



MEN OF SMITHFIELD

Cover Me

L.B. GREGG

Aspen Mountain Press

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Cover Me

Author's Note

Thanks to Sula, Sarah, and T; to my *Dear Friend*, who helped me see this book clearly; to G; and to my evil editor, Celina Summers.

For Carolyn Jean, the toast of the town. And for Rosie, always.

From: Maxwell Douglas (max@douglassecurity.com)

To: Michael Finnegan (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

As we discussed over the phone, Kyle's PSAT scores are unacceptable for college admission. He'll need tutoring three days a week. The two of you can work at my office in the break room. How does one o'clock fit your schedule?

Max Douglas

Chapter One

"I need to speak with you before you leave."

I glanced up from the table I shared with a gum-snapping Kyle Douglas who, to date, was one of the best looking and least interested students I'd ever met. Kyle took the half-second my attention was focused on his older brother to check his phone—the little pissant. "Kyle. Put it away."

He did with a sigh. I turned and nodded to Max. "Sure. We'll be done here in a minute. Kyle is finishing his essay."

No response. I was speaking to the back of his head anyway. Max had dismissed me at my nod, expecting nothing less than full compliance, and moved purposefully through the office on to his next task.

Kyle shot a wad of paper at the back of Max's head and it bounced off. Max didn't so much as flinch. He entered his office and clicked the door shut.

"Two points, right?"

I'd give him five and then detention. "Why do you do that? He's paying for your tutoring. You should respect him, Kyle. He's your brother and he's been decent to you all summer." Kyle shrugged, popping his gum in a loud series of crackles against the back of his teeth. "I can't believe he lets you get away with that."

"Nah, he doesn't. He'll make me clean the entire office tomorrow morning when we come in. Like with a toothbrush or some shi – thing. After we run five miles."

"Sounds character building."

"He wishes." The boy blew a pink bubble and I fought the compulsion to pop it into his face. It'd probably get stuck in his skillfully arranged hair. "So Mr. Finn, can we peace it? I'm done for today, right? I'm gonna pack up and head out."

Ah. It must be three fifty-five. Time to cut out early.

"No. You have five minutes. Get busy."

He sighed and stared woefully at his essay. I couldn't blame him. Kyle clicked his pen *rat-a-tat-a-tat-tat* and I wondered again how these two people could possibly be related – although the twenty-three years difference made Max more an uncle than a half brother. This kid didn't have a scrap of the drive or physical presence Max embodied.

Max Douglas. It had been too long since I'd had sex, but I knew when another man was game – even when he was as reserved and buttoned up as Max. He was exactly my type, too. Good looking, older, wiser, experienced, employed and gay. Truly, it was the winning combination.

I could wince over the depth of this crush I had on him. It was excruciating. I was reasonably confident that my interest was returned – perhaps not as enthusiastically – but there were times when his gaze followed me, intense and hot. He hadn't done that today, of course, but on occasion he'd zeroed in on me with such precision, I found myself flustered and stuttering.

Surely that wasn't how he looked at just anyone?

I should go into his office and just strip – that would send him a clear message. No confusion in those actions –

"Mr. Finn?"

I blinked. "Yes, Kyle? All set? You can go. Good work." I used my most encouraging tone of voice. "Next week we focus on math. Do your homework, hear me? You need to bring that score up by eighty points. You need to clear five hundred."

He was going to have to say a novena. Thank God there wasn't a money back

guarantee for SAT prep.

Kyle groaned, rapidly texting someone. If text messaging was a skill set on the SAT, he'd do well. He packed his single pen and binder and schlepped to the door—his pants belted at his thighs, his phone ringing, his collar popped to his ears. He waved a hand absently. "See ya, Mr. Finn."

Three times a week wasn't going to be enough to save Kyle Douglas from Junior College, but tutoring was a good gig for me. It saved me from working construction all summer with my brother.

I packed up my dictionary and the SAT Prep book that I knew was a stretch for Kyle. The overhead lights buzzed in the small break room, newspapers littered the side table and every so often the snack machine settled itself with an odd clank.

It was time to go speak with Max.

I checked my reflection in the window—patted my tousled blond head—then followed the carpet to Max's office where the door was shut tight and a bit forbidding. I didn't hesitate; I knocked.

"Yeah?"

I poked my head in. His office was small, neat and serviceable, with a large window facing the woods behind route 202. The trees were lush and verdant, the sky a dazzling blue, the forest floor was knee deep in ferns and the summer sunshine sparkled through the leaves. Great view, actually. Max's security trucks were parked in a neat line at the back of the lot, getting their end of the day hose down by an employee. What a perfect job for such a bright, hot afternoon. It must suck for Max to be trapped inside all day.

Max sat at his desk, looking less like a business owner and more like a starship commander at the helm. *Fantasy number one.* "You wanted to see me?" *Mein Commandant?*

I went in, noticing how the spider plants and advertising placards were organized with precision on the tidy bookshelves.

Max drummed his fingers on the surface of his desk. Those pale eyes barely glanced at me; the document in front of him had captured his full attention. I had a

great view of the top of his head. His hair wasn't as gray in this light as it was a soft ash brown. "I need to finish this—can you give me a minute?" His words were as clipped and short as his hair.

This? What *this*? His desk was clear save for that single sheet of paper and his phone.

"Sure." Resigned to wait, I left him to the bright solitude of his office. I chose a chair in the reception room and searched my bag for something to pass the time.

My choice of self-supplied entertainment was limited: scroll through email on my cell; play Sudoku; or read Kyle's essay. I'd had enough of Kyle and his essay for one day so I made myself comfortable while Max's secretary answered the phone, monitored the video surveillance and tapped at her computer. *Click click click*.

Workmen came and went. The air conditioner rumbled low as it battled the summer heat. The security equipment chirped and squawked and the phone rang incessantly. I knew each time Max's snappish little receptionist transferred a call down to his sealed office. I glanced at the clock, growing sleepy as minute upon minute dragged by with nothing for me to do.

When my phone battery blinked out, I got up and stretched the knots from my neck and lower back. I had a drink from the fountain. I took a piss. *Jesus*. I flopped back down in my chair. What the heck? He'd better pay me for my time, because this was no longer interesting, it bordered on rude.

Another half hour passed. My eyes itched and grew dry. I blinked in a vain effort to stay awake, but my head drooped, suddenly far too heavy for my neck.

I may have dozed.

I jerked awake as Max's employees strolled by on their way to the front door. It was five o'clock and the receptionist was gone. Soon the only sound was the sporadic chatter from the security monitors. Max and I couldn't be the only ones left in the building, could we? It felt that way. Maybe he'd climbed out the window and I was doomed to sit here waiting until it grew dark and I got a clue. I should go, but something kept my ass in that chair. He'd asked me to stay and I intended to find out why. Dinner? Maybe something had come up and he had forgotten me. That didn't

bode well.

Finally, the door opened. I stood up and my legs, asleep now, were rubber.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Max scanned me with a thoughtful expression, as if he were weighing my worth or waiting for me to collapse at his feet. It was a real possibility now that I couldn't feel my legs. "C'mon in, Michael." His voice was thick with a kind of sexually alluring authority: low and sultry, and hinting of promise.

Or warning.

I blinked the sleep from my eyes and followed him, struggling with my tingling leg fatigue, my irritation at his thoughtlessness and by the vision of his tight, firm ass and strong back.

He perched his perfect rear on the desk's edge and folded his arms. My irritation vanished because he...*thrilled* me. It was more than his size; it was his noble bearing. As if here in this building, he was the ruler. It was a scene I dug. He had the *Master and Commander* vibe working—of course, the hair was all wrong—but everything else about Max was right. Those strong thighs, the barrel chest, and wide shoulders—there was nothing wispy or waifish or childlike about him. He was a man. We were alone. We were adults and I was ready to have him. Besides, it was summertime; hooking up was obligatory.

Blazer gone, Max's tie hung straight, his shirt wrinkle free and precise. His khakis were pleated and his crotch heavy. I drew my eyes away from the sizable bulge and those gray eyes caught me. The sexual heat I carefully restrained nine months of the year in the prep school world unleashed itself. I smiled deviously at Max and he froze, his brow lifting slightly. I was just going to do it. What the hell? Decision made, I nudged the door with my heel until it latched.

His voice rumbled through me. "You don't need to close it, this won't take long."

Probably not, the way I was feeling. "I think it's a good idea."

"And why's that?"

"Because I don't want anyone walking in on us when we fuck." I yanked my polo over my head as his eyes widened, his brows arching in surprise. I knew I was impressively cut. "C'mon Max." I kicked my shoes off.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing? I’m coming on to you.” I didn’t glance at my polo where it lay crumpled on the floor. Had I gambled and lost? “You game, Max?”

“I don’t think this is wise, Michael. I think — ”

“Of course it’s not wise. That’s part of what makes it exciting.” Max’s gaze wandered far below my chin. His curiosity finally got the better of him because he cast away from the desk’s edge, sailing toward me fast and focused. I’d chosen appropriately, thank God. For a second there, I thought he was going to toss my ass out.

He kept coming and I met him, toe to toe. His big hot hands gripped my biceps and he walked me backward until my shoulders met the door with a thud. We were almost the same height, his mouth nearly on mine, “This is rather sudden, Michael. Don’t you think?” he whispered against my lips, the sinful timbre telling me everything I needed to know. “Do you have a plan?”

Laid was about as far as my plan went.

“Not really — it’s more a course of action.” I couldn’t move my arms, so I contented myself by fingering the cotton of his shirt. It was warm, like Max, and smelled faintly of spice and starch. I leaned in, breathing deeply. “I thought someone like you would appreciate a direct approach.”

“Your approach is to strip in the boss’s office? I’d say this is more a frontal assault.”

“Well, not yet...and you’re not my boss, Max. You’re a client.”

“Interesting. That’s how you see me?” His words tickled my skin, stimulated each nerve ending — his very nearness electrifying me with stinging pins and needles, charging me with sexual heat.

Up close, coarse dark whiskers cast a perfect shadow along the angle of his jaw, rendering it impossibly sharp. He blew gently against my neck and the tingling traveled the length of my spine. Then, with the very tip of his tongue, he flicked the underside of my jaw. I tipped my head back, letting him taste my skin in a long lick that ended at the hollow below my ear. He sucked the spot.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he whispered. His hands still restrained me.

My cock could not possibly be harder so I let my bush do the talking and ground into his crotch. He was as hard as I was. I fisted the pristine cotton of his shirt and, wrinkling it in bunches, freed it from his trousers. I slid a button from its hole. "Yeah. I'm sure. Can we stop talking?"

Max's answer was to nip my lower lip. *Yeowch*. His tongue caressed, soothed the bite as my hand settled on his belt. I anchored myself with curled fingers around leather and rubbed harder. Max dipped into my mouth with a tormenting stroke—nothing tentative about him. He was game. A whoosh of lust hit me and I moaned against his lips, "How do you want it, Max?"

"Slow. Nice and easy. How 'bout you?"

That wasn't what I had in mind at all.

"Like this. I want you like this." I fumbled with his buckle, desperate to unhitch him from his trousers. I slid to my knees, opened his belt, his zipper, his pants, pulled it all out, down and away to coax his heavy cock from its hiding place and smooth its perfect head against my mouth. Moistening my lips with that pearl of salty cum, I breathed in the scent clinging to his thick snatch of hair. He smelled of everything I loved best about men— that intoxicating mix of earth and musk and soap and piss and heat. I nibbled and licked the tip of his cock, teased the slit, and then I buried my head in his thighs and inhaled. I didn't want to freak him out, but his smell was as delicious as his taste.

Max threaded his fingers into my hair and gripped the roots roughly, "If you're going to do this, Michael, then open your mouth." I did. I let him jerk me deeply onto his dick, taking him all the way down my throat, swallowing until I was full. Satisfied by his grunt, I reached into my jeans to free my own erection but he stopped my hand with a yank. "What's your rush? I don't think you want it quick, now, do you?"

I guess not because, holy shit, I was into that dominant tone. He slid out of my mouth to the very tip, then fucked back into me with a guiding hand on my skull. I clung to his thighs, the hair tickling my palms, my nails latching, the sound coming out of my mouth a mixture of grunting exertion and breathy exhilaration. My knees burned against the carpet.

"Suck harder."

Aye aye Captain! I could taste the salt of his semen and I thought he'd let it go, drowning me, but his grip on my hair slackened and he shoved me away.

"Take your pants down." Gruff and bossy. He searched through the bag by his desk, finding a small bottle of what I hoped to hell was lube and, from somewhere in its depths, a condom. The Marines had taught him a thing or two about preparation, because all I had in my own bag was a Kit Kat bar, some pencils and a poorly constructed essay on democracy.

I scrambled to my feet, nearly popping my button in a frenzy to get him inside me or on top of me or below me, up to my pubes in his perfect ass. Some way. Any way at all. My socks flew in two directions. At last, here was a guy who promised to fulfill a very specific, very dirty fantasy. I wanted that shirt of his to stay on, *please*, so that the lines of his body would be tantalizingly hidden by his clothing. I stroked the planes of his abdomen. Christ, he was fit. "How do you want me, Max?"

Say on the desk. Oh, God, say it. Say it.

My cock reached to kiss his, but he ignored my erection and efficiently rolled the condom down his own. "Put your hands against the desk."

Fuck yeah. I braced myself, gripped the edge, and waited. Expectation made me tense. Max's breath burst heavy against the back of my neck, his tie tickled my spine, his hand gripped my flank and then... he kicked my feet apart. My knuckles paled and I held on.

"You sure you're into this? Because we can stop right here." His measured, careful words belied the fact that two firm fingers delved right into the furrow of my butt and swirled in a teasing circle against my hole. A little eddy of pleasure triggered gooseflesh on my arms. The hairs stood up and I gave a tiny shake. "Is that a yes?"

Was he for real? "Yes, Max. I'm into it. I asked you to do this. Just fricken' go." My dick throbbed, my ass clenched and my balls ached.

Yes. Jesus fucking Christ, yes! I was into it.

"Because I need to tell you: this is a surprise, Michael." He laid me flat with a palm between my shoulders. My chest kissed the surface of his clean work space. The hand in

my crack came up to my mouth and I sucked his fingers in, groaning and slurping, my cock wet, smudging the front of the desk. I suckled without hesitation. His voice rumbled against my back, "I'm not used to having employees strip and bend over. Not that I mind in this case."

His fingers popped out of my mouth and he buried them knuckles deep inside me. I cried out.

"Too much?"

"No. No." My ass stung sweetly while he breached me—burning exactly the way I liked it. I groped for my crotch, straining to get a grip on my dick. "Are you going to use that lube?"

"Lucky you—and lucky me. What do you think?" His fingers were widening, scissoring and then they grazed that glorious pleasure point inside me. I stroked off, sweating.

"Are you going to come like this, Michael?"

"Yes...no... Oh God." That voice. Shit. It was...authoritative and somehow—instructional—detached, and that...was going ... to make me...*fuck*. His hand grabbed my wrist and wrestled it away. "No. Wait." I gasped. He slid his fingers free and wiped them on the back of my thighs. "Where are you—"

"Hold on. Lean more; stick your ass way out."

"Please. Just—"

"You really want it, don't you?" He smeared lube, cool and slippery, around my entrance and then inside me, but he still had my wrist in his grip. "Don't touch yourself. Wait."

Wait? *For what?* He pushed his thumb carefully inside and pleasure fried me as the sun shone blinding rays of yellow through the window. *Don't stare directly at the sun.* I closed my eyes, going haywire, begging, "Oh now. Now. Please...."

"Shhh." He withdrew, set free my wrist and his cock entered me. Not in the deep thrust I craved, but in a careful, concentrated plunge that had me mumbling and cursing and backing up.

"Fuck, Max. C'mon."

He took it at his pace, building his pleasure slowly – his speed loose and easy. His tongue licked the narrow line of my spine. My toes curled. My back arched. His dick glided across my prostate in a buzz and it didn't let up, zapping every cell from my toes to my navel and all the way to my heart. I wanted him to fuck me harder: raw, fast, mindless, no thinking involved. No reflection or depth, only pleasure.

"Faster, Max. More." I stretched onto the balls of my feet as he held me down with that heavy hand between my shoulders. He was firm – I wasn't going anywhere. Flat against the cool desk, my face sweated onto that single piece of paper he'd carefully laid there, the ink stamping some backward agreement across the flesh of my cheek. It crinkled and stuck and I kept my eyes shut as his hand finally, finally came 'round to handle my shaft.

Pulling out to my rim, Max began ruthlessly forcing me to the edge with deliberate methodical friction on that secret place inside my rectum, his thighs against my thighs, trying to get that angle ...exactly...right. I mewled – there was no other word for it – and my chute tightened.

"Go ahead, Michael, it's so good." Max granted me permission, and I was set free. His hand moved from my spine to rest by my chin, his thumb swiped my lower lip. Sweat broke out against my lower back and light flared behind my lids as my insides flipped out. I licked at his thumb. It tasted dark, like me, and he let me bite, then suck gently on it. I spilled in lazy spurts onto the floor, down my thighs, hitting my knees – my dick swelling into his fist.

"There you go."

My orgasm strung out long and lean and terrifying all the same. Stars, a storm exploding in spots and flashes, nearly a white-out as my mind frayed. I felt almost beautiful. Cherished. I opened my eyes to the blinding light of the late afternoon sun streaming into the windows.

Max hissed and came within me thickly, deep, deeper, his cock jerking inside his condom pressed far up my ass. His legs trembled and his hand clenched next to my face. The fine hairs on its back stood out against the white of his fist.

We were done. Max slipped out and I lay sprawled, trying to get my bearings. I

regrouped fast, not wanting to lay bent over his desk with my ass in the air. I forced myself to move, post-coital and sore, and I peeled the document from my cheek.

"You good?"

"Sure. Do you have—"

"Here." He handed me a box of Kleenex. His tie was crooked, but his pants were back in place and he was neatly tucking in his shirt, watching me cautiously. As if I was dangerous or unpredictable. That was funny. I'd already behaved about as wildly out of character as I had in years.

Sluggishly, I grabbed my polo from the floor, putting it on, although maybe my pants would have been—

"Michael."

I retrieved my jeans, hoping to hell I hadn't shot a load of cum onto them. They were flipped the wrong way. "Yeah? I'm sorry. I'm a little disoriented. Give me a second. Why don't you tell me why you wanted to see me?" Probably to ask me if I'd like to go out sometime. I was suddenly starving. Dinner would be great—

"About that. I was trying to tell you that I don't need for you to tutor Kyle any more. No hard feelings. I was terminating our business relationship."

My hands failed and I dropped my pants. Shit. My stomach plunged and then threatened to bounce back out of my throat. I willed the floor to open, taking me, my pool of bodily fluid and my inside-out jeans away from this excruciating moment. I shook my head, trying to clear it. "What?"

He rubbed his hand across the top of his head and met my eyes. Was he was embarrassed for me? No. He had things to do.

"Jesus." I turned my back, desperate to hide my nakedness—far too late—and got my underwear back on.

"Michael. I had no idea you were going to—"

I held up a hand. "Stop." The room closed in on me. Sick with shame, I finally jerked my pants up my legs. "You knew you were going to, Max."

Fucked and fired. Hey, this was a first. I grabbed my shit.

Max was talking. "I don't think you're a good match for Kyle. That's all. He needs

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discipline and a mentor with direction. Your teaching methods are a bit unorthodox. Frankly, they're lax."

"Lax?" I didn't know what else to say. I'd just proved I was unorthodox and *lax* beyond a shadow of a doubt—it was impossible to argue that I was anything other than a slutty nonconformist standing there with my dick hanging from my pants—so I zipped up and stuck my feet into my shoes. For the most part I tuned out Max's explanation, although he touched on several "*disturbing trends in my methodology.*" The cell phone. The text messaging. Kyle's informal use of my name. The lack of math preparation.

I stopped listening. I focused instead on my internal burn of mortifying rage calling me every kind of fool. I should have spoken with him. I should have thought before I'd stripped and made that ridiculously eager move.

"Michael, are you listening to me?"

"No, actually, I'm not." I flung the door open and it cracked satisfactorily against the smooth, unblemished wall. I stumbled to the hall, my pants on but my shoes untied. He didn't follow. He'd finally gone silent. I swept out of the building, the July heat matching my temper. That was the last I'd see of Max Douglas, Douglas Security Systems, my self-respect and my favorite argyle socks.

From: Kyle Douglas (kman69@gmail.com)

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Mr. Finn. Max just told me that you're not going to tutor me anymore. He's not a bad guy. My mother says that used to be cool before he came back from the service. Thanks for being patient with me. I'm really sorry. I'll let you know how I do on my SAT's. Peace.

L.B. Gregg

Cover Me

From: Evan (evfin@snet.com)

To: Mikey (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Hey. I'll be running a little late and I'm bringing a friend. I bet you won't check your email. You never check your stupid mail. That's going to bite you on the ass one of these days.

Ev

Chapter Two

I sat at the bar in the Village, waiting for Evan, fending off a very drunk, very blonde thirtyish bombshell. I had to scoot a few times, dragging my beer along, and I'd reached the end of the line where the bar curved into the wall: retreat was no longer an option. The blonde's eager hand strayed into my lap. All I had wanted was to have a Friday night drink with my brother—although right now what I wanted was a wooden spoon to crack this chick's knuckles with. My mother used to do that whenever I reached for a cookie I wasn't supposed to eat. I looked around for a weapon, finding none, I bravely edged further away. I tried not to be rude but she kept on coming, even feigning a fall from her stool. She caught herself with a hungry hand to my inner thigh. Her breast brushed my forearm.

"Um...you know, I'm really not interested."

Fifteen minutes ago, I'd been amused—she was definitely a diversion while I was being stood up by Evan—but now her game was tiresome and her hand nearing my crotch reminded me that I hadn't had sex in months.

Not since Max.

I washed that terrible memory away with the bite of cold beer. I disengaged the claw from my thigh and sighed in relief at the sight of Peggy weaving her way through the crowd and up to the bar. She was such a squirt. Wild brown hair and petite to the

point of elfin, she squirmed into the half-inch of room between me and the bombshell. Rolling her eyes, she elbowed the breast off my arm and reached up to place a quick, sisterly kiss on my cheek.

"Hey, Mike! Miss me?"

"Always. You want my chair?" I tried to act the gentleman but she slapped my arm.

"Please God no, don't get up. You Finnegans are all so damned tall I have a permanent crick. This way we're kinda even," she chirped, delusional. I towered over her. Peggy tilted her face and scrunched her pert, pale nose. "Who's your lady friend?"

"I don't really know. Misty, I think? I'm not sure if she knows. I think she's reached maximum saturation point." The woman clung to the man to our left. That seemed like a sure thing for both parties. I caught the bartender's eye and waved him over.

"How 'bout you? You saturated?" Peg leaned in and sniffed the collar of my shirt.

I gently nudged her away with a fingertip to her forehead. "Me? Right. I'm on my first beer, mom. One more and that's my limit. You know what? You need a glass of wine. Where's Evan?"

"He's on his way. He got held up at the job site. Something about the framers not showing up and, I don't know, I was at work and didn't pay attention."

Pete came by and placed a glass of iced white wine on a napkin, winked at Peggy, and asked me if I wanted another. "Sure."

"He said he's bringing someone with him from work." She tasted her wine daintily. "I think he said work. He may have said something else. We had all that prep work for a wedding and we didn't get our order of lilies. Someone dropped the aisle runner in the dirt. It was a mess and he kept calling and talking yack-yack-yack. I told him I wouldn't remem—"

"Evan's bringing someone? Shit, Peg, the last time he 'brought someone' it was to set me up. Tell me he's not setting me up with some tardy framer."

