



MEN OF SMITHFIELD

Happy Ending

L.B. GREGG

Aspen Mountain Press

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Aspen Mountain Press

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Aurora CO 80047-3543

www.AspenMountainPress.com

First published by Aspen Mountain Press April, 2009

www.AspenMountainPress.com

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ISBN: 978-1-60168-203-1

Released in the United States of America

Editor: Celina Summers

Cover artist: Celia Kyle

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To my imaginary, invisible, internet friends~thanks for the nice-nice.

For Tumperkin and Po.

Friday, June 15th 2:00 PM

It amazes me that they'd heat a table already covered in warm, thick cotton sheeting. It was summer. What a complete waste of resources. I slid between the soft nubby flannel, naked as a jay and glad for the air conditioning. I wasn't glad for the unfortunate new age music piped in through the ceiling or the cloying fragrance of lavender. Or the artful décor. Some sort of rag treatment idiocy marred the walls, presumably to give 'depth.' They ought to just paint it all blue and be done, but this was a spa and it wasn't decorated to please me—at least not with all those lavender pillar candles flickering on their tasteful glass dishes. The smell made the inside of my nose tickle and I sneezed loudly into the empty room.

I'd been in this room so many times that I could see it with my eyes closed. Done up in gold and muted sage green, swaths of amber silk hung from slender rods to pool in designer heaps on the floor. It was supposed to be luxurious. I knew better. It was expensive. It was someone's imagining of tasteful and unassuming but it lacked both personality and character. Boring. Like the glass of water with its fancy slice of cucumber floating on the top, it had no flavor yet I was supposed to be impressed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure this shit out. Quinn would have loved it. He'd have enjoyed the hushed footsteps of the massage therapists and estheticians as they all but wafted down the carpeted hallways gliding toward their next deeply relaxed client.

It was such bullshit.

I waited for Linda and tried not to sneeze. Two p.m. every Friday. Two o'clock. P.M. Standard. Weekly. No exceptions. How difficult could it be to arrive on time?

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I looked at my watch. It was 2:04.

I didn't want to be obnoxious, but I was getting annoyed with Linda. She should be here working my shoulders and neck. Twelve months she'd been trying to ease the strain of my job and all those other disasters this year had wrought. Nikki's death. Quinn taking off for the Keys and making me buy out his half of the house.

Molly.

I flipped over onto my stomach, shifted around to find a comfortable spot, adjusted myself and shut my eyes. My forehead rested in that hole covered in cotton toweling. It reeked of lavender. Why did everything in the goddamn room have to stink of it? I opened my mouth to breathe. I always meant to complain about the smell, but by the time Linda was through working out the kinks in my back it didn't seem that important. It shouldn't seem important now. This was yet another indication that I was stressed out and irritated.

Irritated that it was currently 2:05 and still no sign of Linda.

The music was getting to me. Who would choose this shit? Birds warbled over Celtic fiddles and bagpipes and penny whistles and—holy hell, it was giving me a tension headache. A little Dave Matthews would have been appreciated. I was tired and tense and whining to myself. Even I didn't like me right now.

I rolled my shoulders and forced myself to relax by trying that technique Linda said would help. I was skeptical, however I needed to do something productive. I began a slow tensing and releasing of each muscle group in my body in an effort to find my inner tranquility. That wasn't likely, but it would pass the time.

2:07.

I started with my toes. Squeeze. Release. Breathe. Try not to choke on lavender. Squeeze. Release. I worked up my legs. Squeeze. Release. Breathe. I tightened my thighs and clenched my ass tightly as the door opened with a soft click.

I froze, and then relaxed. I imagined my ass deflating under Linda's scrutiny. No matter. I wasn't here to impress her. I was here to pay her for services rendered.

"Mr. Weston?" A soft masculine voice surprised me and I jerked my head from the cushion. Just inside the room, a very attractive young man stood patiently. His dark

hair floated around his head in curls that fell to his shoulders, his light eyes—I couldn't tell if they were gray or a pale blue in this light—were framed by thick, soot-black lashes. He waited politely for me to respond. I tore my gaze from his and took a gander at the rest of him.

Oh, here was a real numbnut. Soft flowing natural fiber pants (I was betting they were hemp) in the shade of mud stopped some few inches above the man's ankles. A snug black muscle shirt with a lotus in lime green hugged his spare, muscular form. His biceps were banded with Celtic knot tattoos. Good God. He was barefoot and wearing a toe ring and had a wide leather strap around his left wrist. A watch? No, it was a cuff.

Great.

"Where's Linda?" I grumbled, my voice rough due to the overabundance of aromatherapy candles. I cleared my throat and watched as the fey boy narrowed his eyes. He was stunning, with sharp features offset by a wide, plump mouth. But who the hell dressed this way? Ali Baba? I dismissed him, sticking my head back in the hole. My shoulders stretched the width of the bed and my big feet dangled from the end. They really needed longer tables. "I'll wait, but tell her get a move on. I've got to be someplace by four."

"Mr. Weston. My name...." His soft voice trailed off into mumbling. "Linda sent... daughter became unexpectedly ill and she had..." I strained to hear his benign, unassuming voice over the plinking of the Celtic bird band.

"What? Speak up." I nestled my head more firmly into the headrest, stretched my shoulders again and took a cleansing breath. What was this kid mumbling about? Linda not here?

"Mr. Weston." Good. Firmer. I could hear now. "Linda was called away. I'm her replacement. If this is uncomfortable for you, we can skip it. Or perhaps you could reschedule for tomorrow?" Was there an edge there? Intriguing. I smiled into flower-scented towels. "I want to make sure that you aren't opposed to having a male therapist."

I snorted. "Uncomfortable? Why would I be uncomfortable? Are you licensed?"

"Of course. We have to be. Some men would prefer a female therapist. That's all.

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I'm more than capable."

Somehow I doubted that. "Fine. I don't care who does it and I don't have a problem. Just get busy. Time's wasting and I paid for the hour."

I closed my eyes and waited to see if he'd leave or get on with it. I knew I could be brusque, but I had things to do and this conversation was pointless—although in all honesty, his ruffled feathers were sort of amusing.

"Is there a scent you prefer?"

"Anything but lavender."

The sound of a cap spinning and then the brush of warm body against my shoulder "I have something you may enjoy. It's organic shea butter and this carries no scent."

"Dandy." Who *cared*? Linda would have just started in. No talking. I didn't shell out seventy-five bucks to chit chat. I had to pick Molly up from the babysitter at four, swing by the office and figure out supper. Then the evening would stretch out before us. Endless. Molly, needy and quiet and small, and me unable to fill the silence.

We'd take Prissy for a walk. That would kill a half hour.

Hot hands slid shea butter over my skin. It soothed my ire almost instantly. That little man was strong. He worked my shoulders and back, his hands gliding smooth and firm, his thumbs digging deep to find the knotted mass that was my constant companion.

"I'm going to do some acupressure here, I think. Let me know if you find this unpleasant." I guess I wasn't supposed to answer because he dug his sadistic, bony thumbs straight into a knot the size of a quarter right in my shoulder blade.

"*Christ!*" I tried to stay loose but my body stiffened, nearly arching off the table. The heavy blankets and piled sheeting dipped low on my spine.

He pressed me back down with only his thumbs. "That's it. Just breathe. And three. Two. One." His soft voice encouraged me, although it was much firmer now and in control. The tight knot of muscle dispersed into a ray of heated release through my back. He rubbed the area briskly and moved on as I sank down gratefully into the blessed comfort of the massage table. "Was that too intense, Mr. Weston? We can work

on a few more. You've got some spots of tension here."

"Keep going." The man's thumbs were magic. I felt that muscle-knot explode. Or implode. Whichever, it was a relief. And for now, the pain was gone. Amazing. I listened as he warmed more shea butter in his hands. What was his name? D something. Daniel. Darrell? I relaxed and let those gifted hands work my left shoulder and smooth on down my biceps. He gently lifted my arm and brought it forward so that it dangled off the top of the table. Linda didn't do this. What was wrong with her? Obviously I didn't know my way around a good massage because this poorly dressed man was exceptionally talented. What kind of guy did this kind of work? Didn't he have a real job? Maybe he was moonlighting. Working his way through law school—

A groan escaped me as strong, capable hands tugged and caressed the muscles down my arm, over my forearm, soothing, kneading and massaging their way to my wrist and then over the tired flesh of my palm. His hand slid onward to rub each one of my fingers. It was oddly intimate. The therapists' palm, for the briefest second, aligned with mine and for a fleeting heartbeat, I was sure I'd grip that hand and hold on despite all effort not to do so. I fought the compulsion to lace my fingers through his. Like a child being led or a lover in a moment of sweetness and trust.

Fuck, this was weird.

