he landed, Vic flopped onto his back and just rolled, wallowing on the ground while Shane giggled above him, until he was away from the edge of the deck and could crawl to the relative safety of the sliding glass doors.

“You sure you don’t mind sharing?” he asked as he let his head hang and crawled forward a little.

“C’mon, Vic,” Shane huffed as he took Vic’s arm and pulled him to his feet clumsily. “Get your ass in gear. M’tired.”

“Me too,” Vic said contentedly, letting his head rest on Shane’s shoulder as they walked arm in arm toward the bedroom. “I call right side,” he crooned happily.

“Damn it.”

Vic had foregone the melatonin pills in favor of alcohol, but still his dreams that night were vivid. They weren’t, however, all bad. He knew he was dreaming, because even as he lived through his dreams he could always tell that they weren’t real. There was just something about them, some quality to them that allowed a part of his mind to sit back and say something like, “This would make an interesting anecdote in the morning” or simply ask “What the hell did I eat tonight?”

These dreams, though, Vic knew very well what had provoked them. It was amazing how something as simple as a kiss, no matter how heated or memorable it had been, could translate into dreaming that Shane was inside him, thrusting with slow, languid strokes. Tasting his lips again as he pushed into him over and over, hearing his low moans.

When Vic awoke from the dream in the middle of the night, he was fairly panting for breath, and Shane shifted next to him in bed and raised his head. “You okay?” he asked roughly, obviously having been disturbed from sleep.

“Yeah,” Vic breathed as he lay completely still, clutching the sheet to him uncomfortably and staring up at the ceiling.

“Another nightmare?” Shane asked groggily as he rolled onto his side and placed his hand over Vic’s chest comfortingly. “Jesus, Vic, your heart’s pounding,” he murmured as he seemed to shake the remainder of sleep away and become a little worried.

Should Vic lie and say that it had been another bad dream that was leaving him breathless and making his heart try to leap from his chest? Vic knew he couldn’t tell Shane the truth. They had just barely shaken off the awkwardness of their earlier contact. Telling the other man he was now having erotic dreams about him would not aid in their recovery.

“Guess so,” he murmured, not able to actually lie and imply that the dreams of touching Shane so intimately had been bad ones.

Shane hummed a little and patted Vic’s chest like he would a dog for behaving, and then his fingers rubbed almost unconsciously over the thin material of Vic’s T-shirt before his hand stopped moving and he scooted closer to Vic’s body. Vic knew Shane was doing the same thing he had the night before, thinking that Vic was suffering from nightmares and simply offering the comfort of having another body next to him. But tonight the contact was most unwelcome. Or rather, too welcome.

Vic felt himself respond to the warmth of Shane’s body and the familiar, comforting smell of the other man. Even beneath the salty scent of the ocean and the sweet smell of the tanning

lotion that still clung to them both, Vic could smell Shane. He had never been able to pinpoint the smell. It was part classy, expensive cologne, part shampoo and shaving crème and deodorant, part smoke and something earthy that Vic was innately drawn to and had yet to identify.

Before, the smell had always been comforting to Vic; the scent of friendship and camaraderie and solace. Now, though, now the scent was reinforced with the memory of taste. The taste of lingering saltwater and beer, of cherry-flavored lip balm infused with sunscreen bought from the grocery store down the road, and that same indefinable smoke-and-earth taste that had made Vic desperately need more. Now, the smell reminded Vic of that taste. Now, Shane smelled not like a friend, but like the most amazing kiss Vic could remember having.

“It’s okay,” Shane murmured as he slid his arm beneath Vic’s neck and let his hand close over Vic’s right shoulder as he pulled himself closer. “Bigfoot back tonight?” he asked with a sleepy smile as he turned his head and rested his cheek against Vic’s left shoulder and let his free arm drift down until it was draped across Vic’s waist.

Vic was holding his breath, trying to convince himself that it was *not* a good idea to turn his head just a tiny bit and press his lips to the top of Shane’s head.

“No,” he answered softly, barely breathing as Shane’s body relaxed into his. Vic desperately wanted to touch the other man. To kiss him once more. To tell him that he was confused and a little frightened by what he was feeling, and to talk to him about it. Normally when Vic wanted to talk about something Shane was the one he called up. Who was he supposed to call and talk to about this?

Shane was asleep once more, and Vic finally let his body relax a little. He closed his eyes, trying to will himself not to

think about this situation. Even thoughts that made his heart ache about Owen's unreturned feelings were better than the confusion he was feeling toward Shane right now. Vic opened his eyes and blinked up at the dark ceiling, thinking of Owen and frowning a little. Did this mean he was finally moving on a little? Did the fact that he was beginning to lust after Shane like this mean that maybe he really could break free from Owen's spell after all these years?

Shane sighed heavily in his sleep and shifted slightly, and his hand that had been dangling off the side of Vic's body reached out as he stretched, the fingers brushing over the palm of Vic's right hand and then entwining themselves between Vic's own fingers.

Vic gasped a little at the unexpected touch, and he thought back on the three levels of pleasure he had made up to explain his attractions to Owen. Physical, emotional, and painful. It hit him then, that his requirements for emotional pleasure—the comfortable silences, the long talks into the night, the affectionate words and now, finally, the unconscious need to be touched even in sleep—, he felt them all from Shane. Those had always been missing from Owen, unless the younger man was feeling particularly affectionate or lost, but with Shane they had always been there. Offered freely without any sort of demands made in return other than reciprocation.

Vic's heart felt as if it were beating in his throat as he thought about their ability to sit and watch the sun set without speaking. Perhaps that was where he had gone wrong with Owen. He had simply had the levels wrong. The emotional pleasure, it was supposed to come before the physical, not after it. He and Shane already shared that emotional bond that he and Owen had never quite been able to form, though he was almost certain that neither of them had intended for it to go further than friendship. Now, though, now the physical aspect

was definitely playing a part, and it hit Vic suddenly that if he kissed Shane again, he *would* be kissed back.

He wondered briefly if he were also to love Shane... would he be loved back?

His fingers closed over Shane's and he brushed his fingertips over the back of Shane's hand. He bit his lip as Shane moved his head and nuzzled into the pillow beneath him, pulling Vic closer as he tried to get comfortable. Life was full of uncertainty, Vic knew that. His love life especially had been full of heartache and disappointments, unrequited love reinforced by brief, wonderful moments of tenderness.

A lot of things in life were uncertain, but Vic knew one thing was certain right then. He shook his shoulder a little, nudging Shane and waking the other man. Shane inhaled quickly through his nose, surprised to be ripped from sleep again so soon, and he raised his head quickly to look at Vic in groggy concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a rough whisper.

Vic turned a little in Shane's arms, keeping hold of the man's hand as Shane tried to pull away and give him room to move. He swallowed nervously and blinked rapidly at Shane in the moonlight.

"I was wondering if I was right," he said softly.

"What?" Shane asked in sleepy confusion.

"I was thinking that if I kissed you again, I would be kissed back," Vic told him, turning completely until he and Shane were facing each other. He pushed up onto his elbow and looked down at Shane. "Would I be kissed back?" he asked after a stunned silence, his curiosity and need and possibly a little bit of the beer overriding any embarrassment.

Shane didn't answer, and Vic could tell that the other man was holding his breath now. He leaned his head forward slowly, giving Shane the chance to back away if he so desired, and when Shane remained where he was, Vic pressed their mouths together chastely.

Shane froze as they made contact, and Vic's heart practically stopped as he waited for a response. Shane inhaled deeply through his nose and pressed forward, parting his lips and letting his tongue glide over Vic's before deepening the kiss and pulling Vic to him with the hand that had yet to release Vic's shoulder.

They twined slowly together, all thoughts leaving Vic's mind save for the need to get closer. He just needed to touch, to taste. He needed Shane to devour him and hold him close all night, and for him to still be there in the morning when Vic awoke.

They parted breathlessly, Vic's heart beating loudly in his ears and Shane's breaths coming in ragged gasps as they clutched each other. "That..." Shane gasped, running the side of his nose against Vic's affectionately and nuzzling him. "That answer your question?" he asked breathlessly.