Peg started to say something, then changed her mind and took a gulp of her wine. *Guilt?* This could either be amusing or upsetting. My brother's idea of a 'date' and mine

were embarrassingly different. Evan's goal to find me a long term mate didn't jibe with my own goal not to get involved. Not now. I'd been burned by what I thought was a true love—hello *married*—at nineteen. First fuck, first love, first betrayal and since then I preferred fast, friendly and free of strings. I thought again of Max and how fast and free of strings that had turned out.

Maybe it was time to reevaluate.

"The last man Evan brought out for 'drinks' was that body builder, Peg. He spent the evening flexing and clenching and straining."

Butch. Evan said. *Just what you need to keep you in line.*

He'd laughed. He had no clue. Admittedly, I'd been entertained watching Ty posture and make his play. Butch, my ass. I squinted suspiciously at my wee sister-in-law. "What's going on?"

"I don't know! I feel like a dingbat because I can't remember and I think it's important but, Mike—I wasn't listening. He might have wanted me to do something before they show up. I should have called him, but I was busy. And I didn't want him to think I wasn't paying attention. I mean, you know he gets pissy."

"Pissy about what, babe?"

We both flinched at the rumble of Evan's deep voice. Peggy clutched her wine glass and grinned sheepishly. I looked past Peg to my brother, standing six foot two and eyes of blue, his hair pale and his build burly—he was a slightly bigger, broader, older version of myself. He was grinning like the fool I knew him to be. A figure lurked behind Evan and my eyes were drawn immediately—

Fuck.

I caught myself before I said it out loud, but only just. My mouth had formed the *fuh* part and I snapped my jaw shut, hoping he hadn't seen that telltale reaction. My mouth curved into a fake Parent's Day approved smile. I suppressed a death glare for both my matchmaking brother and his forgetful, pint-sized wife and cleared my throat with a cough.

"Hey Max." Not a break or a squeak betrayed me, although I made a stupid gesture with my fingers. Like a gun or something. Freudian? I dropped my hand.

"Hey yourself, Michael. How are you?" His smile was cool. No surprise there.

Fine until a second ago. I was going to kill Evan when we got out of here. I wish I could blame early dementia or selective memory loss or punishment for one of the many unforgivable childhood pranks littering our past—but I'd been so thoroughly humiliated by Max that I'd never told Evan a thing. Not about the job or the messy way things ended.

I groped for my beer. "Good. You?" *Kill me.*

"No complaints." In the tense silence that followed I concocted multiple images of fratricide, just for enjoyment's sake. Why did Evan persist in trying to set me up? I willed myself into keeping a calm outward appearance as Evan ordered his drink not twenty inches from my fist. "How's Kyle?"

"Fine. I understand he's taking his SAT soon."

"I'm sure he'll do well." I'd have to remember to light a candle. And then I couldn't think of single thing to say—and me, the damn drama coach.

Evan, clueless to the undercurrents swirling around his thick Yankee head, gazed back and forth between us. "Hey. You guys know each other, right?"

Biblically.

"Max is working for Sammy Sparks, Mike. He's putting in the security system while Sam's in LA. You have his kid in your class. Small world. Max came with me so you wouldn't have to drink alone again, Mikey. He said he didn't mind." Evan clapped me on the shoulder and grinned at Max.

Well, that hurt. True to form, Max said nothing, remaining aloof. I guess he was trained to wait and see how things would play out before he'd commit to any action.

My thoughts tripped along. Why the hell had he come with Evan? He wasn't interested in me—or me in him. What did he want?

I must have been quiet a beat too long because the strange tension grew until my usually obtuse brother's mouth quirked into a knowing, smackable smirk. He signaled for Pete, saying smugly to me, "Something you want to share with the class there, Mikey?"

So much for anonymous sex partners.

"Not particularly." I shot a glance at Max, whose gray eyes watched Evan. Max's tight-assed posture gave nothing away. He remained as he ever was: rigid, though relaxed. *At ease*. Waiting to see where the enemy lay. Always at the ready.

I could go on—and on—apparently, but I stopped myself.

Peggy passed a confused look between the three of us and then her personal light bulb lit and she whacked Evan in the arm. "Don't be such a jerk, Ev. You're embarrassing Michael."

Which made things exponentially worse. I wished I was a drinker.

Peggy smiled at Max, "Hi Max. I'm sorry that I couldn't remember it was you who was coming!"

Me too. A warning would have been appreciated, maybe helped me to remain detached or at least friendly. Anything was better than being surprised into silence. I hated being blindsided like this. I could have slipped out the back door had she said something. I stared longingly at the rear exit as waiters trotted past me carrying heavy trays

Should I ask Max for my socks?

Max smiled at Peggy. "Not a problem. Mike tutored my brother over the summer so we know each other."

Peggy looked confused. "Your brother?"

"Half. My mother's second family." Max stated automatically.

"Well he's a fortunate kid if you had Mikey working with him. His students all go on to top notch schools."

They needed to stop calling call me that.

"I'm sure they do," he said with no conviction at all.

"Oh, yeah. He's terrific. All the parents love him."

"I'm sure they do," he repeated politely. He set my teeth on edge, even as his body distracted me. Max leaned into the bar, his shoulders massive and masculine in his twill sport coat. I took a drink while he changed the subject, obviously not wanting to contradict Peggy on my competence. "How's the flower shop?"

"Good. Hectic as hell. We have a large wedding tomorrow."

“Her business is booming and blooming,” Evan said cheerfully, throwing his arm around his diminutive wife. She beamed.

Pete served a round of drinks while we suffered through some painful small talk about flowers. Peggy outdid herself keeping the ball rolling. It was rough going, particularly because it was loud in the bar. Laughter came from every direction along with the clatter of dishes and the hum of conversation. I took a peek at my cell. Time wasn’t flying by quickly enough. I had to be back to the dorm by ten—two long hours away. I sighed.

Max turned to me and I was pinned. “How’re things at Dalton Prep? You’re living on campus still?”

I had to do this. “Yes, I am. And all is well. We’re gearing up for Halloween.” Did I sound tense? I sounded tense.

Peggy lurched forward, excited, “Oh, they’re doing *Guys and Dolls*! Evan’s donated materials for the set, which is enormous. You should go see it when it opens. It’s going to be a smash.”

Oh God.

“I just may do that. That’s a fun show.” I wasn’t about to quiz him on the finer points of *Luck Be a Lady* but, gay or not, he’d probably never seen a musical in his life. I held my tongue, with my teeth, and wondered again why the hell he was here. He had a motive. There was no way he was onboard with Evan’s dating machinations.

I might as well find out. “So, Max, you’re working for Sam? He’s a busy guy. Have you met Hemmi? Great kid, but what a name to saddle on anyone. Hemmingway Sparks. It suits him, though.”

“I’ll be up at the school assessing security there, as well as Hemmingway’s personal safety.” Ah. The motive. Max held me with a no nonsense look, no doubt ‘assessing’ my threat level. I tried to appear innocuous but as a disgruntled former employee, I wasn’t going to pass muster.

“Are you putting in a new security system at the school? That’s a big job. The campus is three hundred acres. I think we have things handled pretty well. It’s odd that Bibby didn’t mention anything during the faculty meeting.” Our Head of School,

Barbara 'Bibby' Danvers, would have at the very least sent a memo.

"No. I'm keeping an eye on the kid."

"Watching Hemmi? Babysitting? I didn't know you offered that service."

"We offer a variety of services based on the security needs of our clients."

"Is he in some kind of trouble? He's not the type to cause a problem. He's a good kid, considering his dad is a legend. He's what you'd call 'well adjusted.'"

"I haven't met him yet. I'm sure he's everything you say he is. Sam wants me on campus to make sure the school is safe and up to standard. He feels security may be a bit lax for his son's needs."

Lax? Again with the lax. "I wasn't aware that Hemmi needed protection. He's in the eleventh grade, he's a decent student and he has nice friends. Of course we're 'up to standard.' We're very careful with the welfare of all students." I was bristling. "Unless he's in danger—but Bibby would have sent a memo to the staff..."

Before I could ask more, Peggy cut in. "Have you met Bibby, Max? She's like Grace Kelly, but she's got a steel spine. I'm so intimidated. Maybe we'll win the lottery and our kids can go prep, Ev."

"Well, we'll have to work on having some kids before we think about where they'll go to school." Evan said. My brother was ever hopeful to be a father.

Peggy smiled at her husband as my attention shifted to Max. He'd taken the stool recently vacated by the blonde. As uncomfortable as he made me, I couldn't deny that he looked good enough to eat. He'd taken off his jacket, his shirt sleeves were rolled up, his tie loosened and crooked around his strong neck. He was sporting a heavy five o'clock shadow and I couldn't take my eyes off the contrast of his dark beard against the white of his collared shirt. I was captivated by his strength: hard, firm, opinionated, rough, dangerous. Cruel. Everything about him was clipped and neat and mean.

He leaned on his forearms, idly spinning a napkin with his thumbs as his drink sat sweating on the bar. I stared at his blunt fingers, remembering them deep inside my body, and the air grew thick. My breath dried in my lungs. My cheeks burned; I had sucked that thumb. Heat engulfed me in a rare combination of raging desire and anguish-infused humiliation. Max glanced away from his napkin, tilting his head over

his shoulder. His eyes briefly swept my body, then he met my gaze.

Fuck. That moment—when he'd made me spew cum onto my own feet—came screaming back and I couldn't break away. My neck and cheeks prickled with heat as my dick hardened—no imagining there. I shouldn't want him. I should despise him. I did. I despised him. Yet everything in me lusted for him. It took all my will to keep my ass nailed to the bar stool, my mouth closed and my mind open.

I wasn't going to win. *Shit.* I had to get out of there. I gulped my beer in rapid swallows, Max studying me the entire time. Exposed, resentful, and hot, I longed to hold my beer bottle against my face—or dump its contents into my crotch. *Why was he staring?*

"Excuse me." I jumped up and fumbled my way over to the men's room as my brother and Peggy resurfaced from their tête-à-tête.

I returned cooled off, limp-dicked and in control of myself. Evan and Peggy were nowhere to be found and Max was picking up the bar tab. They'd ditched me, which was just typical. Here was my brother's lame stab at matchmaking. I'd seen it coming, but I'd figured Max was a business associate of Evan's. I didn't think it could be any more patently clear to everyone in the bar, including my family, that hooking up (again) was out of the question. Unless they'd felt the heat radiating from me five minutes ago. Damn Evan.

"Max, let me pay for my own drinks." He waved me off.

"This is a business expense," Max stated, laying cash on the bar. *Really?* "Let's go somewhere and talk."

"Why?"

Max loosened enough to smile at me, "You overestimate your charm, Michael. I need to talk to you about Hemmingway—"

My charm was, in fact, underappreciated. "Hemmi. The kid is called Hemmi." I tried not to snip that out as sharply as I did. *What an asshole.*

Him, not me.

"I believe you need to hear what I have to say. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was necessary."

Well, that was credible, so I reluctantly agreed. "Fine."

Within seconds, he was behind me, herding me through the throng of weekend warriors and out onto West Street like a dog corralling a reluctant sheep. I'd grabbed my polar fleece and zipped it as we stepped into the late October chill. It was a beautiful evening, brightened by a waxing harvest moon. The foliage was nearly gone but the leaves blew playful swirls of fall debris against the tires of cars parked on the narrow street. People milled about and a few were out on the green taking up benches as they shivered in the crisp night air. I stayed mute, the only thing moving me forward was my own reluctant curiosity and concern for Hemmi.

We found an empty bench near the cannon and Max sat, stiffly. I sighed like a martyr and plopped at the opposite end. We looked like we were waiting for a bus—but that bus had come and gone.

"All right, Max, tell me what you need to because I've got to get back for dorm check-in."

"Sam's hired me to put a state of the art security system in the house he's building."

"I figured as much, Max."

No shit, Sherlock. Did he think I was dense?

He went on as if I'd not said anything, "He's having some trouble with an overzealous fan in L.A. Sam's taken on a couple bodyguards while he's on the set, but he's concerned that Hemmin—*Hemmi* is at risk here. He's received some unsettling emails regarding the boy."

"He's hardly a boy, Max. He's sixteen. He's a teenager. Why can't the police just arrest this guy? Get some kind of restraining order," I waved my hand around, "where you can only get within fifty feet of a person? Russell Crowe has to get them for crazy fans. And Paris Hilton..."

He watched me during this monologue until I trailed off in uncertainty. I had a master's degree in English Literature and I had just uttered the name Paris Hilton in a conversation with a former Marine. Sometimes this happened to me as I'd spent the past few years with teenagers. Max had not. I'd completely emasculated myself. Great.

"A restraining order. Yes, he's obtained a restraining order against this fan—his name's Colton Dobos. There's nothing threatening in the letters, merely inappropriate. He's too familiar with Spark's private life and that of his son. Sam's concerned for Hemmi's safety. He's hired me to stay with the boy."

"Hasn't Sam had to deal with this kind of thing before? He's been famous most of his adult life. You'd think he would have something already in place."

"With the internet, things are much different. For all we know, this guy has already contacted Hemmi. MySpace—"

I laughed. "No. You'd be surprised how savvy the typical teenager is. And MySpace is so five years ago, Max. Kids think it's a playground for perverts. With good reason."

"We'll see. I'll be checking into his computer activity."

"What? How the hell— isn't that invasive?"

"His safety is foremost. He'll have to deal with it."

I imagined how I would feel if I was Hemmi, and I knew things were going to be rough. He might be a good kid, but there were limits.

I glanced at Max sitting rigidly on the bench. Cars moved up West Street, lights cutting across the side streets. The light at the corner changed to green with a click and a low buzz and I filled the silence carefully. "Well, I can understand that Sam wants to protect his son. We have a few children of high profile personalities at the school. But Max, Dalton Prep is a high school. The students have a normal life, which includes privacy. We have check-ins, dress codes, curfews and a point system set in place to keep everyone safe. Unless you're willing to humiliate this kid, you can't follow him around like he's some sort of rock star, leaping at shadows, invading his space and restricting him from his activities. It would be detrimental to his psyche. Really. I know him. He's a child of fame and fortune and all he craves is to be treated like a normal person." It was painful how much Hemmi needed this. Many teenagers in the same circumstance tried to take advantage, using their parent's wealth as a shield for bad behavior. But many were simply kids who craved approval. "He's in the play as Nathan."

"His father get him that role?"

"No. Not at all. He's quite good, better than any of the seniors who auditioned by a mile, and he works damn hard. Probably because he doesn't want anyone thinking what you just said."

Jerk.

"It was a fair question," Max insisted.

"Not really. He's a good kid; he just wants to fit in, like every other teenager you've ever met. Max, if he's in danger, then he shouldn't be on campus."

"He's not in direct danger. This is a precaution." He sat stiffly, arms crossed, but his attention was high above us on the sky filled with stars.

"Well, please try not to embarrass him."

"I'll be discreet. I'm simply informing you that I'll be up at the school and I'd like your input if you're available and as necessary."

It was like talking to Robocop—he was attractive, but emotionless. "He's my advisee; of course I'll help. He's in my dorm and he's at play practice every evening. The kid lives practically in my pocket. He's with me or he's in class or the dining hall—his fall sport is outdoor club," Max's mouth quirked at this, "so he hikes with my group every afternoon. He doesn't go home on weekends because his dad's always on a shoot. He lives on campus."

How the hell was he going to protect a sixteen year old from an unknown threat on three hundred acres of rambling Connecticut woodland? "You realize that anyone can sneak on and off that campus, Max? The kids do it often enough." Fortunately there wasn't much to do once they left but walk around a town that closed for business at six. They'd sneak back for check in at ten. That's what kids in boarding school do. That and fill their water bottles with vodka. I'd dumped a lot of vodka down the drain over the past few years.

"Sam's coming back Tuesday night. We'll see what the situation is then."

"Halloween? People fly on Halloween?" The thought had never crossed my mind. Distracted, I wondered, "Hey, do you think the flight attendants dress up?"

Max didn't respond. I glanced at him in the moonlight, hanging my arm around the back of the bench, trying my damndest to look casual. I felt anything but. This

entire conversation, as necessary as it was for Hemmi's safety, made me acutely aware of the fact that Max and I had unfinished business. Business I wanted to avoid for now.

He looked like Daniel Craig as James Bond. It wasn't a bad thing, surely, but, no way could he slip into prep school attire like he would camo in some desert, or a tuxedo and seamlessly schmooze through a cocktail party. It was a different world. "So what are you going to do, Max, to blend in on campus? You're going to stand out. You'll have to prep it up. Wear a pink oxford and no socks. The girls will love you."

Max was unaffected by my amusement, setting me straight in his humorless way. "I'm sure I can handle one sixteen year old boy, Michael. He'll follow directions as I see fit."

"It's not one boy, Max, it's a community of teenagers. Do you know any teenagers? Other than Kyle." Kyle, who lived with their mother and Max's stepfather in West Chester County. The poster child of entitlement, he'd grown up at Country Day School and then had proceeded not to distinguish himself in public school. Kyle had come for a rather stilted summer experience with his older brother, that was for damn sure.

"Kyle is exactly as I suspect the students at Dalton to be."

"You're in for a surprise, then." Actually, Max was in for a disaster if he didn't loosen up a bit. I wouldn't be entertained by this because Hemmi's safety was on the line.

Uncomfortable as hell sitting in the cold with this know-it-all wooden soldier, and tired of maintaining my indifference, I was ready to head home. "Look Max, you let me know what you need. I have to go." I watched in fascination as Max clenched his jaw, his first sign of emotion all evening. He had a slight tic or something in his cheek; it pulled ever so faintly toward his ear and his eye. I'd never noticed that before. Maybe he wasn't as unaffected as he appeared.

"I wanted to tell you that I'd be there in your place of work and I understand if you're uncomfortable." Oh. I understood now. He wasn't palsied; he was pissed off having to prep me, the needy one-time fling. What a relief. "I'll email you a photo of this guy – Colton. Just keep an eye out."

Cover Me

"Sure. Thanks for the heads up, Max. You do what you need to. I'll see you at Dalton." I left him sitting alone in the moonlight staring silently at the night sky.

From: B. Danvers (headofschool@daltonprep.org)

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Maxwell Douglas, of Douglas Security, will be on campus providing protective services for Hemmingway Sparks. This is only precautionary and we do not believe him to be in danger. I've given him carte blanche in this endeavor as Hemmingway's safety is paramount. I've asked Max to prep you.

Finn, I will remove Hemmingway if either you or I feel the safety and security of the student body is in jeopardy. I expect you to keep me informed.

~B.

L.B. Gregg

From: Donald Patterson (pattersond@daltonprep.org)

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Mr. Finn. I'm pretty upset that I didn't get a part again. Every play, I try out. Every play, you give it to some kid whose parents are famous, or who's popular, or something. You play favorites every show. I'll do crew again, and I know it's mean, but I hope that something happens and I can actually be in a play before I graduate.

~Bangor

Chapter Three

The following afternoon the cast and crew of *Guys and Dolls* pushed up their collective sleeves and got busy painting scenery. Bibby arrived sometime after two, Max gliding along in stealth mode at her side. She was dressed to attend the various home games in her school athletic jacket and seemed a bit miffed. Checking in on the performing arts department on a Saturday didn't fit into her schedule. However, Sam Sparks donated big bucks and his son was in danger. Those two things would keep Bibby from her football. She usually came attired in correct school first lady apparel: Talbot's suit, sling back pumps, a silk blouse and a string of matched, dime-sized pearls. Today, she was cloaked in school behavior: demure, focused and respectful.

Bibby spoke graciously to the students who were sprawled across the floor dabbling each other's arms and legs with scenic paint. They feigned interest in her formal, stilted attempt at conversation. Emo-rock whined over the sound system. The kids scarfed Chinese food out of paper cartons with disposable chopsticks as they did their best to fly under the Head of School's radar.

Max looked professional. What kind of profession was difficult to ascertain—maybe an FBI agent with his black suit and tie and tinted glasses. This was his attempt at blending?

"Hello, Michael."

"Max." I was civil and professional. I didn't point or laugh or run away. "That's a very nice suit."

Max ignored me. Nothing new there.

"I was told you two are acquainted." Bibby smiled. *By whom?* "I'm sure you'll make him feel right at home, Finn."

Max's eyes shifted to me. "*Finn.*"

"Yes. That's my name." I snapped. "Let me get Hemmi."

I found him in the wings, running lines with his counterpart and current girlfriend, Laura Pennington. They were a set of slacker Hummels with their matching blond locks, though his eyes were a chocolate brown and hers cornflower blue. "Hemmi. Can you give me a minute?"

"Sure, Mr. Finn. What's up?" He unfolded his lanky frame and I waited for him to join me. He was a good kid—handsome, popular, but more importantly, he was kind-hearted and hard working. Still, he was a teenager and therefore, unpredictable.

I waited while Bibby made the introductions. Hemmi shifted uncomfortably, looking between us warily. "Mr. Finn?"

We must look like the Spanish Inquisition. Surely his dad had said something to him. "Hemmi, did your dad fill you in?"

"About? No. He hasn't called since Wednesday. He's on a shoot."

Damn that Sam! Once again, he left parenting up to the paid help. I couldn't tell who Hemmi should be more disappointed with—his father for being a self-absorbed ass or me for blind-siding him. I should have said something to Hemmi earlier, but I'd been busy teaching all morning.

Bibby offered a weak explanation. "Mr. Douglas will accompany you. He's here to see the campus and learn more about how you spend your time." She left a lot out.

"Why? Is he a reporter?"

"No. Mr. Douglas is with security."

Hemmi blanched. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, you're not," Bibby reassured him. "Your dad has some concerns about your

safety and has asked Mr. Douglas to make certain the school is secure. He'll be with you as you move throughout your normal routine."

"I've got to stay with him?"

I gripped Hemmi's shoulder, giving him a squeeze. "Hemmi, he's following you; you're not following him."

Hemmi ran a hand through his hair, his fingers forging grooves through the waves. He turned that brown-eyed gaze to me with trust. "Why?"

"Because there's a man stalking your father in California and Sam needs to know that you're safe and sound. This is to ease his mind. Everything's fine."

Typical teen, he whined. "All day? What about tonight? Because I don't want to miss Coffee House—"

"I'm certain Mr. Douglas will be happy to attend Coffee House with you." God may strike me dead for this but I pushed on because setting Hem's mind at ease was important to me. "I have it on good authority that he enjoys live music." I winked at Max and Bibby gave me an encouraging smile. I smiled back. What would Max think of Coffee House—Dalton Prep's version of Open Mic Night? It would be good for him to spend the evening listening to the kids' rendition of Counting Crows medleys and Sublime covers. He could practice blending. I wanted to see Max blend. Did he unwind? *That* I was curious to see.

"Okay. Yeah. I guess. We're usually there until ten—ten-thirty." Hemmi's color was up, signifying an angry youth. He'd wanted to spend some quality time alone with Laura behind one of the dorms after Coffee House and Max was going to cramp his style. "Uh...how long did you say you're planning to stay?"

Max took his glasses off, drawing attention to his remote appearance. "I didn't say. I told your father I'd see to your safety and I can only do that by being present." Hemmi's shoulders slumped. I stifled a groan. Max was such a wet blanket and because of that Hemmi, good kid or not, was going to give him a run for his money. I could guarantee it.