But Darrell, or Daniel, or David? *David*. That was his name. David moved on to my other arm, beginning the process all over again until I anticipated the moment he would once more align our palms in some horrible yet hopeful, almost desperate need for human contact. I forced myself to breathe normally and tried to calm my racing heart as David worked my wrist in a slow circle. Manipulating and rotating until his thumbs eased into the meaty flesh of my callused palm, the pads of my fingers, the tender center of my hand. My fingers curled toward his.

And my cock began to take notice. Oh, shit.

I concentrated on the music, now a bladder stimulating combination of falling water and Celtic fiddles and pipes. David efficiently placed my arm back onto the table and worked my shoulder, down the long sweep of my spine, to the small of my back. Able thumbs digging, pressing, swirling—releasing a year's worth of stubborn stress

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from my body. He wasn't taking any prisoners as he ground those muscles into submission. I groaned, stunned by how much my libido seemed to love it.

Shifting into the cushion, I attempted to discreetly ease the bend in my dick, maybe move it into a better position or to rub it harder into the flannel like a teenager fucking his mattress in the dark of the night—or as a grown man would later on this evening remembering an acutely sensual experience. I wondered if a wet dream could happen while awake. I had a feeling I was about to find out.

I started to feel uncomfortable. Started? Hell, I was going to have to turn over at some point in this adventure and then I'd truly feel like a pervert. Here it was: I understood why David made his little speech earlier. He wanted to save me the embarrassment of getting turned on. Shit. This had never happened with Linda.

The covers were gently placed back on my shoulders, and I was gripped with a firm hand on either arm, then the sides of my waist, hips, thighs, and then calves, until the blanket was drawn up and away. My entire left side, from my ass to my toes, was completely bare. The coolness of the air was lost to the heat coursing through my veins as those tantalizing hands kneaded the muscles of my thigh with determination and indisputable skill. I groaned again, utterly turned on. *Oh man*. It was almost like the guy was doing this on purpose. I glanced over my shoulder only to see him caressing warm massage butter into the pale flesh of my inner thigh. His fingertips disappearing in that crevice, almost touching my balls. His hands were smaller than I thought, but broad. His head was bent slightly, curls framed the frown on his brow, and even in that get up, even now noticing that ridiculous earbob—or whatever it was called, a gauge?—I wanted to fuck him. Hard. The words *Boy Butter* began to hum inside me. I plopped my head back down.

Oh, this was not good and completely out of character, even for me. At least this past year.

"Mr. Weston? Everything all right?" David's voice was as sultry as smoke in the room.

I rolled my forehead against the head rest trying to get a grip. "Fine."

"Because we can stop if you're feeling uncomfortable."

"I said *fine*." No surrender.

Screw it, I lifted up and set my dick straight. Why not? It wasn't as if this guy didn't know what kind of equipment we both had—or were interested in. I figured we were on the same page with our sexual orientation. I tried not to stroke off, just got more comfortable and then sprawled, boneless, onto the table. In for a penny; in for a pound. If nothing else, my body was in the game and my mind was off my troubles.

"Keep going."

The massage therapist continued his work by sweeping his slicked hands down my thigh, and along the length of my calf. He worked the shea butter into the sensitive skin of my heel and then over my hypersensitive foot. Thumbs dug into the tender arch and holy mother of pearl, I reared up off the bed in exquisite pain and pleasure as the ache was funneled straight down my body and out through my toes. "My God. Again."

I was panting.

"Excuse me?"

"Do that again. That was amazing." I was starry eyed and breathless.

"Uh. Are you okay?" He seemed worried. This is what he did for chrissake, and now he was alarmed that I was enjoying it?

"Fine. Do it. Again." I was the one paying. I sounded like the dictator of an ill-managed regime. I was having to repeat myself.

His thumbs dug back in, this time harder and my cock filled completely as my toes curled into that spine-tingling force. I couldn't help but press my hips into the bedding, grinding as subtly as possible. Which wasn't subtle at all, I knew, but I couldn't help myself. It was a revelation, this sensitivity in my feet. I had no prior knowledge, no inkling that those big old feet needed this kind of man handling.

David, soon to be my permanent therapist if I had any say at all in these things—and I did—moved quietly to other side of the table. I strained to hear him, craving the feel of his hands on me again.

With a careful flip, he covered me back up, the weight of the blankets a caress against my legs. Broad hands worked in tandem to squeeze the blanket into my hip, down to my thighs. A grip on their backs and I bit my lip. His hands swept onward to

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my calf, over my ankles, and then he took both feet and held them tightly in either palm, letting go softly, his fingers lingering. I recognized this was some kind of pattern. I didn't give a crap if the guy was channeling the zephyrs of the summer solstice; I wanted those hands on the naked skin of my other leg.

The covers were lifted and cool air hit me as warm, strong fingers found the break of my hip and the softness of my thigh where it met the hard muscle of my ass. Thumbs went to work rubbing butter onto that sweet zone and I broke out in a full body sweat.

Shit. I was going to lose it. Right here, right now and I didn't care. I wanted it. I wanted to come right on the table with this little twink's potent hands digging into my thigh, thumbs swirling, pulling, the hair on my leg tugging. Christ, he petted the back of my knee and then the hardness of my calf and I moaned, struggling to keep silent. But the promise of his bold strokes working down over my ankle until — *my foot--Oh, yeah! Yeah!*

I saw stars. Moving as slowly as I dared, I humped the table. My fists closed on themselves. Sweet mercy, I thrust into the table, squeezing my ass hard as he jabbed into my excruciatingly sensitive arch. My balls seized, and I exploded. I bucked involuntarily deeper into the lush bedding, the cotton abrading my dick. The smell of lavender flooded over me and it was now a wicked, wonderful, exciting, toxic aroma. It filled me. I groaned in a liberating moment of release, pumping wet and hot against the skin of my abdomen as those devilish hands dropped my foot as if it were a poisonous viper. My leg flopped onto the bed. Frankly, I could give a rat's ass. I sighed, collapsed, and went limp. Everywhere. I breathed into the sweet smelling towel with a smile.

I was stress-free for the first time in twelve months.

Best damned massage of my life.

"Tell me you didn't just do that." His pissed voice broke the delightful haze. "Did you?"

I grunted. What could I say? I hadn't? There was evidence to the contrary directly underneath me.

"No one has ever done that. I heard people say it happens. I mean, people get, you know, turned on, but no one has ever done *that*. Do you do that with Linda? Tell me

you don't make that a regular practice."

I turned to look at David. I guess I should be mortified, but you know, all I felt was relaxed. I offered a weak apology. "Oh. Hey. Sorry about that." Talk about my heart not being in it. I didn't even have the energy to blush or be embarrassed. Or move out of the puddle in the sheets. I just wanted to sleep.

"You have to go. I don't provide that kind of service. We're not a happy ending kind of massage parlor like they have in Torrington. Jesus H, man, get a grip. We don't *do that. I don't do that.*" I could tell that this was David's real voice: no longer calm but deep. Self assured. And righteously angry. Not that soft, effeminate phony tone he used earlier to offer a massage. No, this was a furious man who'd been shoved out of his comfort zone.

Why did that amuse me? I stifled a smile. "Yeah. Sorry about that. It's been a long week." I couldn't help it. I was repeating myself, my neurons firing in some kind of post-orgasmic loop.

I watched as a far more animated David grabbed the white robe hanging from a peg on the back of the door. He wadded it up, his tattooed, lean upper arms flexing. The guy was certainly fit. It was fascinating. David wiped that buttery salve he'd so sinfully worked into my skin onto the fabric. Glaring, he threw the heavy robe at me. It landed on the floor.

"Your time is up, fuckhead." He blew out of the room in a fury, the door slamming with a crack that echoed through the pristine perfection of the day spa. Probably the first real noise the place had ever encountered. I tried to dredge up some shame over my lack of self control, but I felt too damn good. I rolled over and cleaned my dick and stomach on the sheets. I was seriously just shy of laughing out loud. I belted the robe and headed out to get dressed and pay for those much appreciated services. I snorted.

Happy ending? I'll say.

Friday June 15th 6 PM

"We'd like a table on the pub side." I waited with Molly in the small antechamber at the Village Restaurant. Ten minutes prior I knew that we couldn't sit through another silent meal of grilled cheese sandwiches and bagged salad. The huge, rambling kitchen in my house on Meadow Street amplified the emptiness and I was feeling too damn good to waste the evening alone trying to figure out a six-year-old child. A girl child. What the hell did I know about kids? I'd hardly been one. So I called Molly down from her room, a guest room now filled with Barbies and My Little Ponies, and told her to spruce up: we were going out for dinner. It didn't seem to be the big treat I'd hoped for. I didn't know what Molly hoped for that I could give her. I only knew that tonight I needed some garlic smashed potatoes, a decent steak, rare, and a glass of merlot.