"More," Vic responded in the same breathless tone, the excitement of newfound contact making his normal brain function slightly difficult. Shane kissed him again, pressing into him until Vic was once again on his back and Shane was hovering over him, kissing him gently as he settled his body halfway on top of Vic's.

Vic moaned in encouragement and let his free hand wrap over Shane's back, and he realized with something like a thrill of pleasure that Shane's hand still held his own. Their fingers were entwined still, and even as Vic took note of it, Shane shifted his arm and brought Vic's hand up slowly, pressing it

finally into the mattress beside Vic's head and pinning him there gently.

"I had no idea you...", Vic gasped with difficulty as Shane finally shifted his kisses to Vic's chin and then the tender skin of his neck. He closed his eyes and tried to slow his breathing as Shane's breath gusted over his sweaty skin, and he tilted his head back to give the other man better access.

Shane took hold of the collar of Vic's shirt with difficulty, his hand reaching up from beneath Vic's neck, and he pulled it down and to the side in order to give him access to more skin. Vic groaned a little as the material bit into the other side of his neck and Shane's arm muscles flexed beneath him.

"I had no idea," he continued roughly, desperate to fill the silence for some reason. "If I'd known—"

"Vic," Shane whispered as he ceased his attentions to Vic's collarbone and raised his head.

"Hmm?" Vic responded dazedly as he looked up at the other man in the soft moonlight.

"Stop talking," Shane whispered, his voice gruff and affectionate.

Vic pressed his lips together and snorted quietly, and Shane kissed him once more, so gently that his lips just barely rested against Vic's before the kiss deepened again. Vic found that he could barely breathe.

Shane's fingers trailed past the back of his neck as the other man pulled his arm from beneath Vic's body in order to prop himself up. "You talk entirely too much," Shane murmured in between kisses.

"And you don't talk nearly enough," Vic told him, the last word cut off by Shane's lips meeting his hungrily once more.

“Later,” Shane whispered demandingly as he shifted his body to cover more of Vic’s, and Vic instinctively lifted one leg and hooked it over Shane’s hip.

The kisses continued, and Vic slowly began to realize exactly what they were doing. Thoughts of friendships being ruined and comfortable silences being dashed to bits screamed through Vic’s mind briefly, but as Shane’s hand came up to cup the side of his face and then moved up to thread lightly through his hair, Vic realized that he wasn’t actually afraid of that happening.

Shane groaned softly and let his hands come to rest on Vic’s hips, his fingers sliding under Vic’s T-shirt. “It’s been... a while,” he murmured.

“Like riding a bike,” Vic joked with a grin as he pulled at Shane’s shirt. Shane sat up and yanked it over his head, then immediately pulled Vic’s off as well and tossed them both to the ground.

“You said you wanted me,” Vic reminded him in a low voice as his hand trailed through the light fuzz on Shane’s chest and down further, purposely bypassing his cock to glide under the material of his boxers and across the tender skin of his thigh and hip.

Shane’s grip on Vic’s hips tightened almost painfully and he groaned. It was exciting and nerve-wracking, but Vic didn’t want it to stop.

“Yes,” Shane answered with a hiss. “I don’t want to hurt you, though,” he said with difficulty.

“You won’t,” Vic said confidently. “Did you pack condoms with you?” Vic asked dubiously. Vic knew he hadn’t packed any, knowing it would be just the two of them in a fairly remote

location. He had never dreamed he and Shane would ever be this intimate.

“In the drawer,” Shane mumbled as he kissed Vic hungrily and pinned him against the mattress. He kissed him again and then pushed away from him, rolling off the bed and stepping away. “Get that off,” he said with a gesture to Vic’s boxers as he went to his bureau and began to dig in one of the top drawers.

Vic hurried to obey, his stomach tumbling nervously as he thought about what they were about to do. He was about to fuck Shane. His best friend Shane. Even after the intimacy they’d already shared, it still boggled his mind a little.

Shane turned back around and looked at Vic with a little grin, a condom in one hand as he shucked his own boxers. Vic’s breath hitched excitedly. Yeah, this felt right. He was about to fuck Shane. And it felt really fucking right.

“Find a date on that,” Shane ordered with a little laugh as he tossed the condom at Vic like a Frisbee and went into the bathroom. “Been in there for fucking ever,” he said in a muffled voice as Vic snickered quietly.

“Get the body wash,” Vic ordered as he squinted in the moonlight that streamed through the windows, trying to read the little date on the pack. “2010,” he read happily. “Damn, Shane, don’t these things last like, decades?” he teased.

Shane poked his head around the corner of the doorframe and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m being good,” Vic said instantly, not liking the evil glint he could see in Shane’s eye.

“You look good too,” Shane growled as he walked back out with a bottle of body wash in his hand. “You sure you can handle it with just this?” he asked skeptically as he held up the body wash.

“I’m quite skilled,” Vic said cheekily as he reclined on the mattress and watched Shane as the man looked him over. There was nothing quite so erotic, in Vic’s opinion, as watching someone else as desire lit up their eyes and made them burn for you. There was nothing quite so sexy as seeing someone else want you like Shane wanted Vic right then. “Come on,” Vic whispered as he pushed himself into the center of the bed and rested back on his elbows. He hoped Shane could see the same desire in him, because Vic was certainly feeling it.

Shane moved forward, tossing the bottle onto the bed and crawling slowly until he settled between Vic’s legs. He hovered over Vic, looking down at him and breathing shallowly. “You’re sure?” he asked one last time. “I don’t want to hurt you at all.”

Vic smiled reassuringly and said, “One of us’ll get hurt if you don’t get on with it.”

Shane took his sweet time about it despite Vic’s threats, pleas, and shameless moans, though Vic wasn’t really complaining since, despite the other man’s protests about being out of practice, Shane obviously knew exactly what he was doing. By the time he sat back to roll the condom on, Vic was clutching at the sheets and panting, biting his tongue to keep himself from demanding to be fucked right that instant. He wanted Shane inside him, but he also wanted it to last as long as it could.

Shane leaned over him, kissing him passionately as he guided the head of his cock to rest against Vic. He continued to kiss Vic as he rocked gently, putting more and more pressure on the muscles with each rocking motion and stimulating them beyond anything Vic had experienced in quite some time. He wasn’t as promiscuous as he had been in his youth, and he rarely bottomed anymore save for with Owen, who never did anything slowly like Shane was now doing. Vic clutched at the

other man, moaning appreciatively into his mouth as the stimulation continued.

“Ready?” Shane asked huskily as he pressed their foreheads together and his breath gusted across Vic’s face.

“Fuck yes,” Vic answered eagerly, his stomach flipping once more as he thought about just *who* exactly he was doing this with. “Shane,” he moaned wantonly as Shane pushed carefully into him, loving how it felt to say it and groaning in ecstasy at the overwhelmed sound Shane made in return.

Shane’s breath came in short pants as he tried to go slowly and allow for Vic to adjust to the intrusion, and when the burn finally ebbed, Vic turned his head and bit Shane’s ear, tightening his muscles to indicate that he was just fine, thank you, and to get on with the fucking.

“God, yes,” Shane breathed as he started an agonizingly slow rhythm, pulling out almost completely before slowly pushing back in. Vic moaned helplessly and his back arched in pleasure, and Shane reached down and hooked his elbow under Vic’s knee, pulling Vic’s leg up and changing the angle of his thrusts so that it made Vic cry out unintelligibly. “Vic,” Shane gasped desperately against the moist skin of Vic’s neck as he quickened his pace.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” Vic managed to respond, though his brain was slowly short-circuiting and his body screamed that it liked Shane’s attentions *a lot*.

Shane’s panting breaths came in Vic’s ear as Vic’s own labored gasps were forced out of him by every thrust. He turned his head, inhaling the scent of the other man and forever ingraining the smell in his brain as the one that smelled of sex. Nothing else would ever again come close, Vic knew. Shane’s body tightened above him, holding him close and pressing into him as he murmured words into Vic’s ear. Words

that made Vic's heart thud in his chest and his cock throb with the need for release.