Relieved that she could move on to the football game, Bibby clapped her hands happily. "Great! We're all set. I need to check on the second half of the game. I'll stop by

during dinner.”

She didn’t bother to ask Hemmi if he was signing out for the weekend. He had no place to go. I felt the familiar pang of pity as the Head of School exited the theatre in a swirl of Chanel Number Five. The kids took no notice of her. They didn’t mark the comings and goings of adults. It was Saturday afternoon and they were on free time.

“Why don’t you call your dad later, Hemmi? He can answer questions for you. All right?”

Hemmi nodded. Then he slunk back over to Laura’s side, threw himself into a heap of dramatic dissatisfaction and the two ducked their fair heads together, murmuring and consoling each other.

I needed to deal with Max. I decided to act like the adult professional I was paid to be. Putting aside any misgivings, I turned. “Come have a seat or, better yet, check out the building. I can give you a tour. We have state of the art—”

“I studied the schematics. This isn’t a social visit. I’m working. I’ll have Hemmi walk me through later.” He sat in a chair and retrieved his blackberry, dismissing me with a casualness that stung. I slammed the lid on my hurt. Max was no different than he’d ever been. He was the same heartless bastard who’d left me with my pants down. It was me. I’d been the one changed by that experience.

I toughed it out for Hemmi’s sake. “So, this is an important evening for the performing arts kids. They are underappreciated by the athletic community and I think you need to hang back and stay out of his way.”

“Duly noted.” He freed his tiny stylus and began to poke at the screen, his attention captured. I watched for a moment. His cheek tic made an appearance again, and then I moved on to oversee the scenic painting and set construction.

We worked until four-thirty, Max stabbing at his electronic device, sans internet, for much of the time. Solitaire? He seemed remote and sort of lonely. Served him right.

* * * *

“Mr. Finn?” Hemmi asked in a stage whisper that carried halfway across the quad,

"Is that guy really going to follow me?"

"Fraid so, Hemmi. His name is Mr. Douglas, and he can hear us, don't you think?"

"It's just creepy. Don't *you* think? He's like a stalker or something."

"No. He's not. Hemmi try to ignore him, yeah? That's probably the best thing to do." For everyone, all things considered.

"Well, I don't understand. Why doesn't my father just withdraw me from school if he's so concerned?"

"Because there's no reason to. Do you want to be removed?"

"No! But, what's that guy," Hemmi nodded toward Max, "really here for? Is someone going to hurt me or something?"

"Your dad has hired him to keep you safe just in case. This is only a precaution. If anyone tried to harm you, Mr. Douglas is capable of handling things. He was a Marine."

"He's going to come all the way to the dorm?"

"Quit whining. Yes, he's going to the dorm to—" what? "—secure the building. Do as he wants—he's been reasonable so far." I was rather surprised by how reasonable Max had been. Maybe all bodyguards actually did was walk with stealth and hang around looking brawny.

He was damn brawny.

"What are we going to tell everyone? That I need a bodyguard?"

"Tell them the truth. Your dad hired him and it's out of your control. It's not so strange, because he's famous. That's all anyone needs to know. You've had bodyguards before, right?"

Hemmi shrugged. "Yeah, but only in LA."

"Then I don't know what the problem is, Hemmi. You know how to deal with this."

"I guess, but it's still embarrassing." He walked on ahead, hustling to join Laura.

We headed across the moonlit campus toward Millbrook, the boys' dorm where I, two other dorm parents and the upper classmen lived. It was chilly and bright. The trees cast torturous shadows across the pale walkways, our progress underscored by

the snapping of scattered acorns and the crackle of drying leaves. I wore my usual fleece jacket and a snazzy red Dalton Prep turtleneck to ward off the chill.

"Mr. Finn, what'd you think of Coffee House? I think everyone was awesome!" Laura called over her slender shoulder.

"You were wonderful. Except next time, you ought to sing something other than your own show songs, Laura."

I tossed a look at Max. He'd been polite but distant at dinner as he filled up on dining hall food like a man who had come home at last to good chow and plenty of it, appealingly served on a tray with an ice cream scoop. At the Coffee House he'd caused debate amongst the students. I'd heard the word 'creeper' come from more than one mouth.

Now he was deep in thought—or on autopilot. It was difficult to tell.

An acorn went sailing past me to hit one of the boys in the back of the head. "Knock it off, pecker head!"

And so it went the entire walk back. Kids fooling around, shrieking, tripping one another and running through the quad screaming like hyenas. They jumped on each other's backs and pegged one another with acorns: they were teenagers. I wasn't walking with them, wisely staying out of the line of fire. My goal was to check everyone in, watch a movie and then sleep in. I slowed my pace, allowing Max to catch up, Hemmi always in his sight.

"So Max. What's your plan? You coming to the dorm and what? You're camping out in the hallway?" I laughed. I wasn't trying to be a jerk. I was genuinely curious how this was going to play out. "Have you seen the dorm?"

"Bibby took me over there earlier. I checked the security. I'm all set, thanks." He'd probably beefed that security up, which wasn't a bad idea, truthfully. "I'd like to see what the evening routine is. And you should probably —"

"Mostly it consists of kids facebooking and watching movies until dawn and then sleeping in. Unless they have morning detention or have to sign in for brunch at ten."

"Sunday morning detention?" Whatever he had been about to say before I interrupted was forgotten. His demeanor shifted from aloof to attentive.

"Sure. We also have Saturday night detention. That's part of the structure here and a real drag when you get enough demerits to screw up your weekend. We take the disciplining of teenagers seriously." I ignored Max's snort. "We have a point system. Students can't work off certain infractions; they have to do their time and then they get a clean slate."

Most of the time.

"That's not discipline in my book."

My ass clenched at the thought of Max, discipline, and a few minutes of privacy. I stumbled. What the hell was wrong with me? He—*I*—was off limits. He reached out a hand and I shrugged him away. Shit, I needed to get my mind out of the gutter. I inhaled some cleansing autumn air and forged on. "You're here on Saturday, Max. Kids need down time and these kids don't get much. They have mandatory study hall every night of the week except Saturday night. They have class and sports six days a week. The theatre kids are practicing their play during study hall and maintaining a rigorous class load. It's brutal. Plus they all have the added pressure of parents who expect Ivy League. You know, I'm beginning to believe that you don't particularly care for rich kids."

"I don't think you know me well enough to make that assertion, Michael." Max stared ahead, his mouth pinched, his twitch twitching in the moonlight.

"Excuse me. That was uncalled for." I shut my mouth. I knew that deep down he was a nice guy, to someone, somewhere—maybe to his mother.

We entered the courtyard to the dormitory. Students dressed in jackets and Dalton sweatshirts were curled around one another on the stone benches. Music floated in the cool air, accompanied by the sound of laughter and teasing. The chill made smoke of our breath and the scent of leaf mold hung heavy.

The old dinosaur of a building was alight. A great, money pit of a place: impossible to heat adequately in the winter or keep cool in the summer. The building housed narrow passages and steep staircases and a lengthy fire escape. The kids used every shortcut. It was a challenge for us to know who had snuck in or out, but somehow we managed. Forty-two boys lived in the building, sixteen of them on my

floor. It was loud, wild and stuffy. We worked hard and relaxed when we could.

A blast of gun fire from the TV in the common room met us when we stepped into the yellow light of the entryway. Max frowned at the book bags strewn across the floor as I said hello to a few boys playing Halo.

"Hemmi, you're to stay in." Max laid that out to Hemmi in his most mechanical, authoritative tone.

"But Finn said —"

"Mr. Finnegan has no say in this."

Hemmi looked to me. I shook my head. His hopes to glom Laura in the courtyard dashed, he marched sullenly toward the stairs. Max followed him, sparing a swift, interested glance at the boys sprawled on sofas playing Xbox. For the first time all day he appeared animated. As entertaining as it would be to kick his ass with a brute shot, he was leaving for the night and I was no longer interested in playing games with Max.

I trailed them up the wide carpeted staircase.

"Hey, Finn!" a couple of the boys called. I waved hello on my way to my apartment.

Hemmi, shoulders stiff inside his sweatshirt, halted in front of his door. His key was poised inches from the lock. Max stood calmly behind him, inscrutable as ever.

"Mr. Douglas, do you need to follow me? I'm fine and safe and sound. I'm just going to get my laptop and go into the common room. I'll meet you there." He spoke to Max as one would a servant. It was clear Hemmi didn't want Max to go in. That action occasionally indicated the presence of alcohol, but not in this case. It was because the room was trashed and he didn't want us to see. I knew that. Max didn't.

"I'm not violating your personal space, Hemmi. I need to learn your routine in order to do my job, just like you have to learn blocking in order to make things work on stage."

Ouch. That could hardly have been more patronizing.

"Yeah, sure, what-*evs*." Hemmi slipped into his room prepared to shut us out, but Max anticipated him.

"You are to stay inside this building until I tell you otherwise. Do not go to anyone

else for permission to leave. Clear?" Hemmi's jaw swung loose as Max swept into the tiny dorm room uninvited—in direct violation of our privacy rules and his own lame comment.

"Hey! You can't just—"

"I can and I will." He did a rapid scan for some unnamed danger. Satisfied that all was well, Max retreated back into the hall. "I've emailed you some information you should look over, Hemmi. I'll speak with you later. Do not slam this door."

Hemmi's jaw snapped back and he glared mulishly, but he closed the door with a restrained snap. I knew Hemmi would come by to complain later. It was a given. Even I thought Max was a bit high-handed.

"All safe and sound?" I unlocked my apartment, unhooking the overburdened clipboard as I went in. It was chock full of messages, sign-outs, and sticky notes all jumbled together. I sighed. I had a lot of catching up to do this evening. I left the door wide—standard operating procedure for Saturday night when I was on duty—and Max followed in on my heels. My place was floor to ceiling books and dust. I squelched any embarrassment. I was a confirmed bachelor—he'd just have to deal.

Max leaned one impressive shoulder against the doorframe. Trying to block the temptation out, I glanced down at the first memo from Bibby. I hadn't checked my messages since noon, hadn't read my email, hadn't been back to the dorm since lunchtime—

"You're staying in the dorm?" I croaked.

"My bag is over there now." He indicated the previously unoccupied room directly across the hall from my apartment. Less than four feet would separate us.

Clearing my throat I said without a hint of pitch or bitch, "You didn't say a word. What the hell, Max? You could have said so out loud."

"What did you expect? That I'd go home at night? Think, Michael."

He was right, of course. I hadn't thought.

"I didn't realize that you weren't up to speed. Bibby notified the staff. I tried to speak with you about this very subject not five minutes ago."

I glared at the door across the hall. "You're staying for how long? Until he

graduates and this guy is caught? Don't you have to make an appearance at work or something?"

"I've been hired to stay until Sam comes back with his people—Tuesday at the latest."

I grunted. Four days. I could handle that but it was unsettling to think we needed round the clock security. "It's perfectly safe in the dorm, Max. There are dorm parents and locks on all the doors."

He snorted derisively, glanced over his shoulder down the hall, then stepped into my apartment. Unlike most people, he didn't look around curiously. He took it all in at once and I suspected that he was cataloguing and judging my living space automatically. Or he'd poked around earlier without my knowledge or permission. Bibby certainly had a master key. My temper spiked higher.

"I'm keeping this professional." Not a trace of his real emotions, assuming he had any, showed on that impassive face, handsome as it was. The only true expression I'd ever seen from him was the passion he let loose during that incident in his office. Even then, he was controlled. Controlling.

He carefully shut the door. I must have been louder than I realized. My apartment took up a quarter of the dormitory floor and was on the opposite end of the kid's rooms, my door kitty corner to the stair landing. I was present in dorm life, but I had privacy unless my door was opened. "I intend to lay down some very specific rules in this dormitory."

"Max. We have rules. They're clear and are in place to protect us all."

"They're slack. And given your history of questionable judgment—"

"What do you mean *questionable judgment*?" It had been one time in his office!

"—and your obvious impulsiveness, I think you can understand that to ensure Hemmi's safety, things need to change."

I sputtered, "This isn't the Marines: it's a high school."

"Your legal history isn't exactly a clean slate either, Michael."

"Excuse me?"

He folded his arms across his chest, his jacket straining across his biceps. "You had

a run-in with the law eight years ago, right here in town."

I colored. "That's off the record. That was expunged."

"Not really. It shows poor judgment and a lack of control. You vandalized personal property."

"He was married and I was pissed. I spray painted a dick on his car. So what? I was nineteen, Max. Didn't you ever lose your temper when you were a kid?"

Max wasn't interested in excuses. "No. You're ruled by emotion and permissive. I don't see that you've change all that much. You could accidentally cause more harm than good."

"You're out of your fucking mind, Max." I said, reining in my hurt. How could he think I was a danger to the students because I was...what? Fair minded and kind?

I stormed into my tiny kitchen and threw the refrigerator door open looking for a Sprite. I popped the top on my soda and it let out the hiss I was trying to hold in. Naturally, it sprayed across the front of my turtleneck and into my crotch. "Shit." I went back into the living room looking like I'd pissed myself, threw myself into a chair and spat, "What is *wrong* with you? How could you possibly think I could be a risk to anyone?"

"You engage in risky behavior."

Touché, but I needed to set him straight.

"Fine. I expect two things while you are here." His brow hiked. Too bad. I thrust a finger at him, and not the one I wanted to. "One: that you do not use this bullshit superiority complex on me. Just be straight with me and we'll get along. And two: that you do not question my authority in the dorm or in the classroom. Treat me like an adult colleague because *here* we are equally in charge. I don't answer to you—I work with you."

"I'll do the best I can." He said through his teeth. "But the kid comes first."

He shrugged. I noticed the fit of his jacket and a new troubling thought presented itself. "Max, are you armed? Because you can't have a weapon on campus. Not with these kids. It's absolutely prohibited. We have zero tolerance."

"You let me worry about weaponry, Michael; you worry about Shakespeare."

I saw red. "That's exactly what I mean about being condescending. I'm telling you, we cannot have firearms in the dorm." Could Bibby have approved of this and not told anyone? I needed to check those memos.

Max's eyes grew hard and that twitch flicked once in his jaw. "I'm not going to tell you again. I'm protecting this kid. When I'm with him, yes, I'm armed. That's my job."

"You'd shoot someone?" I was shocked.

"If need be. I would. Why do you look surprised? If that kid's life, or yours, or anyone else's were in jeopardy, I'd do what was required."

"I thought this was precautionary. Do we need the police?"

His voice hardened; his attitude, if possible, grew more superior. "What, you're going to ask the local yokel to stop by when there's no obvious threat? It doesn't work that way."

"Then you need to tell me if things escalate."

He nodded tersely. "I will, but if you impede my ability to do my job, we have a problem."

"Why in hell would I do that? Jesus." I jumped up and strode toward the door. My goal was to throw his ass out of my place, but that fast bastard grabbed my arm as I passed, stopping me cold. I tried to jerk from his clutches but he yanked and I tumbled into his chest. He gripped both my wrists in one large hand and my breath huffed out in shock. I struggled to free myself. Damn he was strong. And his touch was exhilarating. It should be revolting, but my skin tingled where his fingers met. "What the hell...let me go, Max."

"I don't think so." He was in my space, pinning me, and he stepped close. I drew back, alarmed, and bumped into the bookshelf as his chest brushed mine. Our eyes met and my heart froze.

No. No. No.

"What the fuck, Max, quit manhandling me. Let. Me. Go." I wriggled to free myself, keeping my tone firm, but I was breathless and he heard it. I watched his pupils dilate and his grip turned bruising.

"You are such a....distraction. Always so puffed up and bristling. You've been that

way all day. I shouldn't like it. I should not be attracted to you, but for whatever reason, I can't help myself." His gaze slid hotly to my mouth. "And neither can you."

"In your dreams."

He moved closer, his mouth hovering near enough that his breath touched my lips.

"You...I...You're supposed to... ask for consent."

"Am I?"

I reared away and his look turned confident. Apparently he was turned on by the chase—and I was turned on by being chased. An unexpected dimple creased his cheek and then, exactly like the first time, he touched the corner of my mouth with his tongue and quickly withdrew.

Something unfurled inside me. Some part of him...woke me. Muscle memory?

I tightened my lips and then that son of a bitch pulled out the big guns and floored me with a boyish smile that was all charm and mischief.

Oh shit, I was toast.

"What?"

"Nothing, Michael." He released his grip on my wrists and cupped my jaw and I just couldn't help myself. Max was suddenly tender and affectionate and like a fool I caved completely, rubbing the evening stubble on my chin into the warm flesh of his palm with a satisfying *skritch*. He was strong and right and like a magnet, I was drawn to him.

Max hooked an arm around my back; I guess he was afraid that I'd bolt. He pressed my hips into the cradle of his muscular thighs, our zippers scraped in the quiet room. His thumb pulled my lip and I burrowed into his jacket, steadied by the heat coming from his body, ready to let him kiss me. Let him? I'd participate with enthusiasm. Lifting that tiny fraction I closed my eyes—

Bang bang bang on the door and I jettisoned Max away with a two-handed hard shove to his pecs. He thumped back into the wall, surprised.

"Mr. Finn!"

"Shit!" I touched the back of my hand to my mouth, then righted my cock. There was a swirl of the teaming dorm life on the other side of that door. How soon one

forgets. "Yeah, hang on a sec!" I called back.

Max asked lazily, "So, we're all set here, right? I need to find the kid."

"What? Christ, Max. Give me a second to process, okay?" Turned on and overeager, he was currently two for two. He always had the upper hand. Not that I seemed to mind during the festivities, but our dismount needed major work. I threw the door open to see what the boys wanted as Max brushed past me and I counted the reasons not to let him near me again.

I remembered he had a gun and my lust evaporated.

"Mr. Finn, we're ordering pizza, Jesse wants to know if you have any cash." Bangor, the big redhead from Maine, stood outside my door, blinking innocently. His stubbed nose was covered in freckles, his chin with fuzz.

Jesse, tiny and fair and brilliant, flipped him off. "Don't blame me, Bangor. You're as financially challenged as I am."

The boys shuffled in, not waiting for an invitation, and proceeded to collapse on my couch. Bangor asked, "Mr. Finn, you wanna watch a movie? We have *Halloween* or *Predator*."

Max wordlessly glided down the stairs, off to locate his pissed and sulking ward.

Christ Almighty, Max Douglas and guns in the dorm. Neither one a good plan. If the parents found out about any of this...then that was Bibby's problem. I joined the boys. "If we're looking for movies about the hunt, *Predator* is the obvious choice."

From: Hemmingway (sparksh@daltonprep.org)

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Finn – I spoke with my father. He told me Mr. Douglas has to stay with me until he gets back from the shoot. He's going to be with me at school like every single day. Which means zero time with my friends. Can we work something out, please?

Hemmi

L.B. Gregg

From: Maxwell Douglas (max@douglassecurity.com)

To: Michael Finnegan (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

This is the only photo I have of Colton Dobos. He could easily pass as a student.

M

Chapter Four

Sunday afternoon I graded papers, although more than half of my attention was on the football game. The Patriots were ahead by ten. A few of the boys sprawled on the floor and across my stained couch, munching chips and sloshing their sodas on my less than pristine carpet. I winced at the mess, not all of it theirs. "Could you guys please take it easy on my furniture?" I asked for the twentieth time.

"Why?"

Good question.

"Where's Hemmi?" Max's deep voice rumbled from behind us.

We all turned. I glanced away immediately as the boys shrugged their shoulders and went back to the game. I couldn't speak for a half-second, dumbstruck by the sight of Max in a pair of faded, snug jeans, his wide hand braced against the door frame.

My circuits fried. He had officially achieved 'blended.' I had to look again.

Yup. Still bulging.

I drew my eyes from his crotch with no small amount of difficulty. He filled it out, that's for sure. Now *there* was a package anyone would want delivered.

What had he asked?

I was rattled. "What?"

"Hemmi. He's gone. Have you seen him?"

I almost said *it's not my turn to watch him* but I was bigger than that. "Are you

sure? Some of the kids went on a mall run — ”

“No. He was here. If he’d left campus, I would have gone with him.” He raked his fingers through his cropped hair, stretching that long sleeved Henley over those guns he called biceps. The fabric of his shirt hiked just enough to give me a peek at his happy trail. I was disgusted with myself. Still, my mouth watered. Max continued, “He’s playing some game with me.”

“Where’d you see him last?” The man was undeniably attractive in his casual wear. With discretion, I scoped his nipples where they poked the waffled weave of his shirt, the buds outlined in forest green. It must rub because they looked sensitive.

“Michael. Pay attention.” Max had the audacity to snap his fingers at me. “We were together all day. He came back to get his backpack and change. I checked his room; he went in and closed the door. I waited in the common room for half an hour and he never came down.”

I abandoned my desk and its clutter of papers, not worried, but not eager to piss Max off. We needed to take this conversation out into the hall. “Did you check the guys’ shower and the other dorm rooms?”

“I checked. He’s not here.”

I asked the boys, “Anyone know where Hemmi is?” They didn’t glance from the game, just grumbled their *nos*.

Jessie said without looking away from the TV, “My guess is that he’s with Laura.”

“I saw him crossing the quad.” Bangor’s mouth was full of snacks. Chip dust landed on his shirt and my rug. “He’s screwing with you, Mr. Douglas.”

“He’s here somewhere, Max. Was he reluctant to have you with him today?” I hadn’t seen Hemmi, having been holed up in my apartment. I hadn’t set eyes on Max either, not since that...episode...last night. I willed myself to be immune to Max’s charms, but how could I when he was standing right in front of me in crotch-hugging jeans?

“That would be an understatement. Yes. He was a foot-dragging smartass all day.”

I snorted. I knew exactly how sarcastic and arrogant a teenage boy could be. “He’s a good kid, Max. He’s testing you. You were ditched. ”

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ditched, Max. You've lost charge of your charge. He out-foxed you. Hello? He went in telling you he was doing some important make-believe task and as soon as you bought that, he was down those back stairs and out the side door." I found my keys on the shelf by the door and grabbed a sweatshirt. "We need to take this out in the hall." I called to the boys, "Eric, you're in charge. Don't let anyone in my kitchen."

"Sure, Finn."

I said to Max, "I told you not to underestimate him."

I ducked under his arm, startled as his hand solicitously touched the small of my back as I went. The contact was brief but unmistakable. Maybe that was a Marine thing? It seemed almost ... fond.

His tone squashed that notion. "Be that as it may, Michael, I have to go on the assumption that he's missing."

"Missing? That seems a bit dramatic, don't you think? He's a teenage boy who doesn't want to be babysat. By anyone, Max. It's not personal."

"It's my job to protect this kid. He's willful and spoiled and he's going to have to suck it up and do as I tell him until the threat is neutralized." His patience seemed stretched. He was absolutely right, of course. This *was* his job

"Are you saying he's in more danger?"

"He's not in less danger, Finnegan. So, where would he go?"

"I'm sure he went over to the student center to watch a movie with Laura and their friends. That's where they usually go before study hall." We hit the stairs. Sunlight poured through the windows illuminating a billion dust motes. "I don't think he understands how immature he's being—and Max, that's all he is," I lectured. "Don't be afraid to tell him so but don't call him immature. There's a fine line you need to walk with adolescents and once you put them on the defensive, you've got yourself a real uphill battle."

Max stalked through the door in those tasty jean-clad legs, his ass framed and sealed in denim. I dragged my gaze away before I got caught checking him out again.