Molly took my hand in her smaller one and waited quietly. She was a stout moppet with hair as thick and auburn as mine and eyes the color of copper. Freckled and short for her age, she was fragile in that way only a motherless child could be. I squeezed her hand and dragged her along behind me, her Barbie flip flops slapping the hard wood as we followed the hostess to a booth by the bar. *Great place for a kid.* True, she wasn't the only one having supper here. Smithfield was the perfect town to raise children. Friendly, quaint and purely New England, it was no big deal to eat dinner in the pub on Friday night. Just put the kids in bed before you came back to drink with the townies.

We slid into the booth. Molly asked politely for crayons, clutching the oversized menu I knew damn well she couldn't read. The hostess flittered off to her duties. And Molly? Her menu whacked the water glass hard. Ice cold water dumped directly into my lap before I could grab the glass and right it.

"Holy Sh—" A blast of frigid liquid splashed into my crotch, and then flowed in an icy current down the dip of the bench to soak my ass. I jumped up, scattering heavy cutlery onto the floor, as Molly, wide-eyed and scared, waited for me to lose control. Which I would never do, of course, but it was disturbing to see fear etched on her brave little face. She'd only seen her father twice that I'd heard of, and both times he'd gotten drunk and mean and scared the hell out of her. I hadn't been there, hadn't ever met the guy, but Nikki's best friend Annabelle had filled me in.

"Sorry. Phew! That's cold. Brisk. I'm all right." I was short, but her eyes didn't look as wild. "I'll dry." I smiled weakly, blotting the bench, and with as much discretion as I could muster, my crotch. It was a repeat performance, the second time today I found myself in a puddle mopping my privates with rented linens. And as though my thoughts had conjured him up, I glanced across the crowded room and my eyes met those of the fey massage therapist. Except this time he was wearing waiter's garb of black pants, white shirt and red tie. I watched in resigned disbelief as he trudged with noticeable reluctance to our table, his lush lips squashed flat, his long apron strings dangling. Wordlessly he handed me a stack of cloth napkins.

"I'm sorry," came Molly's timid voice.

"It's Okay, Moll. It's just cold. Refreshing, even." I smiled. My balls were the size of acorns, or peas.

"Just what the doctor ordered, I'm sure." David murmured, smart-mouthed. I slid a look at him while he stared curiously at Molly. He was far more appealing in this clothing. But, a waiter? Surely this couldn't be his real job. Not unless he was impaired or unemployable. Maybe he lacked ambition and long term, achievable goals.

"Hi." He spoke directly to Molly. I liked that he didn't ignore her. "My name is David. I'm your waiter. Can I get you a Shirley Temple? I can sneak some extra cherries in and if you like, I can get Pete to put a sparkler in it." He smiled charmingly.

"I'm allergic to cherries. They make my lips puffy. Right, Uncle Seth?" She blinked at me, waiting for approval.

"Yes, you are kiddo. And no soda. It's bad for you and rots your teeth." Did I sound like an ogre? Well, too bad. Kids shouldn't have a lot of sugar. I'd heard that

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often enough.

David gave me a look of disgust. “How about some chocolate mi—”

“Water is fine.” I cut him off. What was wrong with me? “And I’ll have a glass of the house Merlot.” I placed the wet, wadded napkins on his tray and settled on the now dry bench.

Molly sat motionless, a small frown on her round face, her freckles stark against her pale skin. I couldn’t help but notice her resignation. Or David glaring at me, looming over the table, with his nostrils flaring. His hair was in a clubbed pony tail. Oh, for fucks *sake*. That was so nineties. Who wore a ponytail?

I considered Molly. She wasn’t petulant, only sad. Poor kid. I sighed and gave in. “Molly. Would you like chocolate milk?”

She nodded shyly.

“Fine. One chocolate milk and a glass of merlot. You want a grilled cheese?” She nodded again. Her dietary staples lately consisted of white bread and American cheese. “I’ll have the filet, rare, and the garlic smashed potatoes. Salad. Blue cheese, no croutons.” I banged out my order and thrust the menus at David. I’d eaten here a hundred times, either with colleagues, alone or with Quinn.

And I swear, I’d never once noticed David.

The blue gauges in his ears shone. They weren’t overly large, but weird all the same. How could I have missed this ridiculous creature? Was he new? Molly stared at the man. “What’s in your ears?”

“Molly.”

“No, it’s fine. Those are my earrings. Aren’t they cool?”

Molly nodded.

“I did this a long time ago and I’ve decided that I really like it. Do you have your ears pierced?” Molly tucked her hair back to show her ears, the lobes covered in tawny freckles. “Oh, maybe when you’re older you can go to the mall with your mom and you can get your ears pierced. That’s a fun time. My sister Claire went with me.”

Molly stilled, her hands dropped and she frowned down at her placemat once more. What the hell was wrong with this guy?

“Why don’t you go put our order in and bring us some bread?” I suggested.

A bright flush of red crept up David’s neck. In the white shirt, with his black hair tied back, it was fairly dramatic. I noted the hardened jaw, clean and smooth, as David spun and stomped away from the table.

I studied Molly, unsure what to say, my crotch damp and my mood strange. These were the times when I missed Nikki the most. She’d been a free spirit with her bohemian style and her wild artistic flair, handling Molly effortlessly. The two of them would be giggling and squealing in a heartbeat. That was a sound I hadn’t heard in a long time. It had been less than two months since my sister had succumbed to cancer. Six weeks since I’d been the one solely in charge. And there hadn’t been much laughter in our lives over the past half year.

David came up, slapped a bread basket on the table, delivered the wine with an ill concealed slop, and, smiling at Molly, handed her the chocolate milk in a to-go cup. With a lid. And a straw. Smart man. He also handed her a coloring book and crayons. “Here you go, pet. Don’t get it wet!” He practically swished. Cringing, I watched him saunter off, ass twitching, that long apron wrapping his lean hips.

I sipped the wine and ignored the temptation. He was too young, too strange and too obvious. He was a flake. Yet I was aware of the younger man moving around the room, laughing with patrons, carrying heavy trays and bending over the tables. The bending over was particularly riveting.

I tore my eyes away.

At the end of the bar, a slender man in a mint green polo sat drinking a cocktail. His feet were hooked around the rail of the bar stool. He had the bleached out appearance of a man who sailed for a living: clothing worn and faded, hair so light I could see his scalp. His flesh was baked. Crystalline blue eyes were latched onto the back of Molly’s head with undeniable interest as he brought his glass up to lips.

I shifted in my wet underwear, wanting to place myself between that inappropriately fixed stare and my innocent niece. Molly happily colored a line drawing of fanciful unicorns with wings and bridles, oblivious to her surroundings. She used a lot of pink and purple, I noted. No plain unicorns for Molly. She hummed

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merrily, her feet swinging, her hair loose but neat. She had on that yellow top with the butterflies and she looked exactly like my twin sister had at age six. I spread butter on a warm hunk of jalapeño corn bread and was interested to note that the green shirted man now leveled his stare on me. We sat there, staring at one another until I raised my eyebrow and that gaze shifted immediately back to his tumbler of booze. *Who the fuck is that? Do I know him?*

He reminded me of someone, though I couldn't place him.

David came up, interrupting my thoughts, and dropped a salad bowl unceremoniously in front of me. Croutons scattered. "Oh, *so* sorry." He poised a pepper mill over the salad. "Fresh ground pepper?"

"Sure."

Scrunch. Scrunch. Pepper fell in black sprinkles against the white of the salad dressing. A few flakes fell into my wine. I sighed and then frowned at the croutons.

"I said no croutons." Molly stopped coloring and peeped up at me.

"Oh, *so* sorry." David winked at her, who I was amused to see winked back, and he swished away in that quick step waiters are so fond of.

"He's funny Uncle Seth. Don't you think so?"

"Hilarious." I picked the offending croutons out of my salad. "You like him? You don't think he's a bit weird looking?"

"I think he's funny. He looks like someone I know."

Like someone Molly knew? Who the hell did Molly know? She was a first-grader. "Really. Like one of the dads at day care?" Please God, that man couldn't be someone's father.

I felt badly for thinking that way, but I couldn't help it.

Molly nodded. "I seen him at Miss Pat's. I think he comes with Katie, that girl with the jelly shoes."

Jelly shoes?

"Uncle Seth, Katie has pink jelly shoes. Oh, they're so nice and I'd really like a pair of pink jelly shoes. Could we get some? She said she got them at Target."

Target? Six year olds talked about buying shoes? At Target? I drank my wine.

"Sure little bit, we can go get some jelly shoes. Are they grape? Do you eat them?" I honestly had no idea. They sounded repulsive.

"No, you wear them. They're pretty. You'll see," she said sagely.