"Holy fuck, Shane," Vic managed through labored gasps.

Shane's free hand slid up the mattress to tangle in Vic's hair and hold him still, stopping the rocking that Vic's body had been doing with each thrust and making Shane's cock drive even deeper.

"God, yes!" Vic shouted as Shane pushed deeper and deeper into him. He couldn't breathe, save for the occasional gasp that was forced out by his struggling lungs, and his stomach muscles clenched almost painfully with the strain of keeping his hips off the mattress as Shane rocked into him.

"Vic," Shane hissed into his ear, sending thrills through Vic's body. Rarely did he hear his name said with such desperate passion. Shane continued, his thrusts slowing as he tried to hold off.

"Harder," Vic gasped.

"You're gonna make me come," Shane protested, the words whispered into Vic's ear as his leg was hooked over Shane's hip in preparation for the harder thrusts Vic had requested. Demanded.

"Fuck me, Shane," he gasped, barely able to repress the tingling in his own groin that told him he wouldn't be far behind Shane when he came.

Shane groaned and gripped Vic's thigh hard, pressing his face into his own bicep as he buried his head next to Vic's on the mattress and slammed into him. Vic cried out wordlessly, his nails raking down the hot skin of Shane's back as thrust after thrust brought them both closer to the edge.

When Shane finally came deep inside him, he had whispered Vic's name so many times that Vic had lost count,

and when he pulled out quickly to slide down and take Vic's cock into his mouth in order to taste him when he came, Vic couldn't even remember his own name, much less anything else. Nothing else, save for Shane's name as he cried it out in ecstasy.

They didn't bother trying to clean themselves. Shane didn't even bother trying to get up to discard the condom. He merely tossed it away as Vic snickered at him, and then climbed up Vic's body to look down at him in the moonlight.

"That was fun," Shane announced breathlessly.

"Yes it was," Vic responded as he tried to catch his breath.

"Better than climbing sand dunes," Shane said with a widening smile.

"I say we do it again," Vic said, returning the smile with one of his own. "Soon."

"Deal," Shane said softly, and then he kissed Vic one last time and rolled off his body once more, holding Vic close and nuzzling into him, allowing Vic to roll and entwine their limbs. Not one more word was said about their tryst, and they cuddled together contentedly, comfortable once again in the silence.

They drifted off to sleep like that, facing each other and clutching each other possessively.

Hours later when the sun rose slowly and cast its first rays across their still-enfolded forms, Vic cracked a sleepy eye open to see that yes, Shane was still there with him. And he was still holding Vic's hand tenderly in his own, never once having let go.

Vic was once again in the water. It wasn't as cold today, but it wasn't as calm either, and he was having quite a lot of fun fighting the waves as they tried repeatedly to take him down and wash him ashore like a beached whale.

He and Shane had continued what they had started the night before as soon as they had both awoken, but after several slow kisses they had both agreed that toothbrushes were in order, and perhaps showers as well.

After that unromantic break in the mood, they had never really started back up again, and when Shane had stated that he was going for more beer before the noonday hour rolled around, Vic had agreed readily and then immediately headed for the water as soon as Shane had left.

Vic loved the water. It allowed his brain to go into suspend mode for a little while as he enjoyed the assault on his senses, and the added pleasure of fighting the water was quite enjoyable today. He smiled as he thought about Shane and how easy the morning had felt. There was no awkward fumbling over what had happened, or even over what they both wanted to continue happening. It just felt normal and right, and Vic knew it would be okay. He didn't know how he knew, but he just did.

"Hey!" Shane called from the beach, and Vic turned around to see his friend waving at him from much farther away than he had expected.

"Shit," Vic murmured. He had been floating, literally and figuratively, and he had been pulled by the tide quite a bit. He began to swim toward Shane even as Shane set their little cooler down by their chairs and started into the water haltingly, gasping at the temperature. When they met several minutes of struggling later in chest-high water, Shane reached out and pulled Vic to him through the water by his

outstretched hand, taking advantage of the fact that Vic's feet were nowhere near the ocean's floor.

"Trying to escape?" Shane asked him with a grin as he encircled Vic's body within strong arms.

"And if I was?" Vic asked with a barely repressed smirk as he automatically wrapped his floating legs around Shane's body and attached himself to the other man quite handily.

"Mmm," was all Shane managed to respond with as his eyes drifted shut and he hugged Vic closer. "I'd have to chase you down, now," he said hoarsely, and his hands traveled down Vic's back to cup his ass and press their groins together. "You know this is probably the only time you'll ever actually be able to hang onto me like this," he said thoughtfully as Vic hugged his neck and nibbled on his ear.

"You're a big manly man," Vic said teasingly before licking Shane's earlobe and biting down again. "You saying you couldn't hold me like this if we weren't in the water?"

"Yes," Shane answered simply, his voice amused and slightly distracted.

"Even if you had me against a wall?" Vic asked softly, his own cock trying to stand at attention with the thought. Shane groaned a little. It amazed Vic how natural it felt, after all these years of friendship, to have his legs wrapped around Shane's body while whispering seductive words into his ear.

Shane pressed his face into Vic's damp neck and groaned again. "I believe if I were inside you, I could do anything you wanted me to," he said, his voice muffled by Vic's skin.

"You've thought about it?" Vic asked in a strained voice, the pleasure of their close contact almost overriding the curiosity. But not quite.

“More than I should have,” Shane admitted, his face turning until he was able to kiss Vic’s neck and jaw and nip at the wet skin.

“Then we’ll just have to do this more often, ’til we get it just like you imagine it,” Vic told him with a smile as he pressed their mouths together and held on tightly.

Shane murmured something unintelligible in response, but it sounded like an agreement.

“Shane,” Vic gasped. Shane replied with a questioning hum, and Vic grinned against the other man’s lips. “Shut up,” he ordered.

Vic’s phone was ringing when he and Shane finally made it back inside that evening. They had stayed outside almost the entire day, foregoing food at lunchtime in favor of beer, and foregoing going back inside when the beer ran out in favor of going back into the water and groping each other behind the screen of the breakers once more.

It had been a perfect day as far as Vic was concerned, and tonight promised to be very interesting. Now, though, they both needed showers, copious amounts of aloe, and dinner. Lots of dinner. And Vic needed to answer that call.

He dashed into the other room to answer the ringing phone, but just as he reached it the display told him that he had missed the call.

“Missed it,” he called out to Shane, not sure why the other man might need to know.

Shane yelled something in return, and Vic frowned when he couldn’t understand it.

“Are you eating without me?” he called incredulously, stomping into the other room to find Shane standing at the kitchen counter with wide, innocent green eyes and trying to hide the fact that he was chewing.

“No,” he said around a mouthful of bread.

“Fucker,” Vic growled affectionately.

Shane gave that an outraged little mumble just before his own cell phone began to ring. He chewed quickly and wiped the crumbs from his hands as he walked over to where it sat charging and answered it.

“Hello?” he said, swallowing the remainder of the bread and grinning over at Vic. The grin slid slowly away as the person on the other end spoke, and though Vic could hear some of the words, he couldn’t make out what the person was saying. “Are you okay?” Shane asked in concern as his eyes met Vic’s, and Vic frowned in concern. “I see.... Yeah... no, y’know... no, I’m sure it’d be... uh-huh,” Shane said into the phone, his worried eyes never leaving Vic’s. “He’s right here,” he said after a moment. He then took the phone from his ear and handed it to Vic. “It’s Owen,” he said softly.

Vic took the phone and looked down at it as if it might bite him. He didn’t want to talk to Owen, he realized suddenly. For the first time in five years, he wasn’t happy to have the man on the phone, calling him.

He looked up at Shane with a scowl but put the phone to his ear.

“Hello?” he greeted with a hint of concern in his voice. Why would Owen be calling Shane?

“Hey, Vic,” Owen murmured. He sounded upset. Vic had never heard him quite so downtrodden.