"Sure. Fine," he dismissed my helpful comments as we stepped into the autumn

afternoon. He powered up the path oblivious to anything but his mission. I was forced to jog to in order to keep up with him.

"Slow down." I was puffing and chilled despite my sweatshirt. Late October in the Berkshires could be nippy and the temperature rapidly dropped as the sun descended behind the trees. The path was slippery with leaves. The familiar sound of popping and skittering acorns crunched under our sneakers.

He looked back at me sharply. "Are you that out of shape?"

I stopped. Frowning.

"No, I am not *that* out of shape." I panted. "I swim three mornings a week." Usually I did so. Sometimes it was only two times a week. I added defensively, "I hike every day with the kids in Outdoor Club. I'm fit."

He stared at my midsection for a fleeting fraction of a second then turned his back and kept walking. I stared at his thick head. Was this his stab at being playful or had he just indicated that I should lay off the donuts? I narrowed my eyes at his back. I was goddamn attractive. I knew it and he knew it.

We marched along toward the student center with more vigor, our steps not quite matching as Max quickly, effectively and purposefully outpaced me. I was puffing a little, trying to keep pace. He used his elbows to prevent me from getting abreast of him so I tried to cut around his left flank, feigning a quick move to the right, but no go.

Passing him became my primary objective.

"Max. What's the deal?" We were racing down the path now. Should I sprint? He was only a single step ahead, those thick muscular reaching legs of his keeping me back. I had no clue that I was this...competitive... until, in a move born of cheat, I stuck my foot between his legs and tripped him. I laughed in triumph as he stumbled forward. Maybe he'd land face first in the leaves.

I almost shot ahead as he went down, but he was a trained killing machine and I a mere drama coach. Max twisted as he fell, catching me around the thighs, and he threw me down onto the lawn. I landed in a heap, face down, almost on top of him. Wasting no time, he scooped a fistful of cold wet oak and maple leaves, and ground them into my hair. I was smacking him and trying to shove him, when he promptly affected some

intricate Marine mojo: he yanked the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and tied it at the back of my neck.

The fucker.

I watched him through the tiny ring of daylight that remained over my left eye as he sprung away, sprinting with delectable athletic prowess. Wet and leaf covered, Max tagged the door. He turned to smirk at me, his dimple back, however fleetingly. I pulled the damned hood off my head and smoothed my sweatshirt over my chest. My hand rubbed an awkward circle, trying to loosen the sudden constriction as my heart slowly, painfully, flipped over. I sat there in the leaves, arrested by the vision of Max, so boyish and friendly and completely at ease and playful—with me. It was like seeing the real man for the first time.

I had to look away. That's when I remembered that we weren't alone. Students mingled on the steps, staring at us; conversation carried across the parking lot; boys tossed a football across the quad; a squirrel raced up the trunk of a maple. I pounced to my feet, stripping leaves from my shaggy hair, and pulling the worn threads of my sanity back in place. A few of the sophomore girls came giggling over to help me brush the crud from my clothing.

One of my advisees, Tara, leaned her impertinent little nose in and whispered, "Who's that Mr. Finn? I think he likes you."

I could not fully suppress my horror. These girls were going to offer me flirting advice? "That's a friend of Hemmi's," I fumbled. "Actually, have you seen Hemmi? We've been looking for him." *In the leaves?* We'd been rolling on the ground, not exactly in hot pursuit of a reluctant teenager. Reality slammed into place. *What were we doing?*

"He's watching TV in the student center." Tara smiled at me, that fresh young face taking in every speck of my appearance and behavior to better spread tales online as soon as she returned to the dorm. I was relieved no one had taken any pictures to post on Facebook, or upload onto YouTube. I scanned every hand for a cell phone.

Max waited for me by the door. His expression once again guarded, not a hint of amusement remained in his eyes or in his voice. "You are a distraction, Finnegan," he stated again.

Well, at least he was consistent. "Hemmi's in there watching TV, Max. He's fine."

He didn't even blink as he morphed back to bodyguard mode. "You can work out with me tomorrow."

"I can, can I?" No thanks. I followed him into the building. "I'll think about it. What does that entail? And where will Hemmi be while we do it?"

"Hemmi will be with me in the athletic center. We'll run, lift some weights. He told me he likes to run."

"Maybe to catch a cab." That was unfair. He had to train for Ultimate Frisbee each spring and he played dodge ball in the winter. "I've never known him to run of his own volition."

"Well, he told me that he would. You should join us."

Never.

"I'll consider it, but I'd rather swim. You could come to the pool and do laps." I visualized the pair of us in Speedos and decided maybe swimming was not such a good idea. "I'll be there at six."

"Oh-six-hundred?"

"Yes. I'm a morning person." I lied again. I found I lied to Max more than I should.

"I'll keep it in mind."

We entered the student lounge and there was Hemmi, his head in Laura's lap while she idly played with his hair. He was bundled in dorm pants and a cable knit sweater and he was quite comfortably watching *Saw II*.

I had to give Max credit. He said nothing. He merely walked the room, and checked for a threat I couldn't see or begin to imagine. Then he sat in an overstuffed chair at the back, out of everyone's way, where he could keep an eye on both exits. Hemmi lifted his head, in a brief display of interest, smiled directly at Max as if to say "*I win*" and snuggled his head back into Laura's lap.

* * * *

I woke to the pounding of a fist on my door. The clock read two-fifteen. It was

early, *early* Monday morning. I had to get up in a few hours to teach, which was never a happy prospect for me on interrupted sleep. I oriented myself and stumbled from my room to the door, glad I had put dorm pants on.

Bleary-eyed, I found a chagrined Hemmi standing in the hall in slouchy sweats. Max towered over him looking gorgeous—*stern*—Max was looking stern. Cold air accompanied them.

I tried to wake up. Man, what now? “What happened?”

Neither spoke, which was typical. They were both smart enough to wait and see what the other had to say. I let them in. “C’mon. Don’t wake the rest of the dorm.” It was dark in the building, the hiss of the radiators expanding and a radio playing softly the only noise disturbing the night. “You want something to drink?”

“Sure.” Hemmi settled himself on my tired couch. Max declined the drink with a shake of his head, and took his favored position—leaning against the book shelf. I took in the loose sweat pants and his old Batman t-shirt, as fascinated by his sleepwear as I’d been by his jeans earlier. I’d never seen him in anything but a suit until this day.

Hemmi didn’t have as much experience as Max at waiting out a tense situation and was the first to break. “I’m sorry Finn. I snuck out.” His voice broke.

“Again?”

Max gave me look which I interpreted as *this is your fault* and broke his silence. “You know, *Finn*, you could have nipped this in the bud earlier if you’d committed to this assignment and disciplined him the first time. I need you to back me up to keep this kid safe.”

Hemmi paled.

I ground my teeth at Max. So much for playing grab ass on the quad earlier. “Do not tell me how to do my job.”

“I’m sorry, Finn.” Hemmi interrupted. “Can I have a Dr. Pepper?”

Normally I would have rolled my eyes at the combination of remorseful teen and persistent sweet tooth, but at this moment I was struggling to keep my anger in check. I wasn’t going to defend myself in front of a student.

“All right, Hemmi, start talking.”

He hedged. "I snuck out."

"You've said. Where were you?"

"I was online with Laura. She said she'd meet me behind the dining hall and she'd sneak me into the dorm. She was still upset that we can't hang out unless Mr. D is with us."

"Hemmi, you were on line with her for three hours. You hung out."

"I know. I just wanted to see her. I snuck down the back stairs and went into the courtyard, and Mr. Douglas came out of nowhere." Here his tone changed. It was heavy with awe and a healthy note of respect. He sheepishly ducked his head. "He grabbed me by the collar and scared the crap out of me."

"Where's Laura?" I reached for the phone.

"We walked over to the dining hall and found her. Then we brought her back to Goodhouse. Mr. Douglas dropped her off at Bastioni's apartment. Mrs. B was not happy."

Max had the foresight to see the girl back to the dorm. That was good news and unsurprising.

"Hemmi, you can't sneak out and you cannot be caught in Goodhouse after hours. You understand this is an automatic disciplinary action if I report you? Six weeks' detention. You have got to take this possible threat to your safety seriously, as unreal or as unlikely as it may seem. It's imperative that you work with Mr. Douglas, not against him. This is the second time today. Once was enough. Do not make his job difficult, do you understand me? Because if you do, I'm going to make your life very unpleasant. Are we clear?"

"Yes Finn." To Max he offered, "Sorry, Mr. Douglas."

Nothing from that quarter but flared nostrils and crossed arms.

I added another dose of reality. "If Max and your dad feel that you require a bodyguard, Hemmi, then you do. That's not up for debate. I'm equally at fault for not explaining this more fully and impressing on you that you need to tow the line. You need to be aware of your surroundings. You need to tell Laura that you can't sneak out at night because I'll nail your ass to a tree if you do it again." Max kept his eye on me

throughout my tirade. "You have breakfast dish duty for two weeks. I don't want to hear a single word of complaint about it. Agreed?"

"Yes sir."

"Do not for a second take your safety or that of your friends for granted. We have rules for a reason. You put Laura in danger, Hemmi. That's not cool. If you care about that girl, then man up."

He nodded, his chin firm and his eyes wide. I rarely came down on kids—making it all the more startling and twice as effective when I did so.

"Don't do it again. It's getting old. Now, go to bed and take your soda with you."

"Yeah, all right. I won't sneak out again or ditch Mr. D. Thanks Finn. I'm sorry. It's just I can't believe that anyone would want to hurt me. I mean no one even knows who I am, and we're way out here in the middle of freaking nowhere while my dad is in LA. I'm not complaining or anything; I know he's on a shoot. But really no one would think that I'm even his son. It's not common knowledge."

There was pain in that denial. Max piped up, "Hemmi. Everyone knows you're his kid. You're the spitting image of him in his younger years." He certainly played the right card with Hemmi, though I'm sure Sam would have called his doc for a shot of Botox.

Hemmi nodded. "I guess. He's got intense fans. The paparazzi follow him when we're in California, but we've never had a problem here. Except that someone will get our number and call the house and hang up."

"If that happens here, you are to tell me."

Hemmi nodded to Max. "How did you know I was sneaking out? I was quiet. Finn slept through it." I had almost earned a bit of respect from Max—not that it mattered—but it was amazing how easily my pride was stung in his presence. Did I want him to value me? Of course.

"I'm a former Marine, Hemmi. I heard you because I'm supposed to. I'm your bodyguard. If I can't follow you, I need a new line of work."

Hemmi's eyes shone with admiration. I admired Max as well, but for all the wrong reasons.

I was too cranky to continue this impromptu disciplinary session. "Great. This love-fest is over. Everyone leave. I need to sleep." I also needed to get Max the hell out of my apartment and off campus so my life could return to normal.

"Okay, Finn. We're cool though? I'm really sorry."

"I know. You'll be sorrier tomorrow morning when you're washing all those dishes."

Hemmi slunk out, tossing one last worshipping glance at Max. "Later." He disappeared into the hall. The door closed with a click.

Max didn't move. I pointed to the door. "You, too. Out."

"That was good. You were good with him. A little too easy, but I think you got through. Maybe. He certainly respects you."

Too easy?

"This is Hemmi, Max. It's not worth it to play the hard ass. Next time, if there is a next time, he'll get a disciplinary warning. Thanks for bringing Laura back. These girls are ridiculously insecure and needy and the boys are worse. Max, I have to sleep. You have no idea how much. I'm not a night person." This was no lie. I required eight hours to function.

Max pushed away from the wall. Warily I tensed, expecting a replay of that scene from last night, but he ambled by me, his shoulders square. The scent of cool night air and sleep and hot Max tickled my nose.

He grumbled as he passed. "You could have put him on Disciplinary Warning."

"*What?* No. Not this time. I told you before: don't tell me how to do my job."

"DW would keep him safely under the control of adults while we protect him. You're supposed to back me up."

"I am backing you up. My job is to teach these boys and keep all of them safe twenty-four seven. I don't work for you now, Max." I had another replay of him fully clothed, firing me as I scrambled to flip my pants—my body tender and sated, my emotions raw. He just pissed me off. "Further, I'm not going to discipline him for your convenience. I'll speak with Bibby if he doesn't fall in line."

"Look, you set the example and they follow. That's how it works. If you don't take

this seriously, they won't."

"I'm not sure what to take seriously. As far as I can tell, there's been no direct threat. He's a good kid and he gets it now. He'll do as he's told, Max, or suffer the consequences."

"The consequence is that he could get hurt. Keep that in mind."

"I will." I guided him toward the door, "Look, let's talk in the morning." I looked at the time. "Later in the morning. I'll see you at breakfast. Wait. Are you attending classes with him? God, Max, you can't do that to the kid."

"I won't sit in on his classes. I'll be unobtrusive."

I checked him out. "Will you have a weapon? In class?"

"That's none of your concern."

"It is my concern. I need to know this. If that gun got into the wrong hands — Just keep it in your pants or wherever you keep it."

Max gave me a tiny smile, shaking his head. "You're so funny."

"I'm a real riot. Good night, Max. See you at breakfast." I shut the door on him and stumbled back to bed.

From: Sam Sparks (samsparksno1@yahoo.com)

To: Michael Finnegan (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Mike,

I appreciate your taking the time to email me about Hemmi's academic progress. As you can imagine, life on the set is hectic. We'll wrap up Tuesday morning. I'll be in Connecticut later that evening. I'll turn my thoughts towards Hemmi and his college plans at that time. I'm sure the leg work you've done to prepare us for that journey will be a great jumping off point for the professional college counselors.

Samuel Sparks

Cover Me

To: All School

From: Dalton Preparatory Business Office

Because of the high incidence in key replacement this term, the cost of a new key has been increased to \$50.00. This must be paid upon receipt and cannot be billed home.

Chapter Five

"You going to stand there enjoying the sunshine, Mikey, or would you care to put those feeble muscles to work?"

"I'm good, thanks. I'll hold the door."

Evan and I worked, hauling benches and the larger set pieces from the back of his pick up. We'd rounded up some stray kids on their way to soccer practice to pitch in. Athletic bags lay in a heap by the walk. I nudged another one out of the way with my sneaker.

"You think this is all you're going to need or are you gonna further abuse my generosity?"

"Mr. Generosity, I built half this stuff last summer. I'm the brains, you're the brawn."

"I got all the looks, you got the attitude. I hear ya."

"Keep dreaming."

"Mr. Finn," one of the boys called. "What're you wearing at the dance tomorrow night?"

"To the dance?" I corrected automatically. "It's a surprise."

I regretted setting a precedent with my magic eight ball costume that first year. Everyone pestered me and now, with Max here, my costume selection caused me no small regret.

Bangor came huffing down the sidewalk waving his arms. "Mr. Finn!"

One could never be sure if a student's exuberance was due to an excess of high school drama or a real crisis. I waited on the sidewalk, hoping he'd stop before he barreled into me. Bangor came to an ungainly halt at the tail gate of Evan's pickup. "Mr. Finn. You need to come back to the dorm!" He was flushed and sweating; his face matching his hair and, unfortunately, the deeper hue of his athletic shirt. Our school colors were red and white.

"Slow down, Bangor." His agitation, unchecked, would be contagious. Evan stepped around the truck to see what the fuss was about.

"Mr. Finn. There's some nasty shit—excuse me—crap up on the second floor. Mr. Douglas told me to come get you."

I turned to my brother, "Can you keep these guys working while I check this out?"

"Sure, Mikey." I winced. Could he *not* call me that here? "Mr. Douglas? You mean Max Douglas? Max is still here?" Evan seemed confused—and then his look turned curious. That dick winked at me.

"Yes." I didn't have time to explain to him. I took off for the dorm, Bangor dependable yet florid and wheezing, along side of me. "What did he say?"

"I don't know! I was coming down the stairs and he grabbed me by the arm and told me to go to Brisbee and get you right away," he gasped. "It's something with Sparks, though."

Adrenaline kicked in. Hemmi should have already left for Outdoor Club. He'd have gone back to the dorm to change out of dress code and then we'd meet up at five past three outside the dining hall. We hiked every afternoon. I went from a jog to a run, leaving Bangor in the leaves.

In the dorm, everything appeared as it should: book bags lay sprawled throughout the common room; blazers tossed on the back of the couch and on the floor; the TV played to an empty room. The building seemed hollow with all the kids at their sports commitments. I took the stairs two at a time and came to a sliding stop next to Bibby. I hadn't expected her. She waited on the landing, looking wan but pissed. Her lips mashed grimly in a pale pink line and if I didn't know any better, I'd say she was about

to lose her lunch. She was green. However, her eyes were narrowed and blazing. Not much drove the Head of School to this level of emotion.

In front of Hemmi's room, Max took photographs with a small digital camera. He moved deeper into the doorway, the narrow space flashing with pops of light.

It was quiet and stuffy. "What's going on? Where's Hemmi?"

"I'm here, Mr. Finn." I wheeled around. Hemmi, still in school blazer and tie, sat perched on a chair in Max's room. He tried to be brave, but the effort made him appear younger than he was. Whatever Max was doing, he had that part of this situation under control. This was my job. "What happened, Hemmi?"

"I got back to the dorm—" He choked, gulped with a frown, and then, in control, he went on. "I went to my room to change...but the door was unlocked and I just pushed it open and it was weird. I felt weird. So I go in, right? And there's something on the wall next to the window, but I can't tell what it is at first and then I thought, oh it's a stuffed animal. But... why's there a stuffed animal there? You know? And then..." He looked ill. "Someone had nailed a...a dead raccoon to the wall. Like all bloody and—I puked—"

I recoiled. *Holy shit*. Who would do such a thing? Who could have gotten it into the dorm and done that? It was...repugnant...and disturbing.

Hemmi tried to finish. "Mr. D. was right behind me and he took me in here and then...and then he called Mrs. Danvers and..."

"It's all right, Hemmi. We'll deal with this. Mr. D. is here and he's going to make sure nothing like this occurs again." I hoped. How could it have happened in the first place? I wasn't about to cast any doubt on Max's ability to guard this kid. Max might be a hard ass, but he was presumably capable of handling an intruder. "You want to come into my place and maybe change, get a soda, something?"

He nodded, relief flooding his features. Max's room lacked warmth. That was putting it mildly as the room was stark: a bed strictly made, a desk, a closed laptop, a white towel hanging precisely. Granted, he'd only been there two days. "Mr. Finn, can I go to Outdoor Club?"

I couldn't blame him. Outside sounded much more appealing than trapped in here

with a dead animal. However it wasn't possible. "You can't go without Mr. Douglas. I'm sorry, Hem. That's the deal."

In minutes, Hemmi was in my apartment, coke in hand, TV on, sprawled on the couch looking less vulnerable and more like himself. I sought out Bangor waiting dutifully in the common room. We sent one of the boys with a message for Miss Sullivan. She could take the kids hiking without us. Then I sent Bangor to keep Hemmi company.

I went to find out what the hell had happened while Hemmi tried to forget.

Max was speaking with Bibby and Chuck, the building and grounds guy, when I joined them in the hall.

"How many people have keys?" Max asked.

Would they call the local law enforcement or keep things quiet? This didn't necessarily point to the Sam's stalker; it could have been a student. Not likely, but possible.

"House parents have keys for their building and the Dean of Students has a master key. It is possible that Hemmi left the door unlocked. A lot of the students do."

"The door was locked," Max stated. "I checked it when we left."

"Kids lose keys all the time," I reminded Bibby.

Max asked, "Could he have lost one recently? Do the locks get changed in that case? What's the protocol?"

"If you lose a key, you get charged fifty bucks and the business office issues you a new one. That's it. I don't know if Hemmi lost his, but if you're caught not locking your door, it's a point violation."

"So he could have had a key stolen, gotten a new one, and the old one would still fit the door?"

"Yes. We can't change the locks because we'd be doing that full time." Max nodded, filing the information away. I wanted to know what the plan was. "Are we calling the police?"

Bibby and Max exchanged a look that said it all: cover up. Max clarified, "This is private property. You're not required to report this. If this was Colton, there's no proof.

It'll only feed his need for attention. I'll put a security camera on this wall."

"What about safety?" A camera? That didn't seem effective enough.

"He's physically safe. This was a malicious act and could have been done by another student."

"What about the privacy of the other kids on this floor?" I asked.

"It will only be on this door. I've already installed a better lock on the window, but we're going to place an alarm there, on the door, and at the points of entry for the dormitory. It's going to be a pain in the ass for the kids, but Bibby agrees that this is necessary."

"I think that's wise." I said, relieved. I didn't care to think about how many times that alarm was going to go off accidentally, but with Max's security guys on board and the local police close, we'd have the bases covered.

Chuck came out of the room hefting a lumpy garbage sack and a tiny breath of exasperation escaped Bibby. She blinked rapidly and all but pinched her nostrils with her fingers. "Chuck, please take that down the back stairs. Can we have that wall repainted by five?" It wasn't a request.

I looked at my watch. It was three-thirty. Chuck nodded. He was a big, Grizzly Adams kind of guy with a bristly beard that obscured his neck and chin. The kids called him Hagrid, not only because of his hirsute appearance but because he was dim and hard-working. He disappeared down the stairwell, the plastic bag crinkling, his vibram-soled boots hitting the treads with a heavy thud.

I stepped into Hemmi's room, prepped for the mess. Clothing, soda cans, papers, CDs, books, empty snack packages, wet towels...typical room inspection fail, right here. Not so typically, blood smeared the far wall and a gamey reek coated my airway. "It was dead, right?"

"Yeah. Probably road kill."

"Did you expect something like this, Max?"

"No. I didn't anticipate that Colton, if this was Colton, would move so quickly. We all believe him to be in California."

"Does everyone on the staff have his photo?"

He nodded.

Bibby came to a decision. "We're going to keep this quiet from the parents. Law enforcement has no reason to be called at this juncture. Sam will have to be told, of course; otherwise we believe that this was a twisted prank by an unidentified student. I'll address the student body tomorrow at school meeting and let them know that this sort of harassment won't be tolerated and that they should alert faculty if they see anything suspicious." You had to admire her. "I cannot conceive of someone strolling in here and doing such a thing."

"Whoever it was had a lot of information about Hemmi: his dorm, floor, room number, and a key. And he, I'm assuming *he* here although it could be a she, was able to come and go without comment." Max said to me. "He blended."

* * * *

At 9:40 we returned to the dorm from a late but successful second run-through of *Guys and Dolls*. Most of the kids had their lines down and the show was turning out to be a lot of fun. It was pretty damned good, if I did say so, for a high school production. As long as no one got sick and we were forced to use understudies, we were good to go.

Nice to have something light-hearted to think about since the raccoon as wall-art incident.

Max was, understandably, anything but distracted as he guarded Hemmi. He'd spent the evening in the wings while his minions came over from Smithfield to install the electronics. He watched the entire run through and I was curious to know what he thought.

I knew better than to ask.

I arrived in time for a mandatory dorm meeting, all the boys in attendance. I scanned the group of them, dressed in sweat shirts and flannel pants or jeans and sweaters: teenage boys of every description filled the common room. Colton could have easily passed as a high school senior—tall, white and preppie. His photo hadn't fit my expectation of an obsessed fan. Put him in chinos, a blue blazer and a Vineyard Vines

tie and I'd be hard-pressed to know he didn't belong. That was sobering.

Max spoke with authority. He explained the key code for the new security system and impressed upon the boys the importance of follow through by saddling two points on any person who tripped the alarm. It was ingenious. Naturally, there was a chorus of groans.