The pub was filling up, as was the restaurant. It was getting loud, the weekenders arriving for cocktails and crab cakes and the locals meeting for drinks and the best cheeseburgers in town. The long bar was chock full of patrons dressed anywhere from jeans and t-shirts to suit and ties. I knew these folks: the bartender Pete; Max, the guy who installed the security system in my house—he was gay, I was sure of it; a few of the waitresses; a couple of the other diners were from town. Mark Meehan and his sister Sarah O'Halloran sat together eating bowls of mussels. Their laughter was loud and engaging. Not a one of her brood was with her.

I watched the man at the bar whose focus was narrowed back on Molly again. His look offered disapproval and judgment from across the room. It was disconcerting. I had the urge to kick the shit out of him or wipe that expression off his face. I knew most of the folks here and he didn't fit.

I signaled the waiter for a refill. My waiter ignored it, so I turned my attention to Molly. "What should we do this weekend?"

"Can we go to Target?"

"If not tomorrow, Sunday afternoon for sure. We can make a list." I was crawling out of the haze of grief and trying to learn the ropes of parenting. I hadn't a clue what six-year-olds needed. Did she need anything and how would I know if she did? Maybe there was a book I should get. I could do research. I didn't want to be calling Annabelle every day, as I had in May. "You want to go to the library with me too, Mols?"

Dinner arrived. David smiled cheerfully at Molly while sliding a plate of grilled cheese, French fries and a pickle wedge in front of her. I frowned. That wasn't particularly nutritious.

My own meal was slapped down with no presentation or care, the pepper mill making its presence known again. David twisted his wrist and pepper rained down on my supper. "Hey, I'd like another glass of wine, please." The pepper rain ceased and David blew out a huffy breath and then marched away.

Happy Ending

He was both amusing and frustrating. Evidently, he wasn't concerned about his job performance. I'd have fired him if this was his usual behavior.

Molly's voice drew my attention from our ill-behaved waiter. "I'm not a good reader, Sethie, I think maybe I shouldn't go to the library."

"What? You're a fine reader. Sometimes things take extra time, that's all. And they have kids' programs and what not on the weekends." I think. Maybe a flyer had come home? I couldn't remember.

My wine arrived, sloshing across my plate to make a red pool in my garlic smashed potatoes. David hammered it onto the table. Clearly my waiter didn't care for me. It wasn't as if I'd jacked off in front of the guy on purpose. It was an unfortunate mishap. An explosive, mind-shattering, bliss-inducing mishap. My mouth twitched. I shouldn't be amused, but I was.

"I don't like the library." Molly piped up.

David's voice broke into the conversation, his overly expressive face sad. "What? Oh, Sweetie! How can you not like the library? That's where all the magic happens. "

Sure. I rolled my eyes. Personal experience told me that the magic happened someplace else.

"I'm not a good reader." she said again, this time with conviction.

"Well, are you a good listener? I bet you are. You can get your stories on CD. That's still reading. It's all about getting lost in the story, not beating someone to the end of it."

Molly appeared unconvinced. She ate some fries mulling it over. "I don't have a CD player." She ate another French fry, chewing thoughtfully, her mouth smacking. She said cautiously, "They have them at Target, Uncle Seth."

Oh, this trip to Target was going to cost me. I could feel it. What else did Molly require? I recalled that she didn't have a bike. Could she even ride a bike? How do I teach a kid to ride a bike?

"They do indeed have CD players at Target." David encouraged her. Light hit the blue stone in his left ear and it seemed to glow. Like a button I had to push. To make him go away.

“Sure, Mols. We can go this weekend.” David glided away and I tucked in to dinner, intermittently checking on the man in the green shirt while nodding or smiling at something Molly said. For the most part, we ate in silence, Molly coloring her fanciful unicorns. Just like home, only the food was infinitely better.

Finishing my wine, I grabbed David on his pass by, “Can I get you two anything else? We have a wonderful dessert menu. Chocolate —”

“Check please.”

David’s mouth snapped shut and it gave me a moment of wicked, electrifying pleasure to watch him turn a mottled red. I knew it was wrong. But pressing that man’s buttons was too easy.

Saturday, June 16, 12:45 AM

A ringing phone in the night signified trouble. No two ways about it. My hand fumbled toward the cradle of the cordless on the bedside table. I knocked all my neatly placed belongings onto the floor: I heard my reading glasses hit the rug. Followed by my book, and then my watch. The damn phone kept ringing and I finally opened my eyes, the green glow registered and my hand latched onto the phone.

“Lo?” Christ what the hell time was it? It was dark as pitch in the room.

“Is this Seth Weston?” A deep voice I didn’t recognize.

“Yeah.” Who was this?

“Seth. This is Ben Martin.” He was pretty impressed with himself. I couldn’t place the name. Ben? Who the fuck was Ben? Christ what time was it?

“That’s nice. Listen, do you know what time it is? Can this wait till a decent hour?”

“You don’t get it. This is Ben. Martin.”

Nothing. Nada. Zip. “Name’s not ringing any bells.”

“I’m Molly’s dad.”

My eyes popped open, wide awake now and straining to filter through the facts, the history, and the threat level with judicious speed. “Technically you’re a sperm donor. Legally speaking; I’m Molly Weston’s next of kin.”

“We’ll see about that, you faggot.” The phone disconnected and I lay there, trying not to laugh at the audacious idiocy of the man. What the hell was this all about? Molly was mine, right and tight, and that needledick had signed away any claim on her from the moment she was born. I had the papers to prove it. I might be reeling from the crap hand I’d been dealt this year, and not as attentive as one should be, but I was Molly’s parent now. What the hell was this fool up to? And who employed that kind of mustache-twirling drama in the middle of the night?

Ben Martin. I'd never met the guy, but I had heard plenty of stories from Annabelle, and dribs and drabs from Nikki over the years. He was a handsome, charming loser. Nikki's short relationship with the man had terminated before she'd even suspected that she was pregnant. The guy was an alcoholic. Heck, he was probably drunk right now. He definitely didn't want kids. He hadn't take responsibility. Why would he want a six year old now? Not that he had a prayer. One thing was certain: I had excellent legal counsel, and plenty of it. I'd call Larry Ouellette tomorrow morning. He didn't muck around. He'd make sure there would be no visitation. I'd made a promise to take care of Molly, to protect her, and I'd never break it. Molly Weston belonged with me.

I cleared my mind, fluffed the pillow and flipped over onto my back, shifting my feet to get comfortable. I was still blissfully relaxed from the massage earlier, although the acupressure had caused some lingering soreness. And cost me a hundred bucks. I wondered if I tipped too generously, but it seemed the right thing to do, all things considered. The corners of my mouth lifted and I smiled into the darkness. I guess I'd request David as my regular therapist from now on. He'd probably say no, of course, but I don't accept defeat. Not easily.

My hand stroked down to my cock, the feel of wire hair and velvet skin and a rush of lust as I stroked my shaft, thinking of David dressed in those hemp pants, slung far too low on his lean hips, his wide mouth opening. I tugged on the crown, smearing that drop of wetness Biting my lip, I made good on my earlier promise.

Saturday, June 16, 4 PM

By four o'clock, Molly had her overstuffed backpack and was pacing the porch, a pony in either hand, waiting for Annabelle to come pick her up for their weekly overnight. We were all entrenched in this adjustment period. Annie and Nik had been best friends since college. Roommates for years. It had been a natural progression for her to take over the day to day during the school year, while I worked and tried, as the only family member who gave a shit, to take care of Nikki. After the funeral, Annabelle had put her foot down with me over the care and keeping of Molly.

"Seth, you've got to do this. I'm not doing it for you."

"I didn't realize we were imposing."

"Please don't be a condescending jerk. It's not ever been a problem, and you know that. But think about it, Seth, Nik left Molly with you for a reason. You need to reflect on that. I'm not going to allow you to hand her over to me just because it's easier and you're – and please don't take this the wrong way – a standoffish prick –"

"I'll try to take that in the spirit it's intended –"

" – and I'll take Molly every Saturday for now and every other Wednesday. We can pretend we're divorced and you have full custody." She finished and I could do nothing but sit, mutely. "If you need me, you have my number. Look, as difficult as this is going to be for the both of you, you're doing it, you're going to get used to it and you're going to thank me someday."

My long standing problem with Annabelle was not that she was outspoken and tactless, it was that she was generally right. She was practically family, Nikki's closest

friend, Molly's godmother, and currently the only female role model in Molly's life. We'd have to take what we could get.

And now, I was waiting impatiently on the porch, the dog at my feet, prepared to ask a few questions. I could have phoned her, but Annabelle's shop did a brisk trade on the weekends, down in that picturesque Cornwall Bridge, and I knew she'd soon be by the house to retrieve Molly. It didn't seem important enough to warrant a call. I hated calling.