Vic's stomach tumbled end over end with a sudden blast of worry, not only for whatever might be wrong with Owen, but worry over what Shane would think of this phone call. He didn't want anything to ruin what they had started. He watched apprehensively as Shane looked away and then turned to walk into the bedroom.

"Uhh," he managed to say distractedly. "Hey," he returned as he turned away from the bedroom door. "What's wrong?" he answered distractedly as he heard the shower turn on. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"I've been trying to call you," Owen answered almost accusingly. "You just disappeared. I was worried."

Vic's scowl returned suddenly as he walked closer to the French doors that led to the back deck. He stared out at the ocean without responding. His first impulse, of course, was to tell Owen that now he knew how it felt to be forgotten and cast aside. But he didn't want to. He was still angry and hurt, and while he wanted to hold on to those feelings long enough to purge his system, he didn't want to ruin the friendship by being nasty to the man.

"Vic?" Owen tried. "Are you okay?" he asked with sincere worry.

Vic looked down and closed his eyes. He told himself that even if he wasn't planning on fucking Owen anymore, the man was still a friend. He hadn't intentionally hurt Vic, and Vic didn't think he ever would have.

"I'm fine," he assured him in an even voice. "I'm sorry," he added with a little more effort. "I just needed to get away after that conference. Shane offered to let me come with him and it seemed like a good idea. Is that why you called?" he asked tiredly as he turned and headed for the bedroom to find Shane.

“Well,” Owen said hesitantly. “Yeah. This damn expo thing I was working wrapped up early so... when Shane was here he told me to call him if I needed a vacation. I was wondering if I could meet you guys down there. And I want to talk to you about some things,” Owen said hopefully.

Vic licked his lips and frowned harder as he stepped through the door and found Shane standing at the dresser, getting out dry clothes and a towel.

“Can’t it wait until I get home?” Vic asked as he leaned against the doorframe.

“I don’t think so, Vic. Please,” Owen murmured seriously.

When Shane turned to look at him, Vic met his eyes and sighed heavily. He put the phone to his hand and lowered it.

“He wants to come here,” he told Shane.

Shane watched him blankly for several moments, and then he nodded curtly and slung a towel over his shoulder.

Vic shook his head. He didn’t want Owen to come here and pop the perfect little bubble they’d created. He didn’t want to face that obstacle yet. Right now, looking at Shane, he was sure he could tell Owen to take the proverbial hike. But he knew himself better than that. Faced with Owen again, he didn’t know if he’d have the backbone.

“You’re gonna have to see him sooner or later,” Shane told him softly.

Vic sighed heavily again. Shane was right, of course. And maybe, Vic told himself, it would be easier here than it would be at home. Here, with Shane.

He put the phone back to his ear. “Yeah, okay,” Vic said into the phone.

“Good,” Owen said happily. “I’ll be there as soon as I can get my shit together.”

Vic nodded distractedly, as if Owen could actually see him, and he ended the call without so much as a farewell as Shane walked into the bathroom and pulled the door closed.

Vic stood in the middle of the room alone, the phone hanging from his limp hand and his eyes glued to the door behind which Shane had disappeared. This was going to complicate things.

VI

Vic sat on the bed, waiting for Shane to reemerge. To say that he was a little confused was a bit of an understatement, but he was slowly but surely working things out in his head. It was hard to shake the five years of feelings he had harbored for Owen, and he knew it was going to be difficult to do, but he recognized that Shane was offering him something here, something that Vic would have to be a fool to turn down.

For the first time since he had met Owen, Vic wasn't excited about seeing him. He wanted Shane all to himself here, just like it had been all week. He didn't want Owen to come in now and possibly ruin what had been a very good thing starting, to bounce in and nip it in the bud without even realizing it. Unfortunately, that couldn't be helped now; Owen was on his way with an urgent need to talk to Vic about something. It had to be important for Owen to travel almost eight hours to get to him. That worried Vic more than anything.

But he was determined.

He was also smart enough to know that Shane wasn't happy about Owen joining them. He was a little ashamed to admit that the knowledge thrilled him. That thought, the thought that Shane was upset about Owen coming here and possibly taking Vic away, made Vic happier than it probably should have. He would just have to make certain that Shane knew exactly how he felt about this, and leave no room for misunderstandings.

There was something seriously wrong with the fact that he was sitting there grinning like an idiot as he thought about this potentially disastrous little triangle, but he was entitled to his moments of insanity just like everyone else.

The water stopped running and he wiped the grin from his face. He sat there waiting for several moments, and when the door opened the steam puffed out and Shane stepped into the room with a towel slung low around his hips and steam rising from his skin as the cool air hit him. His shoulders and chest were red from the sun and his blond hair was dark with dripping water.

He looked up and his eyes widened when he found Vic sitting there in front of him, but then he schooled his features into impassivity and said, "He's coming down?"

"Yeah," Vic answered as he stood up. "Are you okay?" he asked carefully.

Shane nodded curtly and took a step as if to walk away, but Vic stepped in front of him, putting his hand on Shane's still slightly steaming chest and invading the other man's personal space. Shane reared his head back slowly and looked at Vic with an unreadable expression.

"Don't do that," Vic requested softly.

Shane pressed his lips together and frowned thoughtfully. "I'm too old and set in my ways to be fucked around," he finally said evenly, and he inclined his head slightly, waiting for Vic to counter.

"Nobody's fucking you around," Vic said softly, his eyes leaving Shane's briefly to look down at where his hand remained planted against Shane's bare chest.

"Oh, come on, Vic," Shane snarled with a shake of his head as he stepped back and broke the contact. "You've been

head over heels for him since nearly the moment you laid eyes on him. I'm not stupid enough to think that a few kisses from me are going to change that now."

"A few kisses?" Vic asked incredulously. "It's been much more than that, Shane. So much more," Vic said pointedly, his voice still soft and calm.

"What?" Shane asked, tilting his head as if he hadn't heard correctly.

Vic didn't answer, instead stepping closer and sliding his hand behind Shane's head, tangling his fingers into his wet hair as he pulled Shane toward him and kissed him hard. Where before their kisses had been slow, sensual, and gentle, now it was demanding and brutal, and Vic loved every second of it. When they pulled apart breathlessly, Shane looked at Vic dazedly.

"What?" he asked again stupidly.

"Stop talking," Vic whispered, smiling at what had become a little joke between them and leaning in again. "I want you," Vic told the other man, his mouth moving against Shane's slightly parted lips. "*You*," he emphasized. "Right now. I don't care what's coming tomorrow."

Shane was curled around Vic's naked body, nuzzled under his chin and practically purring as he slept, when the doorbell rang and startled them both awake.

"Hmm?" Shane groaned and nuzzled closer.

"Hey," Vic said in a hoarse voice. "When did it get to be morning?"

“Morning?” Shane asked as he raised his head and looked around. “Shit,” he groaned as he let his head flop back down onto Vic’s chest. The doorbell rang again and Vic squeezed Shane to him.

“That’ll be Owen,” he whispered.

Shane tensed slightly in his arms, and then the man nodded and rolled over, coming to sit on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Vic looked at him worriedly. They had never actually gotten around to talking about Owen.

“Jesus, Shane, your back,” Vic said in a horrified whisper as he looked at his lover, completely forgetting anything else he’d been about to say.

“Hurts,” Shane grunted. “What’d I do to it? Is it burnt?”

“I scratched the shit out of you,” Vic murmured as he rolled onto his side and ran his finger lightly over an unmarred portion of Shane’s back. He hadn’t realized his short nails would do so much damage. It had to have been the sunburn. “You’re also burnt,” he added sympathetically just before the doorbell rang again. “I’ll put some aloe on you,” Vic said as he rolled out of bed and cast about for his clothing. “Damn it,” he murmured when he couldn’t find any.

“Other room, remember?” Shane mumbled as he rubbed his face and gingerly flexed his shoulders.