"Just what we need, more ways to accumulate points." That was from the Prefect, Eric. "Mr. Douglas, who will be here to reset the alarm?"

"I have someone on campus."

Almost eighteen and sharp as a tack, Eric leveled his gaze on Max. "So, what's the real deal? Something's going on or all the dorms would have this. Are we in trouble?"

"We're testing this system in your dorm while I'm on campus. If all goes well, it'll be installed elsewhere." I wondered if Max was lying; if so, it was a reasonable cover. We didn't want mass panic on campus.

Eric wasn't prepared to let it go. He settled deeply into his chair, his shoulders shrugged, his question not unreasonable. "Why would you do this now, in the middle of the semester, on a Monday night?"

Max considered him. "Because after the incident earlier, and because Ms. Danvers asked me to, we're going to have a trial of this new security system. And that's all you're required to know."

I sighed. He was too authoritative. Bangor stood. "Can we go? I need to finish my English paper. Got it. New security system." He turned to Eric. "It's not a big deal."

The code was simple. We checked everyone in and then dismissed them for lights out. Hemmi dragged up the stairs, reluctant to stay in his room. Max assured him that with the new camera's lens focused on his door and the window alarm set Hemmi was safe. He shut himself in for the night, fresh paint fumes masking the stench of dead animal.

I was lounging on the couch, reading a Tad Williams novel, when I heard the knock. Max slipped soundlessly into my apartment, his sweat pants the same soft gray of his eyes and again, he wore that silly Batman t-shirt. He seemed...sneaky.

"Hey." I sat up suspiciously. "Something wrong?"

"No." Max efficiently flipped the lock with a flick of his wrist. His hot eyes found mine and I knew right then and there I was about to experience the Max Douglas version of a booty call. Thank God I'd taken a shower.

"Who's watching the hall?" I gaped like a fish.

"I've got someone. Everything is under control." Things were safe in the dorm if Max was here looking for some action. Was I willing to play? Sex was absolutely against the unwritten rules of dorm parenting while gay. I was sort of charmed that Max, of all people, would break the rules to get laid and I was powerfully attracted to him. That smile in the quad. That ...moment... the other night. Those crotch-hugging jeans. The way my breath came short when our skin touched.

Max prowled to the couch on his covert mission to have me. He whipped his t-shirt over his head, dropping it at his feet, the action reminiscent of my big move all those months ago. Was that on purpose? Who cared? At last I got a look at the beautiful contrast of his chest. Swirls of soft hair and cut with hard muscle; a whitened pucker marred his left pectoral; a jagged line divided him, shoulder to armpit.

He said in that tone, the one that made my legs weak, "Michael."

It took me a nanosecond to decide that physically I was willing. But emotionally? He was such a dick. Of course, this didn't have to be emotional. It was just sex.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Did I? In all honesty, my attraction to Max was real—as evidenced by the tent forming in my cotton dorm pants. I was definitely up for a clandestine interlude. Literally. I shifted my book to my lap and put a lid on my reservations.

"No. Stay." Besides, rules were meant to be broken, as long as we didn't get caught.

He took my book and tossed it across the room. It hit the rug with a thud.

"Hey!"

"Is there a problem?" The cushions rocked as Max eased onto me. He looked at my lap, then to my face. He smiled and pressed me heavily into the comfort of the couch, his face close, those dove-gray eyes as intense as I remembered from the summer.

“No problem.” I mumbled.

He picked up right where we left off on Saturday night. His mouth grazed mine, the heat and electricity stealing a groan from me. He licked my mouth, not kissing me yet—teasing me with a taste of mint. He’d brushed his teeth before coming. He’d made a plan. Why did that warm me?

Max’s groping hands went everywhere—on my chest, my chin, my hair—he was feeling me up like a prom date in the backseat of a Buick: hurried and trying to hit all the bases in one go. I wasn’t much better, all elbows and knees, until he settled on me like a blanket, his full length on mine, his hands finding purchase in my hair. Our lips met, the two of us playful to start, nipping and sipping and eager. Coaxing turned bruising and then we grew rough as his whiskers scraped the smooth skin I’d sloppily shaved. He was probably giving me a rash—or hives. He was certainly giving me a fever.

My fingers combed the tufts of his cropped hair, trailing on to pet his back, stroking until I held him by the ass, rubbing against his erection. Cotton friction abraded my hard on and the heat and pleasure had me humping hard. Grinding, I controlled Max’s weight and a low growl of approval vibrated against my chest. He liked this. It was a good sign. I could flip him over and take him and he’d let me. I’d love to have the upper hand, to slide inside the tight crease of his ass.

But not tonight.

Between biting sucking kisses he groaned. “I want to be inside you, Michael. Right now. Can I fuck you?”

Like any good teacher, I had to say, “I don’t know, Max? Can you?”

“Oh, I think you know I can.” His dimple deepened. He pulled my hands over my head onto the arm of the couch. Transferring my wrists into his strong grip, I was drawn long and slim. His other hand went for my cock. No preamble. Straight to it.

I sucked on his tongue, bucking into his palm. Restrained, I started to make noise, turned on by the heightened sensation of being held down. He could fucking tie me down if he wanted to. He could tie me down over the couch or on the bed or stick a goddamn dildo—

"Oh God, yeah."

I was getting carried away, and vocal.

"Shhh." His voice vibrated against my skin. "I've been waiting to do this all day, ever since this morning when I came in and you were so fucking feisty and bitching at me about that gun. I wanted to hold you down, and fuck you right on the floor."

"You can do that now," I breathed, "but we have to be quiet."

Good thing I was so easy.

"You think you can keep it down, kiddo? Last time you were howling. Remember? Bent over and begging for it." He brushed my mouth, his grip on my wrist this shy of aching, and I nodded. He whispered evilly, "I'd gag you, just in case, but I want your mouth."

Max was talking dirty.

"Bastard."

His warning feathered my ear. "You keep quiet for me. We don't want anyone to come looking."

Reality briefly burbled up. This was insanity. My job would be on the line if we were caught. What was I doing? "You're sure the door is locked?"

His lips nibbled. "Yes. You watched me do it. You know that it is." He carefully bit my ear and I lit up like a fucking Christmas tree, his hand easily flipping my switch to 'on'. His grip slipped upward, rubbing smooth and moist into the slit in my penis. His fingers closed around the capped head and I humped my cock into his fist. My leg clutched his back as he suckled a raw spot under my ear.

"Don't mark me, Max."

"I won't. At least, not where anyone can see," he smiled against my neck, squeezing my wrists hard before letting go. "Leave your hands there." He used that special tone I liked. I did as instructed. He nipped my shoulder and drew my pants down to my knees.

Oh, now that was naughty. Sprawled with my pants hung up on my thighs, I was all honesty and eagerness, my erection sprouting from my crotch thick and ever ready. His expression unguarded, Max gave an appreciative growl. "I like you exactly like

this.” Hungrily, he swallowed me down.

Trapped by his weight, his eyes, his sucking mouth and my half flagged pants, I fucked in, pleasure ripping me from my groin to fingertips. “Suck me Max. Yeah. Yeah.”

I bit my lip. Shit, I had to shut up.

One handed, he stripped me. I drew my legs wide, making a place for him as his mouth made a place for me. I anchored a foot on the floor; the other hooked over the back of the couch. Gripping with my knee, I rode and thrust as the cushions spilled messily around us. Max’s fingers teased toward my ass, stroking the delicate skin and brushing my sac. I dug my teeth into my lips praying for quiet, but his blunt finger tip came to rest decisively on the buttoned opening of my body.

“Max. I have lube.”

“I’m sure you do.” That tone again. Bossy. Direct. Sexy. Instructional. I hated myself for liking it so much.

His cheeks hollowed out, the strong bones of his face beautiful in the cheap lighting of the dormitory. Expertly, he worried the very top of my dick and pleasure turned me rigid. Straining against his tongue, my familiar plea broke, “Please, Max.”

A finger trailed up to mix in the wet of his mouth and then Max pierced me knuckle deep, insinuating himself into my body. He charmed the tight band of my entrance; his finger curved reaching for the magic place, and there came that old pinging shock of pleasure. My eyes rolled back, my legs went limp and I rode the wave, desperately bearing down on his invasion while simultaneously trying to push deeper into his glorious mouth. Grind and push and press – wanting him to plug me harder and wider. “More.”

I gripped the arm of the couch, the fibers dug into my palms, and my voice grew raw with pleasure. He worked me, driving me crazily around the steep bend toward orgasm – only to put the brakes on with a quick withdrawal.

Max snapped the lid on some lube, and then breached me fully, two...three fingers opened me. He burned me up, all the while mouthing the very end of my dick like a summertime Popsicle melting on his tongue. When at last he suckled it all down, I fell

into a tunnel of lust so deep, everything went black. I tried to hit the bottom fast and hard, split and full and ready and falling, frantic to land. Hoping he'd catch me. That rhythm was as perfect as it was tormenting.

He pulled his mouth away.

"Jeeze, Max, not again—"

"Again. I'll get you there." He reached for his pocket, those fingers still churning inside me. "Your ass is so tight. Have you been holding out, waiting me to come back and fuck you again? Did you like that the first time so much? You gonna suck my fingers again when you come, Michael? You little dirty bitch."

He was depraved. Shame and lust blended together and I needed to come, to suck him, to get him inside me, to come on him. "Fuck you, Max."

"I'm working on it." His fingers withdrew. Max stripped his pants off and suited his cock in latex. He slicked himself and then, he moved in close.

"Hold your legs up."

I did. I wantonly yanked my knees as far as I could, unnerved that we were going to fuck face to face, and I let his body take mine. His chest hair was rough, his skin all salt and tang on my tongue, his slippery dick kissed my hole.

His gaze held me, trapped. This was why I didn't like the face to face thing. I closed my eyes, disappearing inside myself and licked my lips. And then Max leaned in and licked my lips.

He held the underside of my knees and sunk smooth and effortlessly like a stone into the well of my body. My cock slapped and I grabbed on, pumping my flesh and biting my lip.

"Don't make any noise when you get off, Michael." Was he amused? "Shhh." Max shifted, massaging my prostate. His dick filled my passage, his sweat, his scent, his coarse hair—he became everything around me. He was inside me, on top, all over me, bruising me, sucking me, marking me. Taking me...having me...and... and— my freaking body electric—I came intense and unexpectedly fast, in a swelling crescendo, jerking, surging, trying not to make a sound but failing. Sucking his neck, mouthing his collar bone, noise long and low was smothered by his mouth. I shot all over my hand

and the gorgeous rough hair trailing to his crotch. He was immobile, spearing me, his voice rough, and too real. "You come quicker than anyone I've ever known."

I laughed, giddy and dying inside from embarrassment.

He gripped my thighs hard enough that I knew where he'd leave his mark and crammed into me. The couch appeared to be moving, jumping across the carpet, the floor lamp swinging precariously over my head as he battered into my back end. Fortunately, he came before we made it all the way into the bedroom, his hips jacking against my ass, a hissing breath whistling through his teeth. He grunted and then, like men do from time to time, he collapsed on top of me. I ran my hands over his sweaty back, his unguarded weight comfortable for the moment. He'd crush me soon enough. I buried that thought and lay there wondering what the hell to say now. *Thanks for making my Monday* didn't seem appropriate. *Wow, that was great? How are you? I am not really fine. Why do I let you do this to me? I can't believe you called me a bitch.*

The clock ticked between our strained breaths, his skin cooled and Max held me. As he calmed, I began to really fret.

An unfamiliar swish of semen slid out of my body and down my crack. *What the fuck was that?* Lying entwined, my hand froze on the curve of his ass, my heart painfully retracted and fear soaked me. I smacked his head with the back of my hand and he laughed. Out loud. It was the first time I'd ever heard it.

"Max. Your condom!" Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck.* I fought him, struggling to get away. "I think it's leaking or broken or...get off!"

His laughter ended sharply. He held me for the space of a single breath, the afterglow lost, then he let go, frowning and worried. "Fuck." He rested his forehead against mine. Maybe a kiss brushed my skin? "I'm so sorry."

"*Sorry?* Why sorry? Do I need to be more worried than I am right now?" I disengaged, forcing him away with my feet and hands. There was a smear on my couch. "Shit."

Nasty, I headed to the bathroom, Max following close.

"I think I'd have more to worry from you, then you from me." He said soberly.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? What are you saying? Max?" Dirty and

now weirdly shy, I wanted to be alone. I wasn't prepared to scrub my ass with a towel while Max watched from the door, so I groped blindly for the shower knob. I wanted to bathe and go to bed. Hide. There was nothing I could do about this situation. It was the reality of sex for everyone, gay or straight. He knew that as well as I did.

He was talking. "I've been building my business for years and my dating life has been nonexistent since —"

"Fine. You're a virgin," I snapped. "What are you saying about me? That I'm some kind of STD risk?" Pulling the curtain, I climbed in to the hot spray.

We should have had this damn conversation earlier.

"You engage in risky behavior. It's something you enjoy, from what I can tell. It's part of your scene." The toilet flushed. He ran the water in the sink. Washing up. "It's busted. The condom." He wasn't particularly concerned, as far as I could tell.

"So what was that? You seemed pretty into that scene yourself. And you don't know me, Max. Just because I —"

What could I say in my own defense? Did I have a defense? Did I need one? I liked sex, no surprise there.

"—let you have me—twice—this way, doesn't mean that it's my standard of behavior...lately. Okay, *yes*, in the past I've fucked around, frequently, but always safely. Christ, you're the only sex I've had this year." I was drowning. Almost literally as hot water ran up my nose and soap ran down my body. "I don't want to have some bullshit conversation about how safe you are, how neither of us engages in unprotected sex and —"

"You think I'd lie about that?"

"About sexual history? Everyone lies about that."

His voice grew soft. "Who did this to you? You're so bitter. I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"Yeah, well, we all have our secret shame." I said proving his point. I let the soap cleanse me, hot water warming me from the inside.

"Yes. We do. I'm sorry, Michael. I'm safe. I had one long-term relationship in the past six years and he died in the desert three years ago." A world of emotion in that

simple, bare pronouncement, delivered so steadily. "I'm safe. I don't have so much as a cold."

I stared numbly at the curtain hanging between us. Water hit the plastic in a steady, reassuring spray. Water sluiced into the drain. Steam condensed, lifting in a cloud to bead on the walls and ceiling, every spot and stain illuminated. Like my past. And my present. My throat tightened and, again with Max, shame choked me. I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, Max." What more could I possibly say? "I'm really sorry. I didn't know."

Nothing from the other side.

I shut the water off, braced my arm against the wall, and hung my head. Exhausted and incapable of conversation, I selfishly wanted to be left alone. I really didn't want to hurt him. Although, what made me think I had the ability to hurt him? This was just sex for him—he'd said as much. He didn't even like me as a person. He came here with one purpose; to fuck me. He thought I was lax and undisciplined and a possible threat to the safety of the people I had been entrusted with. I hardened my heart. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, but I'm not up for conversation right now."

"I understand." A towel flew over the curtain rod, smacking me in the head. "I'll see you later."

I waited, drying myself alone in the bathroom. I brushed my teeth, used the toilet and listened for the click of my front door. Only then did I trudge back to my room. Belatedly, I was concerned someone had heard the muted noise of hot sex filtering through the dormitory walls. Jesus, what a mess. What a huge lapse in judgment on both our parts. What the hell was wrong with us? It was like college all over again, only, ironically, this time Max really could cost me my job.

To: B. Danvers (headofschool@daltonprep.org)

From: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Five students have reported their keys missing in Millbrook: Bangor, Hemmi, Eric, Wells, and Jesse. Four are in my advisee group. I think that's noteworthy. I don't believe that this incident is related to Sam's problem. We should probably change all the locks and issue new keys.

L.B. Gregg

Finn

To: Michael Finnegan (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

From: Maxwell Douglas (max@douglassecurity.com)

Sam has been contacted by Dobos again. It's not known where Colton is although Sam believes him to still be in LA.

M.

Chapter Six

I was sore on Tuesday. I got through it with another hot shower, two cups of coffee and an Advil. I ate breakfast alone in my apartment and skipped lunch in the dining hall. By five after three I'd only seen Max once—sunglasses on, dark blazer, tie, FBI—as he moved about campus with a walkie-talkie widget hanging from his ear. He looked like he was shuffling someone in the witness protection program on to his next locale. He was professional and detached, and yes, I was hiding from him. My ass hurt, I was tired and I was concerned for Hemmi.

I scanned the throng of blue blazer-wearing teenagers constantly, looking for Colton. I was obsessing. Is this what Max did all day? It seemed like everyone had become a threat. Finally, I had to get on with my job and trust Max to do his.

It was Halloween, which mattered not at all in the daily life of our prep school. Tonight, in lieu of the second half of study hall, we'd get dressed up and head over to the school clubhouse for the Halloween Dance. Roughly translated, that meant lots of togas and tarts, but still fun. Unlike public school dances I'd attended, boarding school kids danced. They lived together twenty-four seven and they knew how to unwind.

Max joined us for our hike, taking up the rear, no pun intended. He was distant and that tic was back in his cheek. He'd changed for the hike into boots, faded jeans and

a deep green polar fleece. It made his gray eyes green. Not that I noticed. My gaze drifted downward. Where was the gun this afternoon? In his sock? I knew what secrets hid under those clothes and I couldn't see any telltale differences.

As usual, he was so fucking remote I didn't attempt to speak with him.

We hiked. That's what we were there for. It was another picturesque October day, crisp and clear. The sun was slipping behind the trees, yet we still had plenty of daylight left to make it down to Little Bear Run and get back for dinner. We took the beautifully maintained trail on the north side of campus that lead into the State Forest. Leaves covered the ground and the crackle of our boots smashing the foliage into dust kept time with the antics of the students in this group—most of them performing arts kids. They were singing and chatting and scaring away the wildlife. I smiled, zipped my jacket a bit higher and hefted the school-mandated first aid kit, attractively concealed in a camo back pack, onto my shoulder.

It was a steep descent to Little Bear Run and, as the name suggested, there were times one could come across black bears on the trail. Not today, as bears didn't particularly enjoy the caterwauling of more than a dozen adolescents, but on quiet walks it was possible. A wide creek cut through the gorge, becoming rapids, and then a long series of falls further down the hill. Hill? It was a steep miniature mountain. There were rock faces, an old quarry and my favorite part, tight hair-pin curves. The path was so worn in places that moss covered roots extended five or six inches above the hard packed earth. It was like roaming through the Shire on a quest for the one ring. This hike was a quick one, it was a great workout, and the path, while riddled with natural obstacles, was clearly marked.

The kids skipped on ahead, flinging sticks and pinecones and anything else they could find. I reminded them not to, but my heart, and my aching ass, wasn't in it.

Besides, they should have fun on Halloween.

"Mr. Finn!" My name was shrieked with enough volume and urgency to send birds flying from the trees.

A misfire in my chest and I bolted, gripping the day pack by its strap. Max whizzed by me, nearly shoving me into the thicket, and disappeared around the bend.

Hemmi had gotten ahead of us in the tangle of kids. I stumbled, skidding around the corner, stones and rocks and leaves rolling under my feet. I felt exposed, although surrounded by forest, as the shadows in the gorge played tricks on my eyes. I loped down the pitched trail after Max. How the hell they'd gotten so far ahead in only a manner of seconds?

And then, my foot hooked a gnarled oak root and I took a half gainer, landing with a thud and a skid in front of the kids.

"Mr. Finn—are you all right?" Jesse's voice cracked with concern. He reached a small but strong hand to me and hauled me to my feet. My knees were filthy. I brushed twigs from my pants while taking stock of the situation. Max was active, hustling everyone together, talking to his command center—instructions I couldn't hear from this distance. I searched for the scary, suspicious or dangerous thing that had set everyone off.

"What's going on?" Everyone was accounted for with no visible injuries.

Jesse's color faded. He pointed down the trail. "There's a body hanging in that oak tree, Mr. Finn. It's not real, but it scared us all."

I went to investigate the figure suspended in the huge old oak. The effigy hung by a noose of thick white rope on the other side of the tree from my earlier vantage point. You'd have to pass by in order to see it. A scarecrow, aptly named. It had indeed scared the piss out of everyone here. The body twisted slowly in the breeze in a gentle arc, dressed in a Dalton Prep blazer, our crest stitched to the left breast pocket and a Vineyard Vines school tie. Its shoes hovered about five feet from the ground. I took a look at the perversely tacked on face: Hemmi. A faded paper print out, enlarged, of his yearbook photo.

I sought Hemmi, now white, but not in fear. He was outraged, which was much better than being traumatized. He glared first at Max, then at me.

"What the fuck is going on, Finn?" I couldn't blame him. The other kids gazed worriedly at us.

Max cut him a sharp look. "Keep it together!"

Hemmi looked stricken. "Excuse me, Mr. Finn."

"I don't know, Hemmi. I think we have to leave this to Max and his guys to figure out." I glanced at Max who nodded back to me.

"Who knew we'd be down here, Mr. Finn? Why would someone do that?" Hemmi put his arm around Tara. She shivered into her Dalton sweatshirt, tucking into the boy's side.

"Someone is trying to scare us. It's probably no more than a Halloween prank. It could be anyone. We hike this trail regularly enough." They begged to take this path at least once a week. We could finish it in time for them to grab some down time in the student center before dinner. I turned to Max. "What's the plan?"

What I wanted to know was: *Do you think we're in any danger?*

He surveyed the forest with a sweeping glance, his military training coming to the fore. "We should take a different route back. Then we'll go to the dining hall and get dinner."

The kids were singularly unimpressed with his plan. "Mr. Douglas, can we please go back up the path?" That from Laura, her eyes narrowed on the sophomore snuggled in Hemmi's arms. The rest of the group mumbled in agreement.

"No." Max gave me a weird smile. "What kind of outdoor club is this, Finn, where at the first sign of adversity the group wants to run home?" His use of my nickname surprised me, which was his intent.

That peckerhead. Mr. Deflection. He was smart.

He asked me softly, "Where's the nearest secondary path?"

"It's below us, through the quarry. I'd say about five minutes walk."

He nodded. "I don't want these kids sitting here stewing. I'm not certain that whoever did this isn't still somewhere in the vicinity."

I got everyone moving. "All right, rest stop over, we'll walk down to the fork and take the road home."

There was a predictable, collective groan. It was an additional two miles home by the road. Eric stood alone, his fists buried in his jacket pockets, staring at the dummy in the tree. "I still think there's something more going on than Hemmi's dad being nervous. What with Mr. Douglas following us around, the new alarm system, and the

raccoon? Something's up." He glared at Hemmi and everyone went quiet. "Someone doesn't like you, Hemmi."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"I mean someone *really* doesn't like you. More than the normal 'you suck' dislike. You did something. You need to watch your back, Sparks." Eric turned to me. "Can we go now, Finn? This is creeping me the eff out."

I deferred to Max. "Are you going to leave that here? Or take it with us?"

He gave me a funny look. "You going to carry it home, Finnegan? No. I have someone on the way."

That was cryptic enough. We were no longer on school property. We were in the state forest. I assumed the state police would arrive, or CSI or NCSI or some form of S-I. I truly had no idea. I preferred the BBC to crime shows.

I grouped the kids together and moved them down the trail, surprised that Max was with us. "Aren't you staying?"

"No. I was hired to protect Hemmi, not to investigate." He scanned the woods and then we moved on.

Passing the effigy, my eye was drawn by a flash of metal. I squinted. A silver bar neatly anchored the blue and red school tie to the oxford. I checked it out. "Max. It's wearing my tie clip."