It took all of five minutes before her powder blue VW came crawling into my driveway. Molly flitted down the steps, her uneven pigtails, which I had placed evenly fifteen minutes earlier, bobbed and bounced along, a counterpoint to her joy. I was glad she had Annie.

Annabelle rolled the window down and waited for me to saunter up, ready to pass the baton, as it were. "Hey there, kiddo!"

"Annabelle! Uncle Seth is buying me jelly shoes!"

Again with those shoes.

"Cute! Good job, Uncle Seth." Annie winked at me.

Molly ran around the car and hopped in to the front seat. "Back seat." I said automatically.

"Right!" She chirped and scampered into the back, buckling. "G'night Sethie! Have fun tonight!"

Her words surprised a laugh out of both Annabelle and I. I guess the notion of me having fun was humorous all around. "Okay squirt. I need to chat with Annie. You sit tight for a minute."

Annabelle gave me a curious look, but took the hint and unfolded her long, broad form out of the tiny car. She was what you'd call a tall drink of water—a strapping brunette who looked like she played volleyball. Well. "What's up?"

I led her toward the front of the car, out of earshot from my niece, who was busy acting out some kind of adventure with her ponies. They galloped along the edge of the seats, their pink manes trailing the backs of Molly's white hands.

"What's up?"

Happy Ending

"Ben Martin called me last night."

"Really? Ugh. What did he want? Money?"

I blinked at her. She was sharp. "He didn't say, but I'm thinking he may be leading up to it."

"Not surprised. He's a complete parasite."

"I still haven't had the pleasure of making his acquaintance."

"No pleasure to be had. One thing your sister did not have was good taste in men."

I knew this. I'm sure there was a psychologist somewhere who would eagerly explain both our romantic choices over the years. "I know."

"You either."

I bristled, but made some facsimile of a smile, "I know."

"So, listen, he's really a jerk. He tried to get money out of Nik a few times threatening her with getting visitation and stuff. He wouldn't follow through, of course, but I wouldn't be surprised if he pulls something. I didn't know he was back. I thought he was working down at some Marina in Nowank. He refinishes boats and makes sails. And drinks excessively."

"I remembered the drinking part. Is he blond? Because there was a man in the bar last night that seemed inordinately interested in Molly and me. And then the phone call —"

"Yup. I haven't seen him in a while, but he's got really light hair. Almost translucent, you know?"

I knew.

Annabelle flipped her big brown hair. "I can't believe you haven't seen him."

"If I had met him in that brief time Nik was with him, I'd probably have killed him."

"I almost did. He got drunk once so bad, I called the cops and had him arrested." I recalled that as well. This was old news. "And that was the end of Ben in our house. Nik saw the light and he was gone."

"She didn't want me to meet him. I guess she was ashamed of him. He's homophobic."

“Seriously?”

“He was vocal about it last night.”

Annabelle shrugged and went back to her car door. “She didn’t know that at the time, I’m sure of it Seth. She was proud of you and she’d have kicked his tail to the curb earlier if he ever said anything against you. No, he was bad news. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I stood in the driveway as they pulled out, Annabelle driving slow and careful, the engine gasping with each shift of its ancient transmission. If Annie thought Molly’s father was going to be a problem, I had to trust her instinct. Her track record for these kinds of things was impressive.

Saturday, June 16th, Late

I walked up to the Village Restaurant and Pub at 11:00. I'd had dinner on the restaurant side earlier with some colleagues who were in town for the weekend and we'd split two bottles of cabernet. I'd gone back to the empty, unlit house to watch some TV and wound up back here.

The fact that I'd seen David working the bar had not affected my decision to return at all.

It was a typical Saturday night. I made my way through the bar. The room vibrated with the voices of too many people trying to speak at the same time. Eyeing a free stool down at the far end, I wove my way farther into the room. My height had its advantages. Ordering a jack and coke from the ever present Pete, I took a look around, knowing exactly what—who I was looking for. Some townies stopped by to make small talk. The guy next to me, a local, was from the Rotary and had decided that this was the time to lure me into the fold. I didn't see myself as a Rotarian, but perhaps they did? It was something I should do, but my heart wasn't into taking directions from a group of MBA wannabes in order to further the common community good. And now, I had Molly to consider although for business connections, it was a solid move. I grimaced at the thought.

My eyes latched onto David's agile form as he swept by, a tray of empty glasses and bottles high on his shoulder. He pretended not to see me. I smiled against the rim of my glass watching him move up and down the bar, delivering drinks, wiping tables, laughing, and scooping money. He seemed comfortable in these surroundings.

I sipped my drink and listened to the Rotarian, avoiding his glad-hand, and all the while I surreptitiously kept my eye on my new masseur. I watched as David dodged appreciative glances from men and women alike. He was beautiful, compelling, in his strange way.

Why did he fascinate me? He was an enigma. And I, aged thirty-six, verged on sophomoric obsession. It was clear that he was inappropriate for me in every way – too young, too weird, too wild. Still, I'd been following his movements all evening and he was well aware of it. Evidently, I needed to get laid. I drank my jack and coke while David brushed past me again.

I wanted him.

I thought of Quinn. It was inescapable. We'd been together long enough that he came to mind naturally. Ours had been a relationship built on a firm foundation of common goals, mostly running his business and building my career. We'd enjoyed the security and the pleasure of familiarity. Nice to come home to him waiting with hot food. My stomach groaned at the loss of those magnificent dinners.

Outwardly, Quinn had always appeared the perfect partner. He had indisputable taste in his fussy tailored clothing, selling his fussy overpriced antiques. It had all been so simple and it was obvious that we were well-suited. On the outside. He was a fit and hearty guy who he enjoyed making the decisions about the house and our lives, decisions that I didn't want to be bothered with. So I earned the bulk of the money and we enjoyed the good things that life had to offer: travel, friends, wine.

But when push came to shove, when Nikki and Molly had moved in, he'd proved to be all style and no substance. He bailed without a backward glance when the chips were down. It had been...painful.

I smeared the ring of water my glass had left on the counter. My finger made an O and then, oddly, a dollar sign. The Rotarian moved on. I ordered another drink and continued to swirl the water ring.

"Making a hex?" David leaned in, resting a small round tray next to my arm. He perched himself against the bar, in that narrow space between my hip and the next stool. Relaxed, though tired, he kept his eye on the crowded tables.

Happy Ending

"Scared?" My drink landed on a napkin. I stirred the rocks then brought it to my mouth. Jack Daniels and sweet cola, my favorite nightcap. I was working on my third, which was probably more than I needed, but I felt good. Warm. Loose inside and out. At least I didn't have to drive.

"Of you? Not really. Don't overestimate your charm, big guy." He smiled, self-satisfied, and leaned further back. His stumpy pony tail was in place, his tie askew and he smelled of deep fried potatoes. Now there was a cologne to perk my interest. "Aren't you out late on a school night?"

"Been working. I had a business dinner earlier. Decided to come back."

"Yeah, I saw you. Looks like you do that a lot."

"Some." A lot. Probably too much, but I liked my comfortable life and the job paid well. Besides, I loved the challenges my position offered. "I don't think I've ever seen you here until the other night. Did you just start?"

He laughed again, at me this time. "I've been here off and on since high school, Seth. I think you see what you want to see and ignore the rest. I've seen you here plenty. I've waited on you plenty." He shook his head, amused.

I couldn't believe that. No way.

"You used to come in with that guy who wears the fussy ascot." He choked on a cough, which had to be another laugh. "He dresses like an aging preppy, but he has to be younger than you, right? Like early thirties?" He laughed out loud this time. Incredulous. "I mean who wears an ascot? Fred Astaire? Is he a dancer? Somehow I can't see you with a dancer. Unless he is very limber. Is he very limber, Weston?"

"Judgmental little shit, aren't you?"

"Yup." He grabbed his tray to go, but gave me an assessing look first. "And, you know what? I think you're following me."

What could I say that didn't sound like a lie? I wanted him. I figured the feeling was mutual or he wouldn't be standing here making small talk. I took a drink and bit out, "Maybe we could go out sometime." I had the pleasure of watching him halt, surprise lifting his brow. I clarified. "On a date."

He settled back. "Really? After yesterday you think I'd go out with you?"

Interesting. You had sex with my table."

"I like to make a good impression."

"Well, you made a lasting one. I don't know. Date. What's that mean exactly? What does a date consist of?" He was intrigued, and underneath I recognized that he might be game.

"We'd go somewhere." I said, noncommittally.

"Yeah? Where would we go? Hypothetically. Where would you, Mr. Terse MBA Captain of Industry Master of His Own Destiny, take someone like me out on a date?" He cocked his head, the soft light of the bar illuminating his stunning, intelligent face. I wanted to press him down to the floor. Or spread him out on the bar. Or, inexplicably, to simply reach out and feel the texture of his kinked hair.