Vic nodded as he remembered that they had never moved his stuff from the other bedroom, and he gave Shane one last worried glance before going to find his clothing. He was dirty, not having ever made it to the shower after coming inside, but they were at the beach. Who really took a shower in order to go sit in the sand anyway?

He dressed slowly as the doorbell rang again, trying to order his thoughts. What would he say to Owen? What would he do? He supposed he shouldn't be worrying about it until he heard what Owen had to say.

When Vic opened the door, he was greeted by Owen much more sedately than he had expected. Usually you got anything from a shake of the hand with a slap on the back to a full-out tackle in which Owen picked you up off the ground and let your feet dangle as he crushed your ribs with a bear hug. But this morning Owen simply smiled tentatively and stuck out his hand to shake Vic's.

Vic smiled in return despite himself. Then his brow furrowed in confusion as he looked at their joined hands, confused by the sedate greeting.

"You said you were burnt," Owen explained with a more confident smile. "Didn't want to hurt you."

"I'm not that burnt," Vic told him wryly, and Owen responded immediately by embracing Vic warmly and kissing him on the ear. He had probably been aiming for a cheek, but Owen rarely worried about aim.

"Hey, Shane!" he called happily as Vic stepped aside and let him in.

Vic turned to look back at Shane worriedly as the other man stood there uncomfortably and refused to meet Vic's eyes. He was obviously dreading what Vic would do now that Owen was here. Owen practically bounded toward him, oblivious to Shane's discomfort.

"I *am* that burnt," Shane said apologetically with his hand held out to stop Owen in mid-pounce.

Vic watched from behind as Owen deflated briefly at the cold greeting, but then he took Shane's hand in his own and shook it with a snicker.

"Poor baby," he said fondly.

"Yeah, I know," Shane grumbled as Vic pushed the door shut and watched them awkwardly. Shane was definitely uncomfortable around the younger man, where before he had never seemed to be, and Vic knew it was his fault. Damn them for falling asleep without talking about this first. Now they might not get the chance before it exploded in their faces.

Despite them having been awoken by Owen's arrival, it was not early in the morning, as Vic had at first thought. It was almost noon, and Vic realized that Owen must have left Charlotte in the middle of the night to get there. He offered to treat them both to lunch, but to Vic's dismay, Shane turned down the offer, saying that he was going back to bed to sleep off more of the burn.

Vic watched helplessly as Shane turned away, heading for the bedroom with his apologies. He didn't want to let on that anything was going on between them. Not yet. So he just let Shane slink off to bed without any argument, and found himself alone with Owen.

He looked at the man with a degree of apprehension. So far, he was holding his emotional ground. He was glad to see Owen, but not for the reason he usually was. Maybe it was time to finally get some things off his chest.

"Hey," Owen greeted again, his voice more intimate than his first greeting had been.

Vic stared at him, trying to formulate a plan. He had stood in front of juries and delivered closing arguments that hadn't made him this nervous. Finally, he cleared his throat. "You

said you wanted to talk to me about something,” he reminded. “Something so important it couldn’t wait,” he murmured.

Owen inhaled deeply and nodded. Vic had never seen the big man look nervous, but this was probably as close as he got. He was fidgeting and frowning as he looked around the bungalow.

“Wanna take a walk?” he asked as he gestured toward the beach.

Vic licked his lips and nodded. “Yeah, okay,” he agreed.

He moved toward the doors, glancing back at the bedroom door uncertainly as he followed Owen out.

When Shane awoke, Vic was sitting beside him, looking down at him with a smile. Shane jerked in surprise then smiled groggily at him.

“Hey,” he said hoarsely.

“How’s the back?” Vic asked him as he handed him a cold beer.

Shane raised one eyebrow as he pushed himself up to sit beside Vic. He took the sweating bottle and eyed Vic suspiciously. “You two talk?” he asked evenly.

“Yep,” Vic answered with a curt nod. “We took a walk. He said he’d realized what an asshole he’d been all these years when I went missing. He was afraid it was because of him.”

“It *was* because of him,” Shane pointed out with a small frown.

“He doesn’t need to know that,” Vic argued with a smile.

“What else did he say?” Shane asked hesitantly.

Vic shrugged. “That was about it,” he said in confusion. “It felt kind of like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t,” he related to Shane. “He asked if he could stay a few days,” he added.

Shane nodded. “What’d you tell him?” he asked before taking a long gulp of the beer Vic had brought him.

“I told him he’d have to ask you,” Vic told him with a shrug.

“Do you want him here?” Shane asked softly.

“I don’t know,” Vic answered honestly. “But I do know he’s your friend. And whatever has gone on between me and him shouldn’t influence how you would treat him.”

Shane nodded again and looked away with a sigh. “If you’re okay with it,” he finally decided with a shrug.

Vic nodded wordlessly and went to tell Owen he was welcome to stay.

The next few days would be uncomfortable at best. But all Vic had to do was keep an even keel and everything would work out. A sort of peaceful feeling had fallen over him, a weight lifted from his shoulders, like he’d finally rid himself of a burden he’d been carrying.

It was a wonderful feeling. Now all he had to do was convince Shane of that and he was golden.

Owen was practically vibrating, he was so anxious to get out on the beach and finally get some peace and quiet, and by the time Vic and Shane got into their bathing suits and hunted down the sunscreen, Owen was standing out on the deck in the

only bathing suit he'd packed with his arms spread wide and his face turned up to the sun.

Vic stood at the door and watched him fondly. His lust for life had always been intoxicating. He was a hard man not to like.

Cold plastic touched the tender skin just above Vic's hip and he yipped and jumped, spinning around to glare at Shane as the sunscreen was handed to him. Shane smirked at him, but then his eyes traveled over to Owen in the distance and the smile faded.

Vic popped the cap on the lotion and looked at it thoughtfully.

"You know," he said in a low voice. "This probably would have worked better than the body wash."

Shane snorted and glanced at him, trying not to smile. "Just be careful with those gashes back there, Counselor," he said haughtily as he turned his back to Vic.

Vic looked over the shallow scratches guiltily. Normally they would probably already have faded, but on sunburned skin, they were lingering. They looked like they hurt pretty badly. Vic hadn't known he could do that.

"What are you gonna tell Owen?" Vic asked as he carefully applied the lotion one fingertip at a time, partly because he didn't want to irritate the scratches, but also because he enjoyed touching the other man. The slower the better. Shane was silent, and Vic worried that perhaps that had been the wrong subject to bring up. "Unless... you want to tell him the truth?" Vic ventured carefully. He wasn't sure how Shane felt about that, but Vic knew he himself liked the idea. Or aspects of it anyway.

Either Owen would be thrilled for them, or he would be jealous. Considering that he had never been particularly possessive before and didn't demonstrate any sort of feelings other than friendship and the occasional desire for a fling, Vic presumed it would be the former. Even after what Owen said to him on their walk, that he realized how he'd treated him and was sorry to have done that to a friend, he'd never mentioned any stronger feelings. Vic couldn't help but think he'd wanted to say something more, but he doubted a profession of love had been on the agenda.

"I'll just tell him I got rolled around by a wave, if he even asks. He may not," Shane answered with a frown, and Vic bit his lip to hide his disappointment. He had no illusions that this was a permanent thing—not yet anyway, but he could certainly hope. And he would until Shane told him to do differently.

"Okay," he responded evenly.

When he was done, Vic handed the lotion over and had Shane rub him down as well. He had no desire to get burnt, and Shane's hands, still so gentle even though it was obvious that Shane was troubled, felt amazing on Vic's sore back.

"Old age slowing you two down?" Owen called teasingly as soon as Shane had tossed the lotion aside.

Shane snorted and started forward, but Vic reached out and caught his arm as they watched Owen toss all three beach chairs over his shoulder and then leap down into the soft sand and plow his way down the beach. Shane laughed and Vic snorted at the folly of youth.

"He won't be so keen to do that after a night on that mattress," Vic murmured, his hand still tight around Shane's elbow. He looked at Shane seriously then and said, "I want to talk about this. I do. Just know now that I'm not jerking you around."