Max filed that information away into his neat, organized brain. "Are you sure?"

"Max. I know my own stuff—it's from Trinity. How'd he get that? We know what this guy looks like, right? I don't think this prank was Colton." No way. He couldn't have gone into my place. "Who could have taken that? I'm not missing any keys."

"Michael, people are in and out of your place all day long. Your apartment isn't exactly secure."

True.

"We'll talk later."

Unsettled, we walked quietly in the chill, the forest less friendly now than it had been fifteen minutes ago. No pinecones sailed through the air. The only sound was the far off burble of the water below us. Hemmi and Laura and some of the others held

hands, bravely soldiering on to the quarry.

"Mr. Finn, do you think that person is still here?" Bangor asked nervously from the back of the line, his face mottled.

"No. I think they had their fun and went back to...wherever cowards go. We're fine."

I glanced at Max, who was busy scanning the outcrop of rocks. He was within three feet of Hemmi, ready to take him to the ground if need be. At least he hadn't drawn his gun.

The path snaked into a narrow ravine where quartz had long ago been blasted from stone. The temperature dropped as the trail abutted the cliff. It was cold and damp. The ground glittered with specks of dazzling white peeping through orange and yellow leaves. Veins of mineral contrasted the dark planes of the rock wall. It was usually a wonderful, if nippy, section of the trail but today it seemed ominous. We picked our way along the jumbled footpath, each one of us trying to walk without making a sound.

I felt malevolent eyes peering down at me from the hillside and shook myself. It was Halloween. We were alone in the woods. We were exposed and nervous and appropriately freaked out.

A twig snapped from somewhere above us and Max shifted. Everyone tensed. My own breath stilled as I waited for....what? What the hell were we waiting for? The boogie man? Rather unsuitably, I fought a snicker. It was a nervous reaction I couldn't contain. We all froze as a tiny, mischievous chipmunk scampered around a tree set high on the edge of the ravine above us. A small stone, a pebble really, fell down the wall and inanely we all watched it descend, pinging and tipping down the rough hillside, until it landed with a pop in the leaves at Jesse's small feet. He looked up, his eyes raking the forest, his face expression now smooth of fear. "Mr. Finn? Did you see that little chipmunk? It about gave me a heart attack."

I laughed, breaking the spell that held us. "C'mon everyone. Let's shake this off and get back to the dorm. We have a big night ahead of us."

Cover Me

From: Max (max@douglassecurity.com)

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

I just heard from Sam. He says his flight lands at ten this evening. He also states that emails from Colton are escalating and he is considering removing Hemmi from school until things settle. You'll need to think about replacing him in the play.

I'll keep you posted.

M.

L.B. Gregg

From: Dean of Students (dean@daltonprep.org)

To: All School

The annual Halloween dance will begin at 8 p.m. and end promptly at 10. A \$2 donation is to be collected for the Smithfield Food Pantry Thanksgiving Turkey Drive.

*Prizes awarded for most original costume. Please come suitably attired. No nudity, profane slogans, or lewd costumes. Period. No grinding, freaking or offensive dancing. My definition of **offensive** stands: I'll know it when I see it.*

Mr. Stacy

Chapter Seven

Study hall was an utter wash, especially for the kids with dorm study privileges. They spent the entire hour dressing in their Halloween costumes. Warring playlists blasted from every room. Someone had ordered pizza and the dorm mothers had delivered plastic pumpkins filled with chocolate to every student.

I wasn't sure what it was like in the girls' dorms, but here it was absolute anarchy.

I dressed like I was going to my own funeral—with despair. Last month I had found a costume sure to get a few laughs from the kids, but zipping myself into my silver lamé monstrosity, I questioned my judgment. Actually, I could kick myself for my lack of foresight. What the hell had I been thinking? How could I ever have guessed that Max would be here and would see me dressed like this? I couldn't. And it shouldn't matter anyway.

I would suck it up and be the charming, self-assured man I generally pretended to be. I'd be damned if I wasn't going to wear this fifty-dollar—fifty-eight-dollar—toaster costume simply because Max Douglas was here.

I stood before the mirror, a slice of foam rubber white bread framing my unsmiling face, and swung my faux electrical cord jauntily for about a half second. I could always plug myself in and jump into the bath tub...

Shit. I looked like an idiot. My arms and legs, clad in black, poked out clumsily. My chest was three feet wide. I was like a Home Show convention mascot.

It could be worse. I could have put the white gloves on, but, let's face it—I was a goddamn toaster and about as far from sexy or masculine as I could be short of a pair of mouse ears, a lollipop, and some gold lamé short-shorts.

Resigned, my shoulders back and straight—though who could tell under all the foam?—I left for the dance. I had to turn sideways to get out of my apartment.

Students horsing around in the hallway halted and stared. Launched laundry, mid-air and forgotten, fell in airy plops on the carpet.

"Mr. Finn! Holy crap that thing is *awesome*." Cory Johnston came up to stroke the shiny surface of my chest, right where *Sunbeam* was embossed in a charming circle. "Are you the Brave Little Toaster?"

The what? Oh no, no, no.

"I'm just a toaster." I bravely plodded on, and almost fell down the stairs.

The kids followed me like a parade of toast-deprived orphans. "Mr. Finn, what's your toast made of?"

Surely there wasn't a hidden dig there.

"It's Styrofoam." Eric said. "That's not good for the environment, Finn. It depletes the ozone."

"Well," I corrected him, "good thing it's made of foam rubber then." I shook my head and the bread jiggled a bit but stood firm. I had no peripheral vision—making this evening the perfect opportunity for one of the kids to stick a sign on my back. I wouldn't be able to reach back to remove it either. I'd have to rub against a tree periodically to check for loose debris. I smiled with false enthusiasm. "You guys ready?"

A grinning, blond, five-foot tall feather-wearing pimp in purple joined us. Jesse. "Hey, Finn, did you ever see the Brave Little Toaster?"

I refrained from saying *fuck you*.

In the common room, Merry Men in green tights and pointy hats danced. They carried miniature bows. They looked more like undersized Jolly Green Giants in their

felt attire but I was in no position to offer any pointers on costume design. The men were skipping around as merrily as possible, trying to perfect the Shrek song for the costume contest. Really, you'd think they'd act their age.

I crashed into the couch, bounced off, and was steadied by the overgrown paw of Bangor. He was dressed from head to toe in black, a scream mask in his other fist. "Steady there, Finn." He patted me roughly as if I were a dog.

I jerked away, my foam wobbling. "I'm fine. Let's get this festival on the road." I took a cleansing breath, probably a bad idea in close quarters with forty sweating teenage boys, and the entire group of us exited: Romans and pimps, thieves and murderers, ninjas and numskulls. I shook my head sadly at this dearth of creativity.

We arrived at the clubhouse across campus and I tried to blend which was impossible, of course. A calm and reserved appliance can't exactly fade into the background, even in a room full of rowdy teenage psychopaths.

I felt Max's eyes on me instantly. He was leaning against the far wall, his normal vantage point, dressed as a ninja. Nice that he'd made the effort. It was a pleasant surprise.

His nunchucks were tantalizing.

He scoped me out, wide eyed. Even from across the room, I could see the tiny shake of his shoulders. His face relaxed. After a second, a smile surfaced—then he chuckled. At last, full out laughter transformed him into someone approachable. Someone likeable. Someone I craved knowing. I absolutely had to hear the sound of his laughter. I teetered through the crowd of grinding, freaking, sweaty dancers determined to get closer. The kids dodged my girth. The music pulsed through my skin, my heart pounding along with it. I was transported back to nights wasted in clubs years ago. Back then I was alone and needing some indefinable thing that sex could give me—that same thing I feared I now needed from Max and he could never provide. I moved close enough to hear his deep grumbling laughter. I shouldn't want to. I should have been insulted to be the source of his amusement. Instead, as ever, he was deliciously melting my butter.

I swung my extension cord in a neat arc, twirling it snappily, and he doubled over.

I chuckled too and tried to tilt suavely against the wall, but that wasn't happening. I tipped. He stared at my toast.

I spun around, showing off a little.

"Hey, you've got something stuck to your back."

I visualized his touch; I couldn't feel it. Fortunately, the bottom of my metallic housing covered my crotch, on the off chance that I got excited.

"I'll bet. Does it say 'kick me?'"

"No. It says 'I like to have my muffin buttered.'"

My face flamed and I jerked back around, my jaw hanging. "Tell me you're kidding."

He smiled roguishly. "I'm kidding, Michael. It says 'kick me.' And you're blushing, kiddo." Turning to keep an eye on Hemmi, he went ninja, Johnny-On-The-Job. His smile, rare as it was, remained.

The shame and fear of last night faded. I'd take that smile as a Halloween treat, pleased to be the one who coaxed Max ever so briefly from his severe public persona.

I spent the next two hours handing out prizes, trying to dance without taking anyone out or tripping over my cable and slow roasting. It was damned hot. Next year I would wear a toga.

Bibby stopped by, shouting over the music, "Everything running smoothly Finn?" She made a hilarious Wednesday Adams.

I nodded.

"Sam's coming tomorrow. I want to make sure he feels we have everything under control."

"Of course." I scanned the sea of writhing teenagers—searching for bad behavior of the intoxicated kind. Underage drinking or any drug use at all was grounds for expulsion and this was historically my vodka-down-the-drain night.

Bibby leaned in close, her attention on my bread. "What in the hell are you wearing, Michael?"

"I feel like a moron."

"Well, you could win the costume contest."

"I am not going to walk across the stage begging for favors from my colleagues. Unless you are, too."

Bibby smiled, her teeth a line of perfectly matched pearls. "I don't want any talk about you and that security guard, Michael."

Security guard? "I don't understand."

"I think you very well do understand. The reputation of Dalton prep is pristine. No violence. No drug use. No wild sex in the dorms."

I blushed. Flustered, I sputtered, "What are you —"

She held up a neatly manicured hand. "Please."

Someone had heard us last night and complained to Bibby. "I'm of age, Bibby. My apartment is supposed to be private. I don't see you having this conversation with more...traditional staff members."

"Don't fear. No one has spoken to me but I know what I see." Bibby patted my hand. "Of course I have this conversation with the staff, Michael. It's a constant. Our teachers are young and...excitable. Just remember that discretion is the key. The best way to keep your private affairs safe is to be beyond reproach."

She wandered away and I reflected on my behavior as she'd intended. I'd just had my knuckles rapped with a wooden spoon.

At ten fifteen, Max and I collected Hemmi and Laura. It had been a great dance, even if the girls embraced their 'ho' costumed personas a bit too enthusiastically, and the four of us cut out a few minutes early to check the safety of the dorm. Honestly, I needed to free myself to take a piss.

Hemmi, his toga no longer anything more than a ruined bed sheet, held Laura's hand. I wasn't sure what Laura was supposed to be. She looked like the Flashdance Fairy in her spandex miniskirt, pink butterfly wings and skimpy, torn top. She had to be freezing. They shivered and chatted as we walked through the silver moonlight, their blond hair shining like lamps, their hands clasped. The skeleton trees cast odd shadows on the gray walkway as it twined through the deserted campus. Max was in his protective robo-mode behind us. I stumbled along as best as I could, channeling Scout in her ham costume ala *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I didn't mind Max in the role of Gregory

Peck.

The night was clear and cold, the air clean. We were moving swiftly away from the music of the dance, zipping along toward the dorm, when Hemmi tripped on the tattered hem of his bed sheet and fell, jerking Laura on top of him. There was a hiss, a swift intake of breath, a high cry and then a shriek. It was blood curdling. Laura's voice pitched, then she gurgled. I moved to find her, but a stinging burn hit my ass. My leg buckled and I tipped forward onto the cement, my knee connecting with the ground in a terrible kiss that ripped my pants and hurt like blazes. The foam of my costume both knocked the wind out of me and prevented me from a face plant into the pavement.

Max said firmly, "Stay down! Everyone stay the fuck down."

I couldn't see him.

"Laura!" Hemmi's voice broke. "Max, help me! She's bleeding!"

A voice crackling and distorted, sing-songed from deep in the woods behind us, "Peek-a-boo! I see you!"

"Quiet. Don't give your position away, Hemmi," Max ordered.

I was sprawled on the sidewalk, unable to move. From what I could make out, Max and Hemmi had Laura between them. I tried to stand, to lend some kind of support, but I couldn't get my knee under the toaster. Laura had grown quiet. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Laura's been hurt. She's down." Max's voice was tight when he came back for me. "Can you make it over there?"

I cranked my head as much as my costume allowed. He pointed to Senior Rock. I staggered to get up, but something stung my backside like a swarm of bees. What the fuck was that? I couldn't see a damn thing, my attempts to turn my head thwarted by the toast.

"Max, I can't see anything. What's going on?"

"You were shot in the ass. You both were hit." Hit? Max grabbed my arm and dragged me like a fallen comrade across the path, over into the grass, and safely behind the massive formation known as Senior Rock. "Someone is firing at us from the science building. I need you to stay calm, hear me Finn? You have an arrow in your tush."

What the fuck? “Shooting? Who? What the fuck, Max, get that thing out of my ass!”

Max leaned in, his lips almost on my ear. “I never thought I’d hear you say those words, Michael.”

I winced as fire shot into my right flank. He squeezed my shoulder. “Hang on, all right? Laura needs you.” Max stared into the night.

“Are we safe here?”

“For now.” He moved to the side of Senior Rock, blending into the shadows, appropriately dressed after all. His words were clipped. “Help Laura. I need to keep watch.”

“Hemmi, push me to my side.” I couldn’t turn over; the stick in my ass was preventing me from that maneuver. Laura lay still in a small nook tucked into the rocks, Hemmi beside her.

Tears streamed down his young face. He brushed them clumsily away. “Mr. Finn, I don’t know if I can. You’ve got a couple of arrows in you. Can’t you feel them?”

Plural? “I thought I just had the one, right?” I couldn’t see it but *damn* I could feel it! “I can’t feel any others. Get me up. We need to help Laura. We can deal with my pincushion later.” He hoisted me by my armpits until I was wincing and hissing and on my knees. My ass was on fire and not in the way I liked. I hobbled to Laura, ready to perform emergency first aid. Not for the first time I cursed the lack of cell service on this damned campus.

I was shocked by Laura’s state. Three arrows protruded stiff and bright—one in her shoulder, another in her arm and one in her back. She moaned thinly, rivulets of dark blood vivid on her fair exposed skin. Hemmi was wide-eyed with panic, soothing her, his breathing labored, and his face pinched with distress. “We have to help her, Finn. This is my fault.”

“Don’t touch anything.” The arrow in her back was dangerously deep. The one in her arm had nicked some vital blood supply and it bled heavily. How had she gotten hit three times that quickly? I struggled with my costume but it was tacked to my shirt. I ripped off the ridiculous black cord I’d so artlessly twirled earlier and tied it high on Laura’s shoulder. Shallow gasps gurgled between her blanched lips. “Hold on sweetie.

I'm going to help you."

She nodded, her face bleached of color, those beautiful blue eyes tightly shut. She was slipping in and out of consciousness, her skin cold. "Laura! Stay with me. Hemmi get this goddamn thing off me."

Hemmi's hands shook as he fought with my zipper. I wrenched out of my costume, the sound of my shirt tearing lost under Hemmi's hyperventilating and the distressing sound of Laura's labored breath.

"Max, did you reach your guys?"

From the side of our enclosure, Max said, "Help is coming." His words were brusque and tight as he focused on protecting us.

"Give me your sheet, Hem." Pain radiated down my thigh. *Fuck!* Son of a bitch, Laura was bleeding everywhere.

Hemmi nodded, disrobing. The poor kid was in his shorts, too traumatized to feel the cold. Shock was going to hit soon and he'd freeze. I wrapped Laura as best I could. Tremors wracked her slight frame. "Laura? Can you hear me?"

"We have to take those out, Mr. Finn!"

"No. Never remove anything from a puncture wound like this, Hemmi, or you'll have to deal with someone bleeding out. Got it?"

Hemmi nodded, tears wet on his cheek. "Who would do this? Who would hurt her?"

"I don't know. Listen, I want you to put pressure up here, all right? Can you do that?"

"Yes sir." He nodded, brave boy, and Laura made a soft sound as he bore down.

"Laura. Help is on the way," I said, knowing that Max was right there in the darkness, speaking to his people, keeping us safe.

We were lucky our attacker hadn't shot us all in the neck.

A few arrows littered our hiding place. It was ghostly quiet on the quad. A rustle of leaves behind us, and all the spine-chilling adolescent ghoulish Halloween stories I'd ever heard echoed inside my terror-stricken head. Hemmi, pressing firmly on Laura's shoulder, glanced up, his mouth opened to scream. Or vomit. I whispered confidently,

"Max is —"

"Right here."

I shrieked. Well, Hemmi did. I covered with a high-pitched gasp as Max materialized. He was backlit. I almost missed the outline of a gun in his hand.

"He's gone." He shrugged out of his ninja jacket, and covered Hemmi's shoulders. "How is she?"

"Bad, but I think we've got the bleeding under control." From across campus, the party let out. Kids hopped up on sugar and dancing and free time broke the spell of fear that held us. Oddly dressed, our least likely heroes came scampering along the walkway, sending that evil back into the night.

Walking down the sidewalk, Chuck arrived, his beard a black scarf around his neck and his walkie talkie in hand. "Ambulance is on its way, Max."

Hemmi helped me to stand, my ass cramping, each step a misery. Max was aptly seeing to Laura, comforting Hemmi and encouraging me. "Let's go. Finn, no complaining."

Exactly as he intended, I smiled against all odds and Hemmi gave a tear-choked laugh. "Don't be a wuss, Mr. Finn."

* * * *

"Tell me what you remember." Trooper Gervase, Smithfield's resident trooper, questioned me. He was distractingly handsome and unerringly professional. I'd known him for years; I had actually been handcuffed by him once, which had seemed titillating at the time.

I had four stitches in the meat of my butt where, low in the curve of the left cheek, they'd twisted and dug that damn arrow free with a teaspoon. At least it felt that way. I'd been given a tetanus shot and some painkillers and was discharged without my underwear.

Evan joined us as we stood talking in the stark, grubby waiting room. He shook hands with Tony and took a seat.

I declined a chair.

"We left the dance early and walked back toward the dorm. Hemmi tripped on his hem..." I stopped. That seemed funny to me. Ironical. Maybe it was the painkillers? "I fell forward. I guess he jerked Laura into the crossfire. I hit the ground right behind them. I didn't see anything else."

Laura was struck twice more before Max and Hemmi had carried her to safety. Her injuries were sobering. Although the arrow in her shoulder was mostly superficial, the others required surgery. Tears to her ligaments, her tendons, a punctured lung— she'd been blessed that the arrow hadn't pierced her aorta, a major organ or her heart. She was recovering but would remain hospitalized for a few days. It was frightening and confusing.

Those arrows had been well-placed.

My idiotic costume, tattered and discarded, may have saved my life.

"Any idea of who would attack you?"

"Well, Max was hired to protect one of my students, Hemmingway Sparks." Tony nodded, evidently having come from the scene and been brought up to speed. I wondered how those two got along. They were so similar. Relaxed from the codeine, my mind was wandering. I focused carefully on my answers. I wasn't used to the effects of narcotics. I rarely even took a Motrin unless I'd been plowed by Max.

"Mike, I'm certain those arrows were intended for you. You know that, right?"

I concentrated on Tony's words. "It had occurred to me although I can't imagine why I would be a target."

I remembered the tie pin.

"Do any of the students carry a grudge against you? Maybe a former student or a staff member?"

"No, not really. At least not to my knowledge. I teach drama and creative writing. It's not like I inspire a lot of hatred."

Evan snorted.

"Are you involved with anyone on campus?"

"Uh. Not really." We all knew what that meant. I flushed and Evan sighed.

Tony gave me a smile. "Mike, can you think of anyone who would have reason to harm you?"

I thought back to the string of meaningless encounters I'd had over the years. "No. Never."

"Any idea who'd do this to Laura?"

"Hemmi fell. This is supposed to be the stalker, Colton. I can't imagine anyone else doing something so deranged. I think she was hit accidentally."

"Maybe the first time but getting shot three times isn't accidental."

He was right.

"Or without skill. They must have used a specialized bow," Evan added. "You don't have an archery team, do you?"

"No. Weapons of any kind aren't permitted. No hunting knives or paint ball guns. Nothing. Not even sling shots."

Tony's radio squawked and he moved to turn down the volume. "This is the third events in two days. They're related. Can you think of any reason all three of you were targeted? Because Max wasn't."

"The only thing the three of us have in common is outdoor club, the school, the play—they both have leads—they're in my advisee group—it's all related to Dalton."

"I agree. I spoke with your friend Max."

I glanced at Evan, who rolled his eyes.

"He called for a dorm search almost before the ambulances were loaded. We searched the campus. The shooter appears to have been on the roof of the science building. We'll know more at daybreak."

"So it had to be someone who knows the campus well and has access to the buildings."

"He hasn't ruled out the California stalker, but this all points to a person in the school community."

Fatigue made me slump a bit. "I just can't imagine one of our kids doing this."

Tony went on. "The only things of interest he found in the dorm were a few incidents of alcohol possession."

"I hope he confiscated everything."

Tony had circles under his dark eyes and he looked as tired as I felt. His gaze was determined. "Mike, if you think of anything, I want you to call me."

Call him? I blinked away any innuendo. The guy was involved and I was high on codeine. "Yes. Of course, Tony. I'll be more coherent tomorrow. I'll call you."

It was late, I was hurt, and for the first time since I'd had my wisdom teeth yanked as a freshman, I was stoned out of my gourd.

When I returned to the dorm, my ass numb, the codeine tablets warming me from the pit of my belly, Max was waiting, cross-legged on the floor outside my door. He was visibly exhausted. He also looked irritated, or perhaps worried. I couldn't tell. I came haltingly up the stairs, the shot of Novocaine beginning to wear off and my stitches pulling.

Max drew himself up as I fumbled around, unable to insert my key into the lock. Groggily, I asked, "Why didn't you just unlock it and go in and wait?" He had a master key.

"That would be violating your privacy."

I snorted. "Well, we wouldn't want to violate anyone."

Max said firmly, "No. I wouldn't. Are you on drugs?"

He took my key and opened the door. Like a first date. I laughed again. Had I accidentally doubled my dosage of codeine? Wait. Two in the emergency room and then two more in the car. Or was it three? Whatever. I was loose. Good thing Evan had driven me back.

"C'mon in." I breezed past him with the ill grace of a drunken carnie and staggered to the couch. It was two a.m. How many nights in a row had I not slept? Let's see...the night of the sneak out. The night of the condom. The night of the toaster. Yup. Three nights. Sleep was imperative. Why was Max following me around the damned apartment? He was prowling. "You know, Bibby is letting me sleep in tomorrow. Mighty big of her. She thinks we're having an illicit affair."

"We're adults. It's none of her business."

"Gay adults. I'm not sure that Dalton Prep is that p.c. This isn't the Marine Corps,

you know.” Something like regret rippled across his features. “Shit. Just ignore me. I’m not used to drugs or...anything. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

He didn’t blink. “Michael, are you coherent enough to have a real conversation?”

“Uh. I’m not incoherent enough to not have this conversation, I guess.” He was silent. I watched his cheek twitch. “That’s cute when you do that.”

“Do what?”

I pointed impishly at my cheek. “You know. Your twitch. It’s cute.”