I caught what he said. He'd been asking around about me. He was definitely game. "What do you mean, 'someone like me?'" I knew what he meant. I couldn't have been the only one who thought that he was a flake.

"Please. Cut me a break. C'mon. Where would we go?"

His pose relaxed, his elbows now rested on the bar behind him as the crowd swirled around us. We were alone in the bustling, loud room, sharing an intimacy among strangers. His tie needed to be straightened and I fought another inappropriate, alarming urge. This time to open that shirt and taste the hollow where his clavicle scooped in and I knew his skin would be pale and smooth and tangy. What was it about him? I cleared my throat and laid it on thick. "Well. Seeing how it's summer, I'd maybe take you to the jazz festival or out for seafood on the shore. Maybe see a show in city. I've heard good things about *Curtains*."

He whistled. "On a date? Look at you, Richie Rich. But, that's a lot of hoofing it. What about pizza and a movie? That's a good date."

"If I wanted to impress you, I'd take you into the city. Or down to the shore. That's what I'd do. We'd have lobster-in-the-rough at Abbots." It was the sort of thing I had done in the past and had served its purpose. I began to see the futility of that path.

"Well, let's pretend the barn doors are wide open and the milk's for free, Seth. Where would you take *me* out on a date?" He was serious. Unbelievable. He actually

Happy Ending

expected me to take him out on a date – not a quick fuck. A slow smile crept up on me.

David waited calmly, his eyes lit with encouragement and amusement and maybe a hint of caution.

I pretended to think about it. “I’d invite you for dinner, something that I probably purchased ready-made. You don’t know this, but, uh, I don’t cook. And then I’d take you back to your place and fuck you until you couldn’t walk upright.”

That startled a laugh right out of him. “Well, that’s far more appealing than the jazz festival. That’s for sure.” He grabbed his tray, winking, “I’ll catch up with you later, Seth.” Then he strolled away, business as usual. I kept my attention glued on his tapered waist slimming down to that narrow, tight, tiny ass framed in slashes of white from his work apron. Long white strings hung down and I had the urge to untie that package and get to the goodies that lay underneath.

Later? Wait. What? What the hell just happened? I stopped myself from calling him back over to explain. Were we going on a date? Should I call him? Did he want to hook up? Or was that a brush off? I felt entirely out of the loop and irrelevant; a different generation. Was that short hand for *meet me out back and I’ll fuck you in the public restroom*? Because, clearly, that’s what I was taking it for.

I sucked on a piece of ice, contemplating what to do. It’d been a long time since I had sex with anyone other than myself. Not counting the massage table. My mind made up, I drained the last in my glass, threw down a twenty and went out the back door, trying to hide my erection. I was hopeful that he’d walk out that door at closing time and let me bend him over a sink.

* * * *

Smithfield was comprised of a central town green bisected by two major blue highways which had become very early on: North, South, East, and West Streets. Not clever or descriptive names, but the founding fathers had set their cleverness elsewhere. Like education, and preservation, and breeding statesmen and writers, abolitionists and governors. They had work to do. They didn’t need pithy names. They needed

directions.

Along the edge of the green, the county seat had its headquarters: courthouse, post office, four churches, the town hall, boutiques, restaurants, antiques shops, and real estate offices. Behind this row of historic buildings and the manicured storefronts of West Street, currently in the dark of night, lay the municipal parking lot and its brand new facilities. Yes. The town had finally seen the wisdom of providing restrooms after years of parties and concerts and road races with thousands of folks and no place to relieve themselves. It took twenty-five years, referendums and a hike in the borough taxes, but now everyone had a place to pee. They were nice. Roomy. Clean. I intended to get laid in the men's room right now.

I lurked in the darkness, leaning against the railing of the handicapped ramp. The back entrance to the Village was visible, a naked bulb over the door offering sharp light on the stairs. I didn't have to wait long. The door swung open at one a.m. and David walked outside letting the screen door slam behind him. He'd already set his hair free from that knot at his neck and it fell to his shoulders in inky black corkscrews. His apron was gone, his legs clad in dark colored trousers. He yanked that tie from his neck with one hand, jerking it loose, and then stuffing it into his back pocket. He unbuttoned the top couple buttons of his shirt, and ran a hand through his hair. He waited there at the top of the stairs, spotlit, enjoying the freedom from work, I guessed. Taking in the night air. Or trying to figure out if I was out there, lying in wait in the shadows. Was he hopeful, or leery? I rested against the railing of the handicap ramp, waiting until his searching eyes found mine.

He gave me a frank look. The corner of his mouth hitched up a notch and he moved down the back stairs—quick and easy and brimming with confidence. David loped across the parking lot, the motion lifting his hair away from his face. For whatever reason, his sideburns, trim and neat, made me salivate.

He stopped in front of me. "So we doing this thing or what?"

Relieved that we were on the same page, I wrapped a hand around his wrist and pulled him into my chest, dragging him back into the shadows around the side of the building. I felt Neanderthal.

Happy Ending

“My place is right up the stairs—”

I thrust his lithe body into the brick; his breath escaping in a whoosh. Startled, he looked up at me, his mouth hanging open, those blue eyes huge in the moonlight. Before he could protest or finish his sentence, I licked his lower lip to shush him. I rimmed that wide, bitable mouth, dragging my tongue along the edges, tasting the tenderness of his skin and groaning as his tongue pressed eagerly to mine. A quick sip before I cupped his jaw, palmed it in my big hand and tilted his head. I watched his face for a reaction. His eyes closing was all the permission I needed before I brought my mouth to his again. The scent of fries and something I couldn't put my finger on—almonds, maybe—hit my senses as I kissed him roughly, my tongue diving in, desperate to feel his smaller body tremble against mine. Determined to show him who was in charge.

Towering over him, I ground into that tight, wiry frame. I enveloped him, drawing his wrist up to my neck. His hand trailed against my hair and stroked tentatively inside my collar. Those smooth fingertips caressed my rough, whiskered neck and I grew as hard as a plank. David gripped my shoulder and eagerly opened wider for me, letting me plunged into that sweet, willing mouth. He made a noise deep in his throat that spurred me on, because—truthfully? I wanted my cock in there. In about a minute I was going to put it there. I wanted to press him down to his knees. I wanted to bind him with that tie. I wanted to fuck him while I stood in the parking lot over him and he was helpless, at my mercy, as the cars drove up West Street and I took him in the darkness.

What was wrong with me?

Verging on the edge of control, I tried to rein myself in, but he moaned huskily into the shared space between our tongues. I let go, pushing my hips into him, my cock finding his as we aligned our bodies in a quest for fulfillment. He was hard as well and bigger than I'd have ever thought, although by this point nothing should surprise me about David. He skimmed a hand along my shirt, sliding the buttons open to palm my chest and stroke through the hair there. I broke the kiss, caging him against the brick. Looming over him—shit, *lording* over him—until he pulled me back into his body with a gentle hand on my neck and I bit the tender flesh of his bottom lip. I ground into that

sweet little body and rocked him hard with my hips.

“You want it right here?” My voice was harsh in the shadow of the men’s room.

His moan told me everything I needed to know. He was panting and nodding and eager for it, so I looked him in the eye, took him by the shoulders, and forced him down to his knees, “Open my pants.”

Incomparably turned on by the direction this was taking, I thought I’d come when he touched me. Not that I hadn’t before, but this time, I wanted to come all over him. Marking him, like some kind of animal.

David’s hands worked my belt, then came the sound of my zipper and he released my big dick out into the warm night air. He leaned in to stroke the thick length of my erection. Then, oh so nicely, he kissed me first. A swift, tender worshipping nibble and he opened to swallow me, his mouth wet, petal-soft and suckling. Oh shit, he took it all until I felt the back of his throat. I shoved both hands into his curls, drew back and then crammed my way into him. I didn’t care if he could handle it. I held him until the nest of my pubes was up against his nose. I latched on to him and with no finesse, no concern for the welfare or the comfort of this new partner, I fucked his mouth hard.

And he took it willingly. Sweetly.

“You like that? You like it rough?” My God what had come over me? I didn’t even know this guy. I didn’t know myself. I was out of control, but Christ did he seem to enjoy it. His beautiful generous mouth was a velvet glove that I couldn’t help but work onto my rock solid dick. He was holding me by the thigh and the ass, his nails digging in, while I watched the perfect *O* of his mouth.

I was bringing myself closer to orgasm when I finally let go of his hair, pulled back and took my cock firmly in hand. I knocked him back against the men’s room wall and jerked myself off in his face until I came, flinging a stream of sinewy cum onto his chin, his cheek, his mouth, down his neck. My knees were close to buckling. I had to catch myself with a hand on the rough brick, just above his kneeling form, groaning and sweating. I shook until my balls relaxed and my ass stopped twitching and my breath got back under control.