Shane looked at him blankly for several tense moments, and then his face softened and he smiled a little. “You’re a big boy, Vic. And so am I. You do what you need to do, and I’ll be okay with it.”

Vic blinked in surprise and he released Shane just as Owen’s voice traveled back to them.

“Hey! Will someone grab me a beer?” he called.

“Got a cooler,” Vic called back as he watched Shane grab the cooler and walk down the short walkway. Vic was not happy about this situation, mainly because Shane wasn’t being very open about much of anything, and despite the rush of new emotions Vic had been experiencing, he had been right in predicting that five years of attraction wouldn’t just vanish.

He had himself a very real problem now. He wasn’t certain what he would do if by some miracle Owen came up to him and told him he loved him, or even cared for him beyond the friendship and occasional fucks they had shared. He wasn’t sure if he would abandon the fledgling relationship that had begun with Shane in favor of a spark of hope from Owen. He hoped he wouldn’t, simply because not only would he lose Shane as a friend, but also because he wouldn’t like himself very much after doing the very thing he’d sworn to himself he wouldn’t do. Not very much at all.

He watched Shane straighten up and turn around to look at him. He smiled and licked his chapped lips unconsciously as he looked at Vic, and Vic smiled in return. He sincerely hoped Owen would continue on in his blissful ignorance of Vic’s feelings and give Vic time to let them fade. He didn’t want to lose Shane, in any form. He didn’t want to prove himself a fool.

VII

Vic sat in his chair and watched as Owen stood at the edge of the water with his hands on his hips, looking out at the waves and periodically pacing back and forth. His feet were just barely in the water, and he shivered perceptibly whenever a wave touched him. Vic smiled fondly, knowing that Owen was desperate to get in the water but just couldn't force himself to endure the cold yet.

Vic felt eyes on him suddenly and he turned to look at Shane beside him. The man sat with his chair canted to the side, almost facing Vic so he was halfway beneath the shade of the umbrella, and he might have been looking at Vic from behind his sunglasses, but he might have been simply staring off into the distance or even asleep.

"What?" he asked as soon as Vic looked at him.

"You okay?" Vic asked softly.

"I feel like I have the Grand Canyon etched into my back," Shane said gruffly. "Though I can't say I regret how it got there," he mused with a lazy smile.

Vic wished that he could see the other man's eyes. A grin from Shane was never complete without the sparkle of his eyes.

"You look happy," he murmured to Vic after several moments.

"Shouldn't I be though?" Vic asked with a grin, thinking of the night before and how he didn't mind how sore he was this

morning. Just the thought of Shane inside him, holding him close as he gasped his name still made Vic grin like a fool.

Shane didn't answer. He just nodded his head and turned to look at Owen as the younger man let out a squawk and flailed a little, trying to get away from a large wave that splashed at his calves.

"Jesus, you guys said the water was nice!" he cried as he came thumping back up to sit on his towel.

"It is nice. Look how beautiful it is!" Vic said contentedly.

"It's like fucking ice water!" Owen griped as he flopped onto his back and closed his eyes against the sun's rays.

"It's not that bad once you get past the breakers," Shane said in a low mumble that made Vic shiver with delight for some reason. Vic could sit and listen to Shane talk for hours if the other man were so inclined.

"So what have you two been up to, huh?" Owen asked lazily as he reached his hand out blindly for his beer. Vic leaned forward and picked it up, placing it in his hand for him. "Thanks," Owen said happily.

"Uh-huh," Vic responded as he leaned back and stretched his toes out into the sand. He watched Owen drink without ever lifting his head, and wondered how in the hell the younger man did it without spilling it up his nose like Vic always managed to do.

"Oh, you know," Shane answered. "Old man stuff. Sit on the beach. Drink. Go inside. Drink. Come back out. Drink. Go to bed at nine o'clock 'cause you've run out of beer to drink."

"Sounds heavenly," Owen said with a grin.

“It certainly was,” Shane murmured softly, and Vic cut a sidelong glance at him and frowned. Shane either had his eyes closed now or was ignoring the concerned look Vic shot him.

This wasn’t going quite as well as he’d hoped. Shane had deflected Vic’s attempts at talking quite easily, and Vic didn’t plan to disrespect Shane’s obvious wishes to keep things quiet by discussing them in front of Owen.

Several hours and six-packs of beer later, Vic was surprised to find that he had fallen asleep on the beach. He was going to feel like burnt toast by nightfall. He raised his head to find that Owen was facedown on his towel beneath the umbrella, and that Shane was nowhere in sight. Vic sat up and looked around, glancing up at the sky and estimating the time to be around four in the afternoon.

“Hey,” he said groggily, kicking sand at Owen and earning a perturbed glare for his trouble.

“Jackass,” Owen said matter-of-factly.

“Where’d Shane go?” Vic asked as he eased himself to his feet. He wasn’t as burned as he thought he would be, but he was definitely stiff from sitting in the little chair for too long.

“Went inside about an hour ago. Said he was burning.”

“Should have woken me,” Vic mumbled as he looked up at the cottage and wondered if Shane was even then looking out at them. The glare on the sliding glass was too strong to see anything.

“You going in?” Owen asked as he got to his knees and stretched a little before sitting back on his haunches and looking up at Vic.

“Yeah. Think I’m done cooking for today,” Vic answered as he stretched and then yawned widely.

“Wanna go for a walk or something?” Owen asked. “I’m getting twitchy.”

“Why don’t we go in, see what’s for lunch... dinner... whatever.... See if Shane wants to go too, huh?” Vic suggested distractedly as he gathered up his stuff.

“Okay,” Owen responded, his tone hesitant and rather curious. “Are you okay?” he asked as he stood and brushed off the errant sand on his arms and chest.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just... you seem off,” Owen observed as he looked Vic up and down. “Relaxed. You’re not high, are you?” he asked flatly. “That gets really awkward for your law enforcement friends,” he advised.

“No,” Vic answered with a laugh. “It’s a vacation. You relax on vacations.”

“Uh-huh,” Owen responded disbelievingly. He looked at Vic for another minute and then shrugged in acceptance of the answer anyway. “And what happened to Shane’s back?” he asked as he bent to pick up his towel. “He looks like he spent the night with a Singapore whore,” he said carelessly as he shook his towel and began folding it haphazardly.

Vic barely managed to cover his surprised laugh with a cough as he dealt with the umbrella. He covered his mouth and lowered the material of the umbrella around himself so Owen wouldn’t see as he tried to compose himself. When he was sure his voice wouldn’t tremble with laughter, he said, “Water’s rough. We think he did it when he got pulled under yesterday,” he lied handily as he took the umbrella down and tossed the pieces aside.

He glanced up at Owen to see if the story would fly, knowing that if Owen asked outright about him and Shane

then he wouldn't lie to the man about that. He didn't want to lie about Shane. It felt too right to have to lie about it.

He was startled to find Owen watching him with narrowed eyes.

"What?" Vic asked with an innocent shrug as he turned away to pick up the cooler.

"Something fishy," Owen said with a suspicious wag of his finger. "I'll figure it out, though," he said confidently. "You cagey bastards can try to snuff it all you like. I'll figure it out anyway," he said playfully as he grabbed up what remained of their things and began hauling everything toward the relative shelter of the little deck.

Vic watched him go, smiling slightly.

"Does this sofa pull out?" Owen asked as he looked down at the couch and cocked his head to the side. He poked it with his foot and shook his head dubiously.

"No way are you sleeping there," Vic said immediately. "That thing would kill your back."

"I'm not taking over one of your beds, though," Owen said with a frown as he looked over at Shane and Vic, who both still sat at the little dining table staring at a jigsaw puzzle morosely.

"You can have the back room. That mattress is hard as brick, just like you like it," Vic told him as he picked up a piece and turned it over and over trying to figure out what the hell it was. He looked up at Shane when he felt the other man's eyes on him, and his eyes widened at the pointed stare Shane was giving him. "Hmm?"