I turned to stare at the couch I couldn’t sit on. No way was I going face down on my furniture. Years of kids eating pizza and soda and chips? I mean my naked ass on the couch was one thing. My face? Nuh. Uh . “We can talk in the bedroom. I need to lie on my stomach.”

He was standing stark still, twitching at me.

“I have stitches.” I reminded him. What in God’s name did he think? I lurched toward my bedroom, rambling, “At least I’m not going to have to buy an inflatable donut.”

I left. He could follow if he wanted but I had to get off my feet. I dropped my pants, untangled myself from my shirt and, naked at last, lay down. My underwear had been cut off by a weird pair of flat nurse’s scissors. They were nice ones, too. My underwear. Boxers. Red checked and from Banana Repub—

“Jesus.” Max muttered from somewhere.

“Is it bad?” I mumbled. I had no idea. It was covered in a bandage and out of sight, but holy hell it throbbed. Then I OD’d on codeine and now I had pulling and pressure.

And fatigue.

And a delightful sense of well being.

Maybe a little room spin.

“No. You’re....” The bed dipped with Max’s weight and his hand graced my lower back. His fingers roamed up my spine and I shuddered, tickled both outside and in. His blunt fingers trailed the sharp points of my shoulder blades, the width of waist and the dip in my buttocks. They stopped there to linger and lightly delve into the split curve of my ass. He cleared his throat and said huskily, “Christ, you’ve got a sweet

body.”

“Sweet? Delectable? Tasty? Thank you. You too.” I chuckled softly at our sudden formality. “So what do you want to talk about, Max?”

His hand slid as if smoothing silk, whispering across my flesh. I started to float, warm and light, toward the ceiling. I wasn’t going to be conscious much longer. His careful movements were putting me to sleep and I laughed lazily into my arms.

“You need to shut down the play.”

“No.”

“Michael. Someone got hurt tonight. This thing is escalating.” His hand was gentle, but his words were decisive. Was he always like that? Hard on the outside, but gentle?

“Sam’s back. He arrived from LAX at ten as scheduled. He picked Hemmi up after the ambulances left and took the kid home. He’s convinced that this was the work of Colton.”

“But you aren’t.”

“No. I think it was someone in this dorm.”

He was high. He had to be or I was really far higher than codeine alone could make me. “That’s what Tony said too. Someone on campus, I can buy but I can’t believe it was one of my boys. Who would shoot us? Unless they were playing Cupid. Was someone wearing wings and a diaper tonight?”

Max wasn’t laughing. If anything, his tone was harsh. “Tony seems to know you pretty well. He said as much.”

“What?”

“Gervase. How well do you know him?”

I was flying higher than I thought. Was Max asking me if I’d slept with the Resident Trooper? “He arrested me once. I think you know that. I’ve known him for years, Max. He’s just the town cop.”

He grunted. He stroked my arm, his fingers teasing over my shoulder, and changed the subject. “Listen to me. Someone purposely set out to injure both you and Hemmi and Laura got in the way. Someone with reason to hate Hemmi and who doesn’t particularly care for you. There’s a common denominator here and we need to

figure it out. Did Laura dump someone for Hemmi?"

"You're crazy. Kids don't shoot each other over —"

But that wasn't true. Kids shot each other over milk money. Just not here. Not in my safe pretty world.

Max sighed. "Michael. I think you're in danger and I'm staying here with you tonight. I don't think you're safe. I...need to keep you safe."

"Shouldn't you be with Sam? Uh. At Sam's?"

"No. He brought his people with him from California. I'll be with Hemmi when he gets here tomorrow. Move over."

I burrowed my head into my crossed arms, too tired to even open my eyes. I yawned and my jaw popped. "Sure, Max. If you're sleeping with me don't take the covers and don't touch my ass. Oh and set the alarm for seven and lock the door."

I thought I heard him mutter "Bossy" and then I fell into darkness.

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

From: Eric Nordland (nordlande@daltonprep.org)

Mr. Finn

A few things from last night you should know. When the prefects returned to the dorm, Mr. Douglas hadn't arrived yet and the alarm was tripped. Everyone was late for check in. And after the search by the police, we did the annual Halloween black bag search. Among the stuff anonymously surrendered, there was a hunting knife.

Eric

Cover Me

From: Sam Sparks (samsparksno1@yahoo.com)

To: Michael Finnegan (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Mike,

Of course Hemmi will attend rehearsal this evening, but until things are settled I'll be bringing him into school as a day student. Max has agreed to stay with Hemmi until we get things settled. We'll make arrangements after the play. I need to know that he's safe. I trust that Max will take care of things on campus. The show must go on!

Sam

Chapter Eight

I woke with Max next to me, my mouth dry and an ache in my backside that was anything but sexually stimulating. The honeyed hue of autumn daybreak softened the embarrassing mess of my bedroom. It seemed homier. Maybe it was Max. His heavy hand rested possessively on my hip and his head nestled mine, his body warm and comforting against me. The pain and joy of snuggling in our secret nest hit my chest like a fist.

I was about to get my heart broken. It was unavoidable. I didn't want to get involved with him, but it was too late. I was falling hard and it was going to hurt like hell when I landed.

I wiggled, attempting to free my legs, but he held me fast. "Where do you think you're going?" he grumbled. A velvet, seductive kiss caressed my neck. I reached back, felt his coarse hair, and held him closer. I was weak. No. He made me weak. His lips brushed my skin again, his whiskers abraded my nape. My eyes prickled, my heart filled and I forced myself to blink.

I made my voice work. "I didn't think you were awake."

His hand skated around my side and I thought he'd go right for my groin, my cock waking. Max's wide palm flattened against my chest, as if feeling for the rhythm that

traitorously raced. He hugged himself carefully against me, our legs tangling cozily. His morning beard scraped sharp and pleasing on my shoulder. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Tired. Sore. My leg hurts."

"Your leg, huh? Not your butt? You need more pain killers?"

I flexed and the dull ache I woke with turned to an insistent throb. "It's only a flesh wound. I'll live."

I felt him chuckle. Max reached over me, his broad hand closing on the pharmacy bottle. "Here. Take this." He shook two pills out, then handed me a drink. I eyed the water glass skeptically. It could have been there for days. His eyes were light with laughter. "I got this earlier. It's clean, Michael. Drink it."

I dutifully swallowed the codeine and tried to get up, but Max snuggled me back into the warmth of his body. "Just relax."

Relax?

"This is new." I said, unnerved by his nearness. His skin smelled of my sheets, his soap, sleep, and something indefinably attractive. "You don't strike me as a cuddler."

"Why not? You're warm and sweet."

Again with the sweet? Me? "I don't know. You're usually so..." I wanted to say 'hard' or 'stiff' but somehow that seemed inappropriate, "reserved."

"I don't mean to be. You only see me when I'm working."

Could that be true? Was he the life of the party when he wasn't working? "But... you're always working."

"Lately, yeah. I can't afford to be distracted. You're damned distracting. I'm not really complaining." He nuzzled my hair. I looked around the room, searching for something familiar and safe to anchor me. I squeezed my eyes shut because nothing could protect me from his tenderness. It was unexpected and all the more important. "I'm not a complete hard ass."

"Then what are you, Max?"

My question didn't deter him from this strange and wonderful morning embrace. He took care not to bump or touch my injury as he pressed his bare skin more

intimately to mine. "Alone. Horny."

Ah. It was just sex. I swallowed. "Yeah. Me too."

"I've never met anyone who liked being fucked as much as you do." Ouch, but probably true. Max's hand drifted down toward my dick and before I could let my hurt blossom into anger, he stroked the length of my cock until his hand cupped my balls. He held my neck, his teeth sharp, his hand tightened and I moaned. I could guess where this was heading. I flexed and my stitches burned. The pain in my ass I could deal with, it was the other ache, the one fluttering inside my chest, I didn't think I could handle. "Max, I don't think this is a good idea."

Of course, my morning wood told a different story. It was needy and in control and seeking attention. I was embarrassingly ready. Not a news flash, by any means, but I wanted him to at least...see me. I pulled away.

"Don't get all bristly," he soothed. I felt him smile against my neck. "You get so mad and it makes me want you more. Everything about you turns me on. Every single thing. Let me touch you, Michael. I won't hurt you. I promise." He stroked me and kissed the sting of his bite. His lips soothed my shoulder and my cheek. "I want to please you, and then you can get mad, baby." Oh God. Sugary words and that rich, seductive tone ... and it was working. "Stay still. I don't want you to tear your stitches."

I made one last ditch effort to keep talking. "Max—"

"Shhh. Let it go. We're here in bed. It's morning. We're all alone with no place to be right now. I want to make love to you, Michael. Let me love you," he coaxed, tipping my head back into his shoulder and then, lazily, he leaned in to devour my mouth. "I promise you, we can talk later."

I placed my hand over his, around my swollen cock, and Max kissed me as if we had all the time in the world. I supposed that we did. Maybe he was waiting for my narcotics to kick in. Maybe he simply liked kissing me. Lingering. Languid. Open-mouthed kisses that left me breathless and clinging to his lips. He pumped my cock so slowly. Desire warmed me, I relaxed, and he took over with long, firm strokes that made my body temperature rise.

He broke our kiss and shocked me by saying, "I've never met anyone like you." My stomach flipped and I shook my head against him. "You're different. You seem so..."

"Lax?" I couldn't help saying.

"Alive." His fingers tightened around the cap of my cock and I moaned. "Do you... like that?"

"Yeah. I do." I was flushing with heat and arousal. Actually, I was overheating. I tried to unwind our legs, but he held them and my stitches tugged. Pain shot down my leg. I winced against his mouth.

Max drew back. "Are you all right? What do you need?"

He was everywhere. Everything. Overwhelmed, I gasped, "I'm sore. Just...be careful."

Max let me go, stripped us of the bedding and the cool morning air hit me. "It's okay, Michael," he soothed, "it's all right." He hugged me loosely, licking and caressing and murmuring—he eased me. It was strange, or maybe not, but I wanted to give more than my body to him. With Max, for the first time, I craved something more. Something named and real—something I'd always run from.

Tucked together on our sides, his teeth, tongue, lips had my neck. It was torturous and wonderful. I wanted to reciprocate, but he held my legs with his own, while his hand wickedly masturbated me.

I thrust but he loosened, let go for a second, then licked his hand to soothe my skin. He sloppily fisted my cock. "Max. Goddamn it, you always tease. Why can't you just do it?"

"Because I want to watch you. I like watching you. You're responsive and sexy and you're goddamn spoiled. Relax. Trust me. I will always get you off." As he had every time, Max drove me fucking crazy. He slid around me, climbing over me. His big naked body brushed my legs. He was beautiful and strong. The sunlight lit his ash brown hair, his gray eyes found mine and he ordered, "Hold still Michael."

"I can't...we can't...my stitches."

"Stay on your side." His hot mouth slid along my chest, slipping lower against my

stomach. He tongued the hair on my abs, licking the happy trail that ended at my dick. Max's voice turned sultry. He whispered, "Why can't we, Finn? You have somewhere you need to be? Something else to bitch at me about?" He stroked me off, jacking me slow. I felt him smile against my stomach and my mind went white with pleasure and want and a lust that was more than physical. I wanted to store that smile, the quality of his voice, the softness of his words, the laughter, the friendship...all of it away in some secret nook inside myself. I wanted to hold it, contain it, keep it, tame it, and call it at my will, because, sweet Jesus, his smile unraveled me.

"Please. Just shut up, Max." I was covered in perspiration, my cock head wet and friction burning me with pleasure. The codeine was starting to make me woozy. You know, my ass felt fine. It was my groin that was on fire. I moaned, "Suck me. I want to come. I'm close...oh...close...suck me, Max."

I opened my mouth to ask again and he sealed his mouth around the end of my shaft. His lips closing, wet, sucking perfectly. He was so big, so in control and so careful, making love to me unlike the other times His mouth was firm and moist and moving with deliberate slowness. There was nothing hurried or thoughtless about Max's lovemaking. His gentleness threw me further off course into new uncharted territory. This Max was tender and teasing and kind.

I pulsed and his mouth released me. His fingers squeezed and I came long and slow and quaking and willing into his hand as his eyes found mine. A flood of warmth spilled onto the sheets and for the first time with a partner, I came silently, my heart full to bursting.

"Oh that's so good, isn't it? So good." Cum, wet and warm, spurted under me and against me. Max's mouth hovered open and feathering on my lips, which were suddenly itchy with the need to press into him. I leaned up, licking him, and our breath, our mouths, our heat mingled.

I swear I hear him whisper, "I love you, Michael."

I was high. I had to be. "Did you just..."

He smiled and I had to close my eyes. "What are you so afraid of?"

Him. This. Everything. "What are we all afraid of, Max?"

We lay there, kissing, holding each other, little rippled aftershocks chasing tremors across my cooling flesh. He reached down and flipped the covers back. They drifted down and settled on our spooned bodies, comforting and cocooning us as the room brightened and fulfillment weakened me. His words weakened me. Our bodies relaxed. Cum dried on the bed and in our hair and on our hands.

And I slid swiftly into sleep.

* * * *

I opened my eyes and it was a quarter to nine. Wow, it was bright. I squinted painfully against the white light of day. My bedroom smelled delightfully of coffee and not so delightfully of sweat and dirty socks. A fine layer of dust coated my nightstand and made my lamp furry. I should wipe down the furniture. Maybe do laundry. Max's room across the hall had a perfectly made bed, the blanket tight enough to bounce the prerequisite quarter, shoes in a neat friendless row, everything ordered and properly placed. It was without...spirit. I couldn't imagine living like that. Even so, seeing the room through his eyes brought home the fact that I was a bit of a slob.

I stumbled, still sore from my stitches and groggy from the codeine and the sleep—and Max's revelation—to the shower. Max must have gotten up right after we'd made love and fixed coffee and then, if God was merciful and loved me at all, I hoped he'd left to track down the mysterious bow hunter. Maybe it was Tony who would do that? I didn't know. I didn't care. I wanted some time to think through what had happened last night. This morning. Heck, the last few days. More immediately: I wanted to wash. The ER doc told me I could bathe but not to get the site wet. How the hell I was supposed to wash my entire body without getting my backside wet? I'd improvise. I was taking a shower, stitches be damned.

I was in the stream of hot water, soaking, when the bathroom door flew open and Max came in, demanding, "Hey, are you supposed to get your stitches wet? I think you're supposed to wait twenty-four hours."

"I'm fine. I have a band-aid." I'd taped it down. Then I'd taped the tape down.

Good thing my ass wasn't hairy. "You didn't have a problem earlier —"

"Because I had stitches a few years ago in Afghanistan and I remember I wasn't supposed to get them wet....not that there was much chance to get them wet..."

I scrubbed my hair, wondering if he wanted me to ask, and then figured he did. "I didn't know you'd been—" The curtain slid to the side with a yank and I jumped, yelping, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I want to make sure your bandage isn't loose." Max was dressed in fresh clothes neat, correct, handsome and about to get a wet washcloth in the face.

"I'm. *Fine*." I jerked the curtain closed again. "I'm an adult, Max. I've got it under control."

"You're really crabby in the morning, aren't you? I thought you said that you were a morning person." The bathroom door clicked shut. Where the hell was the real Max and who was this.... pod person rambling around my apartment fucking with my coffee maker?

Frowning, I rinsed the shampoo from my hair. I should have asked him again about his tour of duty. I'd missed this opportunity to learn more about him and it was oddly disappointing.

By the time I had shaved, brushed my teeth, combed my hair and dressed Max was sitting at my table reading a paperback and listening to the news. He was munching on Lucky Charms. Perched on his nose was a pair of rectangular, tortoise shell glasses. He was...attractively older, but just enough, and approachable. The hard planes of his face seemed smoother.

Not to mention how hot he looked in glasses. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"I am working. I'm protecting you." He pushed his glasses up. Something had changed between us and I flushed. He smiled calmly. This was too easy for him. Why was it so hard for me? I was the outgoing one.

"Well, if that's what you want to call it, who am I to argue?" I grabbed the biggest mug I had and filled it, leaving plenty of room for hazelnut creamer. I snagged the bottle from the fridge door.

Max pointed at the creamer with his spoon. "You drink that? That's not good for you. It's loaded with fat and calories and chemicals."

Had I asked for an opinion? I eyed the Lucky Charms and raised my brow, then dumped an inch of creamer into my mug. "Any news on Laura?"

"She's stable and resting comfortably. I spoke with Sam earlier. He's still receiving threatening emails. Hemmi admitted last night that he's received a few anonymous ones."

"He didn't say anything because he's sixteen and not a crybaby, right? I bet he said 'I thought I could handle it.' "

Max nodded. I saw that he'd picked up my Tad Williams novel from the other night. It was an intimate gesture not lost on me. He was seeing what I liked. He kept talking and I attended. "Sam's not bringing him in until second period. You're off for the morning, right?"

"Yup." I tasted my super fine, super sweet, chemical coffee and considered adding a drop more creamer.

"What's your plan?"

"Read, grade papers, catch up on email. Fret about the show. Apply bacitracin to my hiney."

He flashed that dimple, but abruptly sobered. "I want you to be careful. No. Vigilant. I believe you to be at risk. I'd prefer you staying either here in the dorm, more specifically in your apartment, or with me."

"Max. I don't need to hide or be babysat. I'm fine. I will stay here as you've asked because I think it's important for you to keep focused on Hemmi. I won't be an asshole. I promise."

"Thank you. Look, I need to talk to Bibby about issuing another dorm check," he said grimly. "Colton wouldn't know the terrain, your schedules, or have access to any buildings. He isn't fitting the profile for me, regardless of what Sam thinks."

"Max, what are you going to do?"

He said calmly, "My job is to protect. I'll protect Hemmi, you or anyone else who is at risk or in danger."

Cover Me

"So, what's your plan? You're armed, Max. You're not going to shoot someone? One of the boys?" I couldn't wrap my thoughts around it.

"Someone shot you. Someone punctured Laura's lung with a hunting weapon. That person waited for us in the dark with malice and forethought, Michael. He shot you. If you hadn't worn that...ridiculous...toaster," he fumbled in his lecture, my toaster had that effect on everyone it seemed, "you could have been killed."

I tried to ease him. "Max, I told you. I promise not to leave the dorm without you. Promise. I need to be at the theatre at six. You can walk with me to dinner at five. I have to meet with Laura's understudy at some point this afternoon, but we can do that here." I dreaded dealing with Shelby or any other understudy two days before curtain. This was going to be an uphill battle. Did she even know the lines? Did any of them? "Look, I'll stay in and catch up on....cleaning." Yuck.

Max looked around briefly. "Probably not a bad idea."

I threw my napkin at his head.

Email: To Cast and Crew of Guys and Dolls

From: Mr. Finn

Shelby Tyler will take Laura's part in the play. I expect everyone to make this transition as successful as possible for her. Tonight is tech rehearsal. I'll see you all at the theatre at six. Outdoor club is cancelled. Get your homework done.

Mr. Finn

L.B. Gregg

To: B. Danvers (headofschool@daltonprep.org)

From: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Bibby~

If you have time today, we should probably discuss postponing the show.

Finn

Chapter Nine

It was a productive day at my place. I took my medicine then I cleaned. I vacuumed a little, but that didn't last long. I managed to pull five bucks worth of change from my couch. I sprayed the cushions with Lysol and then Febreeze. I lit a bayberry candle and changed my sheets. I cleaned the bathroom. I broke down and, finally, I dusted. My mother would have fallen over from the shock. Sore, I sat on my tender ass, popped one more codeine, propped my feet on the coffee table and graded papers.

At two, Eric showed up at my door. "Mr. Finn?"

I let him in. "What'd you need, Eric? Shouldn't you be in class?"

He nodded, his dark hair falling over one eye. "I lost my iPod in the couch earlier and I came back before fifth period. I found these in the couch."

He handed me a Dalton Prep lanyard dangling with keys. "Okay, I'll make an announcement—"

"No, Mr. Finn. Look." Eric flipped the keys one by one and I looked closer. Each key had a tiny letter scratched into the surface. E, W, J, B, F, H. I glanced at Eric who waited with patience. He knew exactly what he had found—the missing keys. F? That had to be mine.

"Let's see." I slid the key into my doorknob and presto change-o, it worked. "You found these in the couch?"

"Yes sir. Just now. My iPod was in there too. I knew these were room keys. Someone has been collecting them."

"I see that. Any idea who?"

"No. Not really. I've been in this dorm since I was a freshman and sometimes shit goes missing, but this is disturbing. Someone is going into our rooms."

"I'll take care of it." There were a few extra on the ring. "Thanks Eric. We'll get this handled and get the locks changed."

Eric left and I called Bibby's office, leaving a message on her voice mail. At least I had the keys now.

Eventually, the late nights of the past few days caught up with me and I sprawled face down on my fresh bed. That was, naturally, how Max found me. I woke to a hand shaking my shoulder. I smacked my mouth and turned my head to find a dry spot. My eyes, heavy, fluttered shut. Had that been drool?

"Michael. You're snoring."

My eyes popped back open. It was dark outside. "Sorry." I was scrambled. Like an egg. What day? Where did I need to be? I needed caffeine. My bladder was full. I was never taking codeine again. "What?"

"Michael." Max shook me again, quite hard and so unnecessarily.

"Quit it. I'm awake."

"Then get up. We need to go to dinner and then rehearsal."

Rehearsal. My life clicked into place. I shook my head and sat up. The clock flashed five after five. "I fell asleep," I said inanely.

Max chuckled, watching me with a warm look. "I see that."

"I'm out of it. I'm off my schedule." What was I, four?

"How's your butt?"

How was my butt? I flexed and clenched. "I think it's fine. How's yours?"

"You're a goof. Let me see your stitches."

That woke me. "No. Why do you want to look? Go away. I need to piss and go to dinner. I'll check it there."

He grinned full out and it was extraordinary. "Really. You'll check at dinner? That

I want to see.”

“You think you’re so clever.”

“I know I am.”

“I’m fine.” I insisted. “I have stitches. I haven’t severed a limb, for crying out loud.”

By the time we finished dinner, I had three cokes, a bowl of Chicken Chow Mein and a cookie. I was more coherent, but not operating at maximum capacity. I tried to shake the fog from my brain, but the last few days were taking their toll. I couldn’t seem to wake up.

I needed to concentrate on the show. I had an understudy to prep and two days until opening night. No pressure. Our unprepared actress, Shelby, had rowed in a regatta on the Housatonic earlier. This was precisely why I didn’t choose rowers as leads in any production. They were hardcore jocks, not artists. Sports came first, therefore she couldn’t get back to campus until five thirty. She was coming into the play cold. Literally. She walked in at five til six with a cup of cocoa and blue-tinged lips.

“Mr. Finn. I want you to know that I have almost all my lines down and most of the dances. Well parts of some from act two.” *Shit*. “But I’m sure I can learn them by tomorrow!”

I clenched my teeth. “You’ve been at every rehearsal, Shelby. You’re supposed to know the part.” These kids.

“I know most of it!”

Well, that would have to do. This wasn’t Broadway. We’d make it work.

“Hey, Mr. Finn.” Hemmi and his father joined us at center stage. They were followed by two burly men I assumed Sam had brought with him from LA. They certainly looked like two bodyguards from central casting. They were massive. Thick necked. The pair wore non-descript dark clothing and stood identically with their big arms folded across their equally large chests.

I paid the bodyguards no mind. They were furniture to me at this point. We had forty-eight hours to get this show together with a brand new Adelaide, which was one of the most important roles in the entire play. *Shit*. I eyed Shelby. At least she could sing

well. If any other lead had needed to be replaced this close to curtain, we'd be in huge trouble.