Holy Christ. I was a selfish prick to have stopped, to have come and left him on his

Happy Ending

knees in what looked to be dirt, but there was something about his nature that brought out the worst kind of behavior in me.

I drew him up, and the sound of shirt snagging against the porous surface of the wall and his feet stumbling on the rough ground, registered. I tried to be calm, to soothe him, as I licked and kissed the cum from his face. David's erection was clearly defined in his trousers; hard and ready. I stroked his cock then quietly, firmly, I told him to take it out. I even helped him unfasten his pants, his hands trembling, his breath hot on my neck. He was needy and lost and on the edge of frustration.

His breath caught and his hands clutched me.

"Shh. I have you." I kissed him, jerking him slow and steady with my rough hand wrapped around his long, pretty dick. I held him up against the wall with my chest and my shoulders, kissing him sweetly as if he were fragile and lovely and jerked him until he came in a pleasing shudder. His lips were begging and clinging to mine for more. I kissed him and held him and let him blow his load all over my fist until he settled down. Quieted. Gentled.

He was gorgeous.

We stood there alone in the outdoors, the crickets and night noises coming back into focus, cars driving up West Street, the sound of the kitchen crew emptying the night's trash into the huge dumpsters not fifteen feet from where we stood. The distant hush of conversation carried from the parking lot as employees and partiers finished their evening fun. A car started and its lights cut across the wall behind us before moving, swiftly away.

"Can anyone see us, do you think?"

I checked over my shoulder, wondering the same thing. I hoped that I hadn't pushed him down into poison ivy, or broken glass. The condom I'd bought in the restroom earlier sat unused in my pocket. I hoped he hadn't knelt on someone's discard.

"Nope. We're hidden." I stepped back, exhausted and embarrassed by my behavior. "Was that too much? I don't know what came over me."

"I'm good, Weston." He carefully zipped up, and then tucked his shirt in with

short, sharp, efficient moves. Eyeing me, he dragged a sleeve over the corner of his mouth, his chin, and neck. "I'm, uh, gonna head on home now."

What could I say to that? No? "Sure."

He didn't say another word, simply walked out of from our hiding place and crossed the darkened lot with those long strides. I watched as he mounted the side steps, taking them two at a time to the third floor. That's when I remembered that he'd tried to invite me into his place. He lived right there. The light flipped on, the door closed and I was standing there with my pants down.

Sunday, June 17th, Noon

I'd worked most of the morning in my home office. I had a few hundred emails to sort through and some reports to finish before I could turn off the computer and enjoy what remained of the weekend. By noon, Annabelle had delivered Miss Molly and the two of us headed out to get some supplies. We were in the Target behind a cart filled with two pair of seven dollar jelly shoes (one pink, one purple), a new pink plastic equine nightmare, a bike helmet, a CD player, three books on CD, a Hannah Montana CD that I was told was "fun," a pink umbrella with rainbows, a pink bathing suit with yellow daisies, and a new Nelson Demille novel for myself. We were on our way to scout out a bicycle. My money was on something pink.

Molly skipped along beside the shopping cart and I tried not to be offended by the volume of girl stuff in the cart. I wanted to buy camping equipment just to cover the load.

We ambled on toward the pet food section, winding our way through the crowd. The wheel on our cart squeaked the entire time. "Molly there are other colors in the spectrum. Blue is nice."

"What's a spectrum?" She was so happy with her loot I didn't feel like lecturing her, but I did anyway.

"A spectrum is a range. Things arrayed by degree for the process of order. A spectrum in color would be —"

"That's fascinating talk for a six year old, Weston. Even for you." I turned to see David holding a towheaded little girl by the hand. He gave me the once over and shook

his head mockingly. I noted his mouth was puffy and I tried not to turn red.

I didn't succeed.

I had on chinos and a blue button down. What was wrong with my apparel? Not a thing. It was casual. Not as casual as his pair of jeans, more thread than cloth, and t-shirt covered in skulls. His hair was down again and he looked fresh-faced and terribly youthful. I experienced a rush of discomfort. Actually, it was more like panic.

Shit. How old was he?

"Hi Katie!" Molly lifted up on her toes and grinned. Her shyness was gone for the moment, now that she had a basket of goodies to bring home. My girl was a born shopper and Mastercard had its privileges.

The two girls dug through the cart, squealing and discussing the merit of My Little Pony.

"That's quite a load of stuff you got there." David tried to smile.

"We haven't been out shopping for a while. I had to pick up one of every pink in the store."

"I can see that."

An uncomfortable silence fell as we stood in the dog food aisle trying to make a weak stab at conversation. There was nothing to say. I didn't think it would be appropriate to ask for his driver's license. I imagined his expansive, expressive, mind sucking mouth on my dick and my eyes were drawn to the puffy, chafed flesh around the object of my desire.

I pointed briefly to my mouth, "So...uh...I didn't...uh?" and then I had to look anywhere but at him. I was behaving like a teenager.

David cleared his throat as I perused the row of bagged puppy chow in its spectrum of flavor: Lamb, Chicken, Beef and Liver.

David finally spoke. "You should bring Molly by the library tomorrow night. They're having a kid's author read. She'll like it. I'm bringing my sisters and brothers. And Katie's coming." He nodded his head at the towhead.

I glanced at the little girl. "That's your sister?" *How old was he?*

"We're a big family. I'm the oldest and she's the youngest and there's a few in

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between." He smirked mysteriously at some inside joke. I knew he expected me to ask, so I did.

"A few? Okay, how many?"

"Eight."

I was appalled. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No. My parents like kids." Ten children? I considered the cart load of crap I'd be purchasing for one child and multiplied that by ten. It wasn't any of my business, but I had the urge to ask what his parents did for a living.

"I guess they must. Ten?" I asked, incredulous. Katie and Molly bobbed up and down, chatting about the contents of the cart. Why was his kid sister blond? "Blond?"

"Yep. I'm one of the only black Irish in the family. The rest of them are as blond as Swedes. Only my brother Paulie is dark like me."

Ten. "Are they in town? Your family?"

"Four generations of Smithfield."

"Did you just move out?" This was my careful way of determining that he was over twenty-one.

"What? No. I haven't lived there since before college. I've lived over the Village for years."

I knew he lived over the bar. I'd watched him last night. We could have gone up to his place and instead I'd forced him down on his knees in the dirt. I concentrated on what he'd said. "You went to college?"

His face lost its friendliness and his tone turned defensive. "Yes. I went to college, Mr. Weston. I had an academic scholarship. I have a master's degree in education. Surprised?"

"Yes. Actually. I am. You're a teacher? Working through the summer at your little side jobs?" This all made sense now. He was working during the summer break to earn extra money. He had a real job. That was encouraging.

"No. I'm a massage therapist. A good one. I recently discovered that sometimes, I'm too good for certain clients. I'm trying not to be offended here Seth. I'm going to pretend that you didn't just judge me. And I like my 'little' jobs."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"Nope. You do it all natural like." David took his sister by the hand and led her down the aisle. "Nice to see you, Molly." He nodded and then he disappeared around the corner, his sister clinging to his hand babbling about purple jelly shoes.

"Uncle Seth, you gotta be nicer. I like them and you were rude. You made him mad. I saw you. She invited me to come to the library with her to hear him read. Can we go, please?"

"What? He's going to read stories to the kids?" That was just plain odd.

"No, read his book. His book he wrote. Din't you see it?"

"What book? What are you talking about?"

Molly brought me back to the book aisle, our heavy cart groaning under the weight of pinkdom. We entered the children's section where a few small kids played Gameboys while sitting on top of the books, their sneakers tearing the fragile covers. Where the hell were their parents?

Molly pointed. "Those are his books, Uncle Seth. That's how I know him. Miss Pat reads them at Day Care."

A row of books faced me, lining the young reader section. I checked out the titles: Johnny Doughnut Pizza Delivery Man! Johnny Doughnut Digging For Gold! Johnny Doughnut Gets Caught! Johnny Doughnut Field Trip Gone Bad!

I grabbed the book. It was ridiculous, all bright primary colors and that fake kid writing font that I felt perpetuated bad penmanship. The boy on the cover had a mop of black ringlets, he was missing a tooth and he was grinning with a kind of savoir-faire that barely concealed his delinquency. I flipped the book. On the back cover, sure as shit, that was David's smiling grown up face. I noted his earrings were covered by his carefully arranged hair. He was wearing a Smithfield High t-shirt and jeans. He looked as wiry and sexual as an Abercrombie and Fitch model.

Meet the author!

David Cooke is a massage therapist, waiter, and former teacher. David began telling wild tales as a teenager, hoping to keep his unruly younger brothers and sisters in line. Every Friday evening, David was enlisted to babysit while his parents lived the high life – going out to a movie and eating in a real restaurant. Growing up with only one

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television in the house, David learned to be resourceful, entertaining his siblings with stories about Johnny Doughnut, a boy with a mind of his own and a nose for trouble.