“Why don’t you two take the good mattress?” Shane suggested as he plucked the piece from Vic’s hand, looked at it briefly, and then placed it immediately into a hole near the corner of the puzzle. “You didn’t get enough puzzle time as a kid,” Shane told him off-handedly. “You’re shit at this.”

“Yeah,” Vic agreed distractedly as he picked up another piece.

“By ‘good mattress’ you mean soft, I assume?” Owen asked as he came back over and sat down, picking up a piece of the puzzle and frowning at it. Shane nodded wordlessly and Owen said, “Can’t do soft. Hurts my back sometimes. Who will I be displacing with the hard mattress?”

“No one,” Vic answered immediately, not worried that it would sound suspicious. “I couldn’t take more than a couple nights on it.”

“Ah, I see!” Owen said sagely with a nod of his head and a wink as he placed the piece into its rightful spot. “Been double bunking, huh?”

“It was that or sleep on the beach with the crabs,” Vic said wryly as Shane hummed thoughtfully over a new piece. “So I just picked a crab that didn’t come with sand,” he added with a snicker. Shane glared at him briefly, and Vic added, “Besides, Shane’s been keeping the nightmares away.”

“Nightmares?” Owen asked in confusion.

“He’s been trying those melatonin pills,” Shane said without looking up.

“Ooh, yeah, those things can give you some wicked real dreams. That sucks that they’re bad, man,” Owen said distractedly as he placed another piece.

“Not so bad anymore,” Vic said as he looked from Owen’s bowed head to Shane’s. They were both chewing on their lips in

thought, their heads resting in one hand as the other held a puzzle piece, mirroring each other, and Vic smiled fondly at them both. He was glad he hadn't let his irrational anger drive Owen away. He was even gladder, though, that he and Shane had discovered something down here, something that would be special if they let it.

Shane looked up at him and blinked when he found Vic's eyes on him, and he cocked his head and frowned a little.

"I think I'm ready to turn in," Vic said with a slow smile, not looking away from him.

Shane looked away, his gaze focusing on the glass tabletop briefly before glancing at Owen. "You sure you don't want the good bed?" he asked uncertainly, looking at them both in turn.

Vic raised an eyebrow at him, wondering why he wasn't just taking the offer to go to bed and running with it.

"You two take it," Owen said with finality as he looked up at Shane with wide blue eyes. "No point in either of you sleeping on a hard mattress when you have to share a bed anyway, you know?"

"Right," Shane said slowly.

"Who the hell buys a puzzle with popcorn on it anyway?" Owen asked as he stared at another piece and turned it end over end.

Shane snorted and shook his head, trying not to smile.

Vic stood and stretched. "I'm gone. Too much sun and beer," he said as he stepped away from the table and started for the front bedroom.

"Gonna finish this," Shane said thoughtfully as he watched Vic. Vic looked at him long and hard and then nodded.

“Night, Vic,” Owen said without looking up from the popcorn puzzle.

Vic smiled at them both and then disappeared into the bedroom. He was so tired he didn’t think he would be able to stay awake until Shane got there. Hopefully, though, Shane would wake him. They desperately needed to have a discussion, and it was high time that Vic told Shane how he thought he felt. The word “love” might not yet enter the picture, but the words “desire” and “need” certainly would.

Vic heard the heated argument from the bedroom even before he was completely awake, and it took him quite a bit of fumbling and stumbling through the dark rooms before he found it. Owen and Shane were both down on the beach, apparently having gone there in order to keep from waking him and not knowing he’d opened the window in his bedroom. In the light provided by the enormous moon over the water, Vic could make them out quite clearly. They were squared off opposite each other, Shane standing with his fists balled up angrily at his sides and Owen with his arms crossed stubbornly across his chest.

“I’m not stupid, Shane. It took me a while but I finally figured it out. It’s so obvious what happened here you may as well be wearing a flashing neon sign on your asses!”

“And what is it you think happened, Owen?” Shane asked him. “And tell me, please, how it’s any of your fucking business!”

“It’s my business if he gets hurt! You keep ignoring it and he will! Why are you so blind that you can’t see it?” Owen was

asking harshly as Vic pushed the doors open and stepped out onto the deck to look out at them in the moonlight.

“*I’m* blind?” Shane asked in an incredulous growl. “You’re one to talk about not seeing!” He continued shouting, but the roar of the waves momentarily drowned out his words and Vic couldn’t hear them.

Whatever he said made Owen pull up short.

“What are you talking about?” Owen asked in confusion.

Shane took a few impetuous steps toward him, his feet going deep in the soft sand as Owen backed up a little in alarm. Vic’s eyes widened in panic as he realized that Owen could quite handily tear Shane in two if he felt so inclined, and he hesitated briefly before running down the short walkway and jumping down into the soft sand. Vic was far too sore and stiff to be doing that, he realized, as his ankles and knees protested the landing.

He wasn’t about to let them start fighting, though.

“Shane!” he called out in alarm.

Shane stopped dead in his tracks and turned to look at Vic, and Owen warily looked at them each in turn as he continued to back away.

“What the hell are you doing?” Vic demanded of them both.

“Trying to pull his head out of his ass!” Shane yelled.

“Wait a minute. *My* head out of *my* ass?” Owen asked incredulously. “That’s what I was trying to do to you!” he said indignantly as he pointed at Shane.

Vic looked between them in confusion. He couldn’t imagine how a popcorn puzzle had turned into this.

Shane pointed a finger at him warningly. "Don't test me," he said in a low voice.

Owen closed his eyes and put up both hands in a placating gesture. "Okay, calm down," he requested. It seemed the policeman in him was trying to take over, making sure cooler heads prevailed. Vic was relieved to see it.

"Look, I didn't mean to intrude in your private business," Owen told him slowly, as if trying to reason with a charging bull. "I just... I wanted to tell you that if you two are happy then that's good," he assured Shane. Then he looked to Vic. "I told him as long as he was good to you then I was happy for you," he insisted. "Then he started yelling at me!" he said accusingly as he pointed at Shane again.

Vic looked between them and shook his head helplessly. Now he sort of knew how Shane felt on the bench when there were bickering lawyers and he had to call for order. Sort of like a mother breaking up a fight on the playground.

"Idiot," Shane hissed angrily. He looked at Vic and sighed sadly, as if apologizing for what he was about to do, then he looked back at Owen and his features immediately softened. "He loves you," he told Owen in a soft, defeated voice as he gestured toward Vic.

Vic stared at him in shock, hoping that somehow Owen hadn't heard over the sound of the roiling ocean.

"He's loved you for years," Shane told Owen, his voice growing angry once more. "What will it take for you to see that?" he asked in frustration.

Vic could feel Owen's shocked eyes on him now, but he couldn't tear his own gaze away from Shane long enough to look at the other man. Vic had never felt quite so betrayed in his life. Why would Shane tell Owen that, knowing that it

would jeopardize everything they had slowly been building over the past week?

Shane looked over at him, barely able to meet his eyes, and Vic swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat as they locked eyes.

“Vic?” Owen ventured uncertainly.

Vic stared at Shane for several moments longer, not quite believing how much such a small amount of words could hurt him, and finally Shane could take it no longer and he looked down at the sand guiltily. Vic tore his eyes away and looked at Owen like he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Owen was staring at him disbelievingly, his mouth slightly open and his brow furrowed. “Is that... is that true?” he asked in confusion. “I thought...” He looked back at Shane and shook his head.

Vic looked back at Shane, who had yet to raise his head, and he licked his lips nervously before nodding to Owen almost imperceptibly and whispering, “Yeah. Sort of.”

Owen took a few tentative steps toward him, hugging himself tightly against the cool breeze as he struggled through the sand. “Why didn’t...? I never knew, Vic,” he said in a horrified whisper. “I never would have carried on the way we did if...”

Vic turned fully to look at the man then. At one time he had ached for Owen to know this, ached for him to have the opportunity to reciprocate those feelings. He had ached to hear these things from Owen and know that all that time Owen had just not known how much he meant to Vic. This was exactly what he’d wanted to hear. A week ago it would have made his life complete, made him a happy man.