"Hemmi. How are you feeling? You ready?"

Hemmi nodded, "I can do this."

Sam shook my hand magnificently; his strangely unlined face and bottled tan striking in the theatre lights. His hair looked thin. I'd keep that to myself.

"Mike. I brought my reinforcements—"

"That's fine, but let's not announce it." He was a nut. Max came up stealthily and spoke to the thick necks. They all exited, stage right, as proper extras should.

"Right!" Sam laughed boisterously. "I'm going to sit in the back row and watch. That all right, Finn?"

If he offered one single direction, I was going to explode. "Absolutely. We're experiencing some casting changes, of course—"

He clapped his hands heartily. "Well, the show must go on!"

"Er. Yes."

The girls made a ring around Hemmi, asking questions about Laura, and shooting the interested and hopeful looks of the jail bait persuasion at Sam Sparks—noted actor and ingénue connoisseur. Surely seventeen and eighteen were out of his realm? He had to be...fifty? I did not need more stress.

"All right ladies, gentlemen, we're running this from beginning to end with sound and light cues tonight. It's tech rehearsal. Shelby: fake it. If you don't know a line, you say 'line' and we feed it to you. Do not break rhythm or character. That goes for everyone. No awkward silences. Keep going. Now, go get into costume. No makeup tonight." What else was there to say? "You have five minutes."

The actors fled.

Max lurked behind a black curtain in the shadows, waiting in the wings.

"Jesse!" Our stage manager ran down the steep center aisle from the back of the house and joined me on the stage. He was such a tiny boy, that one—barely five two and in the twelfth grade. Smart as blazes, but he was no actor.

"We're ready, Mr. Finn. The programs arrived, the props are set. We're good to

go.” He gave me a thumbs up. That kid was natural management material. Thank God.

I glanced up at the booth. Bangor, our lighting and sound guy, waved lazily. I smiled back. Techies. Reliable and decent and without ego. They were a breath of fresh air. I tried again to shake the haze from my mind, but afternoon naps were treacherous. I wouldn’t be back on my game until tomorrow.

I drank some more coke and headed for another pit stop before we started. “Jesse. Call places. I’ll meet you in the booth.”

* * * *

We limped through the first few scenes, Jesse calling cues and the kids trying their best to shove Shelby through her paces. She had all Adelaide’s big scenes down, but the small blocking and throw away lines were a total loss. Not to mention her accent. Adelaide was no Valley Girl.

Jesse, Bangor and I perched on high stools in the narrow soundproof booth at the back of the house. We could call cues, talk on the headsets with the backstage crew, eat, and make derogatory comments freely without anyone hearing. We watched through the wide window, the sound filtering in from round speakers imbedded in the ceiling. It was dark in the house, the stage lights bright and the costumes even brighter. I couldn’t see Max, but Sam’s fat head was directly below me.

Something was weird. I couldn’t put a finger on why, but the house looked darker than usual, had a light blo—

“Mr. Finn?” I turned. A cute little freshman let herself in meekly. She had a large white box with *Smithfield Print Shop* embossed on the lid. “The programs arrived. Do you want to look?”

“Sure. Thanks Marcy.” She placed the white printer’s box carefully on the table beside me, making sure not to disturb the boys. I was ornamental at this stage in the game, as this was their third show together with Bangor handling the tech cues and Jesse running the entire show. The boys were large and in charge. Literally in Bangor’s case. I was going to miss them both when they graduated.

I popped another coke for the evening. My fourth. Or fifth? I was going to be sick, but I craved the sugar and caffeine. I'd regret it later but for now it was necessary.

I snagged a program and leafed through it absently. *Guys and Dolls* was artfully splashed across the cover in cheerful lettering. I should be paying closer attention, but the show practically ran itself until Shelby came tripping along on stage. We were good here.

They'd done a nice job with the playbill. Lots of photos of the kids during rehearsal, the dance captain looked fatigued in a few shots, and the bios were suitably funny. Some of these were far too long for the part of second gangster on the left, but an actor's ego always needed a good stroke. I looked up to gaze upon the thinning hair of Sam Sparks.

My eyes fell on Adelaide stumbling through her aptly named lament. It was wince-worthy. Though, surely, the singing was adequate.

Why had I chosen her for understudy? She was inappropriate. What had I been thinking? When she'd auditioned, I knew that there was no way I could give her the part. Her range was all wrong for Sarah Brown and she wasn't brassy enough for Adelaide. Not a drop of comic flair. I sighed. Because Shelby was only a sophomore, the older girls were given the remaining roles and she'd been stuck as an understudy. That's how it worked. Underclassmen were understudies. I glanced at the two boys sitting next to me. Hemmi's understudy was no more able to take on the role than Laura's had been. Not one of those kids was ready, willing or able to take on the responsibility this close to opening, or at all.

I sighed, flipping to the cast list. It wasn't as if I could make any changes at this point, we'd have to insert a note, or make an announcement.

I blinked, confused and scanned the cast list. What in the world? Each and every major cast member's name, from Sarah Brown, to Sky Masterson, to Nicely Nicely, was incorrect. I read it twice, then a third time. All the actors' names had been replaced with that of their understudy. That was weird.

I had an itch between my shoulders. Who would do such a thing? A burst of caffeine and fear flared in my gut and the lingering fog of sleep evaporated. The puzzle

L.B. Gregg

of the last few days arranged itself into a clear picture and I knew exactly who would do such a thing – who had access to keys, to the dorm, to my room.

I stared numbly at the playbill, wondering how to signal Max. The lights flickered momentarily and I peered out onto the safety of the stage, the kids singing and smiling and giving it their all, and then those lights snapped out as a curtain of darkness descended on the theatre.

To: Finn (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

From: Bibby Danvers (headofschool@daltonprep.org)

Michael~

I've spoken with the Board of Directors and given the increased level of danger surrounding Hemmingway, we've decided that the safety of our student body is paramount. We're postponing Guys and Dolls until this situation is under control. I know this comes as a disappointment to you and to the cast and crew. Let's shoot for Thanksgiving week.

Bibby

To: Hemmi (sparksh@daltonprep.org)

From: Anonymous (deerhunter@yahoo.com)

You can run but you can't hide, Sparks.

Chapter Ten

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jesse shrieked. "Turn the lights back on, asshole!"

Bangor hit me hard and without mercy, like a big fat mean kid from Maine. He struck me brutally from the right, knocking me off the stool, and wrestled me to the floor. I didn't have a single second to brace myself before his attack. I couldn't see a damn thing because it was dark as tar in the building. Not one emergency light shone. Hell, everyone in the theatre was making noise so I hadn't heard him coming either. From outside our work space, the auditorium filled with commotion as pandemonium broke out. I heard crashes and shouts from over the speakers.

Pinned, two hundred forty pounds of Maine-iac on my chest, I swiped at his head and made contact with something that protruded from his face. A mask of some sort.

"Get off me, Donald," I said as calmly and rationally as I could manage.

He gripped my wrists. "Mr. Finn, shut the fuck up." He cold-cocked me in the face, and my head cracked against the tile floor. A burst of light, pain radiated from my jaw and into my cheek, and then I tasted tin.

"Bangor?"

"You move and I'll fucking kill him, you understand, Jesse?"

"What? Jesus Christ! What's going on?" Jesse's voice grew uncertain and weak.

Something wickedly sharp pressed against my neck. I instinctually flinched from the blade pricking my skin and Bangor ordered, "Get up."

How was I supposed to do that with a weapon at my neck? How could he see? We

were in absolute darkness. I struggled, my head swimming, my stomach rebelling, and somehow managed to stand without slicing an artery. "Okay, Bangor. Take it easy."

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up." His words were high, tight, and seething. Spittle misted my cheek and nose. I was unable to recoil, his grip bruising my arm.

From the house, kids called out to one another, uncertain, but no longer frightened. Inside the booth, silence and fear reigned. Bangor's breath hit me in bubblegum scented bursts. I began to sweat waiting for him to make his move. Jesse was stone quiet on his stool.

Bangor. Maine. A wealthy kid from the back woods. Did he hunt? He did. He loved that damn *Predator* movie. We had so many kids on meds in the school; I didn't know if he was one. ADD? Depression? Something?

This gentle, sweet, placid exterior disguised an angry, dangerous boy. Not one of us had suspected him. He'd hidden right under our noses. Living in the dorm, walking with us to dinner. Hiking. Hell. He'd been stalking Hemmi the entire time, easily hiding behind our fear of the mysterious and grown up Colton Dobos. Bangor had been upstaged in every venue by Hemmingway Sparks: attractive, universally adored, personable, strong, talented and the biggest crime of all – only a junior.

From somewhere in the theatre came a flicker of yellow flame as a resourceful student with a forbidden lighter proceeded to flick-a-bic. Point violation or not, it was hope against the darkness. I fervently prayed Bangor wouldn't hurt anyone.

"Michael?" Max's voice, calm and soothing, echoed overhead.

I couldn't answer. Bangor dragged me to the door by my hair. Wincing, I put one foot nervously in front of the other, hoping I wouldn't stumble. "You don't say a word, Mr. Finn. You hear me? I don't want that Marine following us."

I was silent as the door snicked open.

Jessie tried one last time. "What the fuck, man? Put the lights back on."

Bangor hauled me out of the booth. I tripped on the raised threshold and a hideous burn sliced the right side of my collarbone. It went deep. I felt an edge hit bone. I wrenched back, hissing and biting my mouth to keep from yelling, slapping a hand up to cover my wound and meeting the flat of his blade instead. Blood soaked my hand

instantly. Bangor repositioned his knife to the back of my neck. "Did you get a little boo-boo, Finn?"

His sinister giggle made the hair stand on the back of my neck.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. He was crazy. This boy, this big, ungainly, helpful, reliable, overlooked boy was fearless and prepared to filet me. The slice he'd given me could have easily been my throat. I'd have bled out before Max could get to me. Bangor shoved me again and I fell down the first step, tearing my too long hair in his hand. My face throbbed from the blow, my ears were ringing and blood seeped through my fingers.

"Hemmi?" I heard Max call from the stage, in that calm, detached professionalism I'd come to respect. His weapon would be readily available and seriously useful right about now.

"I'm here Mr. D." I watched his light bob across the stage, stopping when a figure – it had to be Max – joined him.

"Turn your light out." The lighter went out. That would have been a smart tactic if there had been someone in theatre actually after Hemmi at this stage in the game. Max was anything but distracted from protecting the kid. I was proud of him and sad.

My shirt was soaked and the pain... my chest burned like a motherfucker. That arrow had nothing on a knife wound.

My head swam as blood and adrenaline and ice flowed through my veins. Bangor's beefy paw gripped me by my neck and he forced me down the next step. The point of his weapon trailed down to my shoulder blade, snagging my shirt and splitting it. Cool sharp metal teased my skin delicately.

"We're goin' down these stairs. You watch your step, understand?" Lighters continued to flicker. My eyes strained to adjust. I could make out the edge of the theatre seats and the railing to my left. I grabbed it.

Noiselessly, I willed Jesse to get the lights back on, the bodyguards to wake up and my neck to stop bleeding. I needed a plan, but Bangor had every advantage. He was catlike in the dark and the rest of us were blind. He outweighed me by seventy pounds at least and he held that knife like he knew exactly how to gut his kill.

We made our way down then next few steps.

“Mr. Finn?” Voices called out alternately. I heard Sam’s distinctive Hollywood voice as well.

“Can you please get the lights?” he called politely.

Bigger flashes lit the house as students remembered their cell phones. It was a festival of technology as radiant green lightening burst in small rectangles along the stage and across the seats. Young faces were eerily illuminated; unfortunately they made our progress quicker.

“Don’t answer them.” Bangor whispered wetly against my ear. His thick lips brushed the shell and I tried not to flinch. His mask—night vision goggles, I was sure—smacked my cheek.

We were almost to the emergency exit, now a blacker space against the blackness at the bottom of the stairs. I bet Bangor had disabled every goddamn light in the building and, more than likely, he’d tampered with the alarm as well. His knife nicked me again. *Christ, it hurt!* I pressed on my collarbone with the heel of my hand, warm blood dripped down my sternum. My shirt was sticky.

A blinding explosion of white blasted my retinas. I reared back, right into the point of Bangor’s knife and then jerked forward as it slid into my skin. I blinked, twisting away from the brightness as well as the pain of another deep laceration. Bangor yelped, ripped the mask from his face and flung it aside—he’d worn night vision goggles with some sort of chin and head strap.

Everyone stood wincing in house light. Jessie must have felt around in the booth until he found the switch. Good boy.

A scream pierced the theatre as someone, a girl by the decibel range, spotted us. My chest was covered in blood, but I was busily scanning the stage for Max. Before I found him, Bangor threw me down the last couple steps. I hit the railing, grabbing with one hand still clamped to my chest, and then that fat bastard tackled me. We crashed down the aisle; my chin collided with something sharp, snapping my teeth into my tongue, the impact vibrating through my skull with a dry hollowness that made me faint. A surge of exquisite pain, and my mouth filled thickly.

Fuck. His weight squeezed the air from my lungs, both hands trapped beneath me. I struggled, spitting blood, and gagging. "Let me up, Donald. Everyone can see us now."

"Good. They can watch."

Watch? I couldn't move, although I tried. I couldn't take a deep breath and every part of me hurt as I lay in a pool of my own blood. "Let me the fuck up, Bangor."

Bangor's fist curled into my hair. He tipped my chin back roughly and that knife graced my throat. I grappled his beefy forearm with both hands, trying desperately to keep him from cutting my neck open. There was so much noise around us, but it was my breathing, the pounding in my ears of my heart and Jesse, screaming for Max—*Please Mr. Douglas! Please he's going to kill him!*—that I heard clearly.

I watched the kids sift their way through the rows of seats, coming along the stage to the orchestra pit, everyone seeking the source of this great drama. I didn't want them here. They shouldn't see this.

"Everyone back!" Max's voice rang through the theatre. The kids froze.

Bangor started to laugh and I nearly vomited as his groin pushed into my backside. "Mr. Faggy Finnegan. Do you want me to slit your throat right here?"

I stayed absolutely still. I hardly dared to breathe.

Max came around the corner by the stage, his gaze taking us in quickly and efficiently and calmly. He appeared emotionless, but I knew otherwise. In his hand, he held a gun.

"What are you doing, son?"

"Don't come near me!"

Bangor kept hauling me back by my hair, tearing it in his meaty fist. It was long enough for him to get a good handful. I should have cut it but I'd always been too vain to do so. I had no choice but to be yanked back onto my knees, execution style. Max realized this as well. He grew very still, his eyes flickered to mine. Without a doubt, he was going to shoot this kid.

And I wanted him to.

The boy tugged harder. I tipped all the way back, so far that every cord and tender

spot of my neck felt strained. I fought, trying to keep him from drawing his blade across my throat. I was strong but his insanity lent him inhuman strength. I could see his mean red face, his freckles and his downy whiskers, his wild eyes oddly framed by the imprint of his mask.

His breath was sweet—like a child's.

I closed my eyes.

Pop! Pop!

The boy's body jerked violently and I wrenched that arm from my throat, shoving hard, as the knife gave me one last painful slash on the inside of my left wrist. I scooted away as Bangor tipped back, collapsing into the aisle.

It was silent. It must have been the white noise in my mind, because I'm sure that the building was alive with noise and light and confusion—screams of terror or surprise or regret. The adults were certainly busy moving the students back from the chaos. I didn't know. I leaned back against the wall, closing my eyes to the mess that was Bangor, pressing my right hand to my wrist and my left to my chest. I guess I was going into shock; there was so much blood and most all of it was mine. My face throbbed. My back bled steadily against the fine painted surface of the auditorium wall.

Max, still as only the center of the storm can be, knelt down. "Michael?" I heard his voice loud and clear. His gray patient stare came into focus, right where I needed him to be. He carefully touched my chin, my lip, my wrist, reassuring me, or maybe himself, and then he winced, taking in the deep wound I knew must be pretty ugly high on my chest. "Michael. You're okay. You're going to need a few more stitches, but you're all right."

Only a few more. I tried to smile, but it hurt. "I know, Max, but I really need a shower."

"Sure. Shower. We'll cover all your stitches with Saran Wrap, right?"

"Thank you. I'm just going to sit here until the ambulance comes. You called one, yeah? Max, could you cover him up for me?" It was a strange conversation, but it was as much as I could manage.

Max nodded, turning away to call out, "Jesse, call 911!" His voice came from a little

distance, although he was right in front of me, still kneeling. For some reason his shirt was gone, his hands pressing me hard, painfully.

"That really hurts, man, could you maybe ease up?"

"You look like shit, Michael. What the hell did he hit you with? A brick? Your whole face is bruised."

"His fists. They were like dinner plates. He had those goggles on and I couldn't see a goddamn thing. He threw me down the stairs. I don't know, Max, he just kept hitting and slicing. I had no idea he was so...angry."

"No one did. It's done, everyone is all right. No one got hurt. Keep that as your focus."

"Well, I think I got hurt..."

"You're fine," he insisted and I had to smile, which hurt as my lip split back open. "Don't do that; you're bleeding again."

"Right." I closed my eyes, leaned into the wall, or maybe he leaned me into the wall, and waited as the noise in the theatre came in and then went out again. "Thank you, Max."

At last the extras arrived. The police, Bibby, the ambulance.

They trundled me onto a gurney. I was tired and cold, but I was mumbling demands to Max. "Make sure everyone changes out of their costumes."

"Michael. Could you just go get sewn up? We have everything under control."

They wheeled me away, alone, covered in blankets, out into the night. I watched the stars as I bumped along the sidewalk, the two EMTs chatting. Pinpricks of starlight and a hard lit moon, the night blue black and free of clouds—it all kept me company. Not a single moment of this evening had the clarity of this November sky. I wouldn't have ever believed that boy capable of such a killing rage but I was damned glad Max hadn't flinched when putting Bangor down like the rabid dog he was.

Maybe there was a little Gregory Peck in him after all.

"Hold still."

"I'm trying. You're really wrapping that on snug, aren't you?"

"You can't get these wet, Michael. It's bad enough we're doing this right now; you should have stayed at the hospital, so quit whining." Max continued to seal my chest in Saran Wrap, unrolling it over my shoulder, under my armpit and around my back. He was trying to cover the stitches. It all hurt. I held on to his strong shoulder with one hand to keep myself upright. Tired didn't begin to describe my fatigue as I watched him in the soft light of the bathroom, the gray in his hair blending into ash. I gently sifted my fingers through the silky strands as he tended to me. They were so short.

I hissed each time he crossed the roll of plastic over my collar bone. That fucker hurt. Even with the Novocaine, it hurt. "Just hurry up. I want to hose off and go to sleep."

"I should tape this down," he mumbled to himself. I stifled a yawn.

Again I'd taken codeine. A lot of codeine. It was four in the morning, I was still covered in blood and I was weary. I wouldn't glance in the mirror again, once having been more than enough. Battered. My lips, my left eye, my nose were all bruised and split and painful. It would all heal with time...ice...Motrin... The lacerations would leave scars but I refused to be scarred by the experience. I'd also refused to stay 'overnight' in the hospital. With my luck, they'd have kicked me out at nine in the morning and charged me for the whole night anyway. Better to be here, with Max, where I could sleep without being disturbed.

"Let me get your wrist, too, then we can get in." He proceeded to wrap me like yesterday's leftovers as we stood, naked, on the thick cotton mat in front of the shower door. Max bent and carefully kissed the vulnerable skin on the inside of my wrist. "God. You were lucky."

"I know." I choked, my fingers now caressing the firm skin at his nape. I wanted to kiss that pale band, but my mouth was too sore. I didn't feel like bending. Or moving.

"He almost killed you."

"I know. I'm sorry...for everything...that the entire mess turned out that way. I never thought it could be one of the boys in my dorm. And...I don't know...I was

worried you wouldn't get there in time. That you'd have to see me—"

"But I did get there. I won't let anything happen to you." Max tossed the roll of plastic wrap onto the counter, took my hand, and led me into the hot spray of the shower. There was enough room for us both if we pressed together, which we did. The hot water soaked me, easing the ache and washing the sweat and blood from my back and belly. Max carefully soaped my hair, his fingers massaging my scalp. I rested my forehead against his shoulder and let him take care of me. "You know, last night we searched every dorm room looking for that bow and it was in the theatre the entire time."

"Where'd they find it?"

"In the props closet. Tony took everything as evidence—like Bangor's computer. I'm sure there will be plenty there, Michael, plenty no one knew about. Plenty more to destroy that kid's parents."

"It seems crazy that he went over the edge because of the show, you know?"

"He was over the edge long before this if he was bow hunting for you and sneaking into everyone's rooms. He nailed an animal to the wall. He was damaged. Beyond repair. He tried to kill Laura, you, and eventually he was going to finish what he started with Hemmi."

"I know. What a waste, though. Those poor kids tonight. Jesus, Bibby's going to have her hands full for the next few days."

"But you won't because you won't be there. You'll be here." Max said flatly.

"I'll be here." Recuperating. "I...I was proud of you, Max."

His hands moved over my body, skipping the parts encased in plastic. "For once, you were the right kind of distraction. I couldn't stop looking for you and I knew, as soon as you didn't answer when I called, when I couldn't hear you bitching at everyone there to get the lights on and to stay calm, when you weren't looking after all those kids in that great way you do, that something was really wrong. It scared the shit out of me."

"It scared the shit out of me, too." He turned me around to wash my back. "I'd do yours, Max, but I'm too tired."

"Is water getting in?"

"I don't know. If it is you can use a hair dryer on my stitches. I'm not getting out until I'm clean."

"I don't own a hair dryer. My hair is an inch and half long, Michael."

I smiled, my shoulders shaking with fatigue and humor. "Are you all right, Max? Was this like...some other time?" I wanted to know.

"No. I knew you were in trouble. No regrets." He shut the water off, kissing my neck and holding me gently into the hard muscles of his body. "I'm not going to let you go, you get that?"

"I do. Same here." I squeezed my eyes shut and let him hold me as the water began to chill on our skin. "I want to...be with you. I've never had anything that felt like this." I didn't know how else to say it. I never had before.

We left the shower and he carefully dried me off. I let him lead me down the hall, all rich chocolate brown paint and bold, wide wood flooring, down to his small bedroom. His house was warm and cozy, and exactly like Max. His bed was big and soft and smelling of dryer sheets as we curled around each other, my head on his shoulder, his arms around me, and my leg over his. Snug and safe, I fell asleep to the rhythmic sound of Max's breath in my ear and his heart steady and strong beneath my cheek. His words echoed inside my heart. "I want to be with you, too."

From: Evan (evfin@snet.com)

To: Mikey (finneganm@daltonprep.org)

Ok, so at what point are you going to tell me what the hell is going on? I told mom you finally have a boyfriend. Just kidding.

But not really.

And don't ever say I'm not a good matchmaker, Mikey. You owe me.

E.

Cover Me

We hope you enjoyed *Cover Me*, the third book in L.B. Gregg's *Men of Smithfield* erotica series. Be sure you read the previous books in the series, *Gobsmacked* and *Happy Ending*, as well as our full selection of male-male erotica at Aspen Mountain Press!

Stop by www.AspenMountainPress.com and sign up for our newsletter where you'll receive information about new releases, specials, contests and more. While at Aspen, browse our virtual bookstore and pick up more of L.B. Gregg's Men of Smithfield tales.