But now he knew there were better things for him in life.

“How could you have known?” he asked Owen with a sad smile. “I never told you. I should have.”

“Why didn’t you?” Owen asked as he came to stand just in front of Vic.

Vic looked down at the moonlit sand and bit his lip.

“If I had known I never would have.... I’ve treated you horribly, Vic, for you to have loved me. If I had known...,” he repeated helplessly. He trailed off as he looked at Vic, his blue eyes full of such regret that Vic felt ashamed to have caused it. “I would have tried to love you back, you know,” Owen said finally. “Anyone could love you so easily.... I would have tried if I’d known it was part of the deal.”

“Would have?” Vic asked curiously, feeling strangely unemotional at hearing these words he had wanted to for so long.

“It’s too late now,” Owen said softly, his tone just as certain as if he had told Vic the sun was hot.

Vic furrowed his brow in confusion. “Go after him, Vic,” Owen urged quietly. Vic’s head whipped around to find that Shane was nowhere in sight. He looked back at Owen in shock.

“Take it from me, man,” Owen said quietly. “Don’t let someone special slip through your fingers just because you’re too blind to see it. He loves you. Even *I* can see that,” he said with a wry smile, and he accentuated it with a gentle shove. “Go after him, before he pulls a Vic and finds someone better,” Owen finished with a small laugh.

Vic stared at the younger man with his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide with surprise. Owen was right. If he let Shane walk away now, the other man would never believe that he had been anything but a second choice, a backup when Owen had failed to say the words Vic wanted to hear.

He turned to scan the house and beach and then looked back at Owen urgently.

Owen pointed over Vic's shoulder, down the dark beach where Vic could just barely see the light material of Shane's shirt moving slowly away from them. He looked back at Owen once more, not having the words or even the emotions to express what he was feeling. He had loved the other man for so long, it seemed, but had he really been in love with him? Vic couldn't possibly be sure now. What he was sure of, though, was that he wanted Shane. He wanted him more than air.

Owen gave him one last smile of encouragement and Vic ran his fingertips along the side of Owen's face.

"Thank you," he whispered with difficulty.

Owen nodded and made a little shooing motion with his fingers, and Vic turned and broke into a run down the beach.

He slowed when he finally came close to where Shane was now standing. It had been a long, hard run in the soft sand, and Vic was more out of breath than he had thought he'd be.

Shane was standing in the surf, staring out over the water and looking at the gorgeous reflection of the moon on the fretful sea with his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his shorts. His short-sleeved shirt was unbuttoned and flapping lightly in the gentle night breeze.

Vic found himself a little speechless. The other man was stunning, and Vic wanted nothing more than to be able to call him his own for the rest of his days. Shane heard him approach and turned to look at him in shock.

"He's an even bigger fool than I thought," Shane said bitterly as Vic came up to stand beside him. "If he doesn't want you for the rest of his life, he's a fucking idiot."

"He does," Vic said with difficulty. "He does want me."

Shane looked at him sideways briefly and then returned his eyes to the water, swallowing hard and smiling sadly. “Then what are you doing here, huh?” he asked, putting on a brave front but not fooling Vic for a second. “I gave you privacy, right? Go take what you’ve earned, Vic.”

“I don’t want *him*,” Vic whispered, holding his breath as he waited for Shane’s reaction. Shane turned to look at him slowly.

“I thought you loved him,” he said carefully, his voice edged with confusion and what may have been hope.

“So did I,” Vic said with a quick nod. Shane frowned and Vic looked at him intently. “I was wrong, though,” he continued.

Shane shook his head and opened his mouth, frowning further in confusion and trying to formulate words.

“I don’t understand,” he finally said in a lost voice that made Vic want to hold him close and never let go. “For years you’ve mooned over him, and now that he’s willing you’re changing your mind?”

“Yes,” Vic said immediately, a little shocked at how sure he felt about it. He looked over his shoulder back down the beach, saw Owen standing there unmoving where he’d left him, and regardless of the feelings he had harbored for so long, Vic knew that right here with Shane was where he was supposed to be. “A few kisses,” he murmured as he peered through the darkness.

“What?” Shane asked in confusion from behind him.

“You said a few kisses would change my mind,” Vic told him as he turned back around. “You were right. I kissed you, and you kissed me back,” he said, taking a deep breath. He licked his lips nervously. “If I were to love you, Shane,” Vic

ventured tentatively, his heart pounding and his breath impossible to catch as he looked into the washed-out green of Shane's eyes in the moonlight, "would you love me back?"

Shane stared at him, unmoving and not even breathing as he stood there. Vic held his breath as well, waiting for an answer.

Shane looked down slowly, his hand reaching out as he did so to tug at Vic's limp fingers. Vic's eyes followed the movement, watching in confusion as Shane twined his fingers with his and pulled Vic's hand until Vic was forced to take a little step forward.

"I'd be a fool myself not to," Shane whispered as soon as their faces were just inches apart.

Vic caught his breath, barely able to believe what Shane had just said, and then his lips twitched and spread into a slow, delighted grin. Shane held his hand tenderly, much the same way he had held it in his sleep before, and with a shy smile he closed the distance between them and kissed Vic gently, the chaste kiss soon turning into a more demanding one as Vic pulled Shane's body to his.

They held each other close, overbalancing in their zeal to celebrate and toppling to the wet sand.

They snickered happily as they heard an impressive wolf whistle emanate from down the beach, their mouths unwilling to part even as they grinned and giggled and listened to another of Owen's teasing whistles.

"How's he see us, from all the way over there?" Shane murmured between hungry kisses.

"Your shirt glows," Vic said succinctly as he wrapped his arms around Shane's body and vowed never to let go again. "Now stop talking."

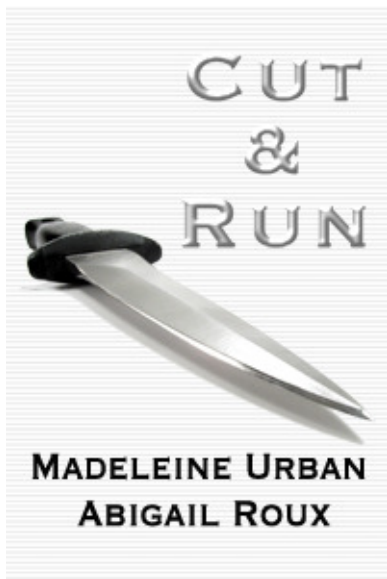
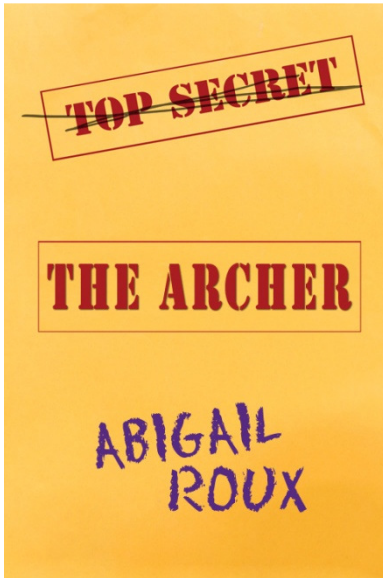
“Do you always nag this much?” Shane murmured in between slow, languid kisses.

“It’s not nagging. It’s ordering. You’ll find out soon enough who’s boss here, Your Honor,” Vic said cheekily as Shane enveloped him in strong arms and kissed him hard to shut him up.

“I’m sure,” Shane murmured into his mouth. “If we drown out here, it’s your fault,” he added as the waves lapped at their feet.

Vic grinned in the moonlight, looking up at Shane with a wicked glint in his eye. This felt right, as Vic had known it would. Vic could definitely do this for the rest of his life.

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Abigail Roux was born and raised in North Carolina. A past volleyball star who specializes in pratfalls and sarcasm, she currently spends her time coaching middle school volleyball and softball and dreading the day when her little girl hits that age. Abigail has a loving husband, a baby girl they call Boomer, four cats, three dogs, a crazyass extended family, and a cast of thousands in her head.

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