I stood there facing the book, the photo, and my own condescending idiocy. Nikki would have laughed in my face. Ambition? The guy had three jobs and two degrees and he was a published and popular author of children's books that were distributed nationally in a big box store. And I'd pushed him down behind the men's room and made him fellate me like some kind of twenty dollar hustler.

Was it possible for me to have treated him worse? I was glad I hadn't bent him over the sink as I'd intended. Although, truly, he seemed to enjoy the hell out of that scene last night.

Stewing, I put a book into our cart, telling Molly, in a voice that didn't match my mood one bit, that I thought it'd be fun to read to her each night and wasn't it neat that Katie's brother was an author? It occurred to me that I hadn't read to her yet. It had been weeks since I'd taken charge and it seemed like the kind of thing one would know to do. I hadn't known, or thought about it. But it was time to start acting like Molly's parent and not some reluctant relative.

"C'mon kiddo, let's get you a bike."

* * * *

It took me an hour to put the damned bike together. Once it was done, Molly happily cruised up and down the driveway, no training wheels necessary, her Barbie helmet buckled safely beneath her chin. Her smile was wide. One tooth, she told me, was loose. Tooth Fairy? I knew nothing. I could try to remove the tooth for her, I supposed. That would be efficient. I'd need string. And how much did the tooth fairy leave these days? It could be anywhere from ten cents to twenty bucks. I needed backup. I'd have to call Annabelle.

I sat on my porch in the uncomfortable wicker furniture we'd gotten last summer; my feet bare and up on the porch railing, my ass hopefully not hanging out from my shorts. I was reading a financial report in preparation to fire someone in the morning,

but it was a gorgeous summer day—not too hot, not too humid, and Meadow Street was alive with my neighbors mowing yards, walking dogs and the distant shout of kids playing. I had a beer on the floor beside me and an open bag of chips while Prissy, that worthless basset hound, was snoring and passing wind on the braided rug in front of me. I had half my attention on Molly and the other on the information displayed on the flat screen of my computer.

I leaned over to snag my beer and my eyes were drawn to a manila envelope sticking out of the mailbox at the door's edge. That was curious. I didn't use my mailbox. I went twice a week up to my P.O. Box where the magazines and junk mail were conveniently recycled on the premises. I hauled myself off the prickly loveseat to investigate.

Just a regular small manila mailer. No address, no name. I had this brief thought about letter bombs, but knew it was more likely a lawn bill. So, I gingerly sat back down on the furniture—apparently made of sharpened twigs— and slid two photos out of the envelope. It took me a few seconds to understand that these were pictures of me fucking David's mouth. I looked up quickly, making sure Molly wasn't around, and then hid the photos back inside the envelope.

What the hell? Who had seen us? I tried to remember. How'd they get these shots? I knew by the quality it wasn't a cell phone. Some creep had watched us, had been directly across from us and had taken an impressively clear shot of David on his knees, my hands gripping his head. I didn't remember this, but his hand was locked around my ass. I looked wild and cruel. He looked game.

Shit.

This didn't bode well. I glanced around and slid the photos out again, searching for a note, writing, anything to indicate who had put this in my mailbox and why. Nothing. I'd have to call David. And Tony, our Resident Trooper. This was a threat. I hid the envelope in the side pocket of my computer bag and took a swallow of beer. I put my feet back up on the railing and contemplated my next move.

A silver Mercedes came to a stop on the narrow street in front of my house.

I couldn't see the driver, my angle and the tinted glass prevented a clear view. I

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had a moment of panic over the pocket full of my own amateur porn, and for a fleeting second, I equated this arrival with the threat. But that was unfounded.

It was probably someone coming here to visit me or one of the neighbors or yet another New York tourist stealing a parking spot. Whoever it was; they weren't coming into my house. The entry hall was filled with a jumble of pink boxes, dolls, shoes, bags, and the left over parts from the bike. I'd been stymied over those few left over pieces, but the bike seemed sturdy enough. Mols had hopped on, thrown her new pony in the basket and much to my relief, she'd taken off to twirl around the smooth pavement in front of the garage. I ditched the training wheels that she'd told me repeatedly she didn't need. We hauled the garbage cans down to the end of the drive, blocking it, so she'd remember not to go flying down into the street.

Tension coiled in my gut as Quinn unfolded himself from the driver's side, his golden hair highlighted with whitened streaks presumably from the Florida sun. His face was dark as mahogany.

When did he get that car? Whose money paid for it? I figured the answer to that question was mine. I didn't move from my perch, didn't shift my feet, but I did reach for my beer to take a swallow. I needed to wet my now ash-dry mouth. I couldn't think of a single reason he'd show up here unannounced and I wasn't in the mood to deal with his histrionics. I crammed the envelope further into its hiding place.

I had to admit, Quinn looked all right. I hadn't seen him since we closed on the house, back in November when Nikki was still active but worsening daily. He had asked after her, his manners impeccable. A wasted effort on me. In April, he'd not shown up for her funeral and I wouldn't ever forget that. I didn't care enough to forgive it, either. He was out of my life.

Why was he here now? This was bizarre having found those photos not five minutes ago. He couldn't have taken them. That sort of thing required stealth and a willingness to get one's hands dirty. He could be cold as a fish, but I couldn't imagine him hiding in the shadows to get those photos. And why would he? What could he possibly hope to gain, having taken all my money already? I was being paranoid.

He glanced at the trash cans in the driveway and I saw the moment he noticed

Molly on her bike. Like a foul reminder of why he'd left and what he'd run from. His smile deflated and then he seemed to catch himself, probably remembering my presence. He waved to me, turning on the charm, and strolled affably up the sidewalk in seersucker pants and a matching polo. He had a cashmere sweater tied around his neck--apricot--the poster child for fag antique dealers everywhere. Sort of a combination of Thurston Howell the III meets George Hamilton, only much younger. His tan was that intense. His casual attire was affected, as was he. Hard to believe he was my age when he dressed like an aging movie star. He'd swept his Ray-Bans onto the top of his head, showing the handsome planes of his face to perfection. One thing was certain: I was not interested in anything he had to offer this time around. I'd had a piece of that--plenty of pieces--and while he was a very agreeable lover, I was over it.

"Hello, Seth." His teeth flashed preternaturally white against the sun-baked flesh of his face. Evidently he'd gotten the hang of those sticky bleach strips he used to leave stuck all over the bathroom sink.

I wiggled my toes as I waited for him to mount the steps. I didn't like the way things were shaping up here. "Quinn. Nice car." I saved my file and shut down my laptop, but left it on my lap. I refused to make whatever this visit was about comfortable for him.

"I like it very much, thanks." He gave me the once over, smiling pleasantly. His behavior was strange, considering he'd walked out of here and took most of my assets with hardly a backward glance. He'd blithely left me the worst of the furniture and the full of the mortgage. "You look good. How've you been?"

"Fine." I didn't return the compliment or the query. I checked on Molly, who was singing and drawing on the sidewalk with her brightly colored chalk crayons. It enraged me to imagine that she could have found those photos in our mailbox at any time this afternoon. I clenched my fists and seized on the fact that she was a shrimp and couldn't reach the lid. I turned back to the man brushing off the seat of the white wicker arm chair with a small pressed handkerchief. I could smell his Bulgari. "You need something, Quinn? I can't imagine you'd be here otherwise."

Quinn's smile lost a bit of its luster and he cleared his throat. "No. I was simply in

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town, viewing some retail space. I've been considering coming back up from the Keys, maybe getting back into the business here."

"Here. Imagine that."

"Yes. Seems a good, thriving community."

"You said the same about Westport. And Smithfield. And then about Key West. When you left." I wasn't bitter. I wasn't.

He hiked his pants and took a seat, uninvited, in that uncomfortable chair he'd purchased for this very house a year ago. I hoped a stick caught him in the ass, or in the back. I noticed his ankles. His socks were apricot. Clearly he'd gotten more outrageous since he'd moved to Florida. This was extreme, even for Quinn.

"The Keys were not exactly what I expected. A bit too much of a party town and I missed the foliage." He eyed my beer expectantly. I didn't offer.

"Really." I read this as: he was running through his money. "So what's your intention, Quinn? You're here for something or you would have called, or sent an email."

"Seth, I'm stopping by out of courtesy. I didn't want you to hear through the grapevine that I'd been to town and not said hello."

"Yeah. I don't rightly care either way, Quinn. It's a free country. Do as you like." What grapevine? He was crazy. I glanced at Molly, busily drawing a chalk outline of her bike on the driveway. What the hell was she doing? A reluctant smile turned the corners of my mouth up and lightened my mood momentarily. She was such a funny kid. She carefully outlined the spokes of her tires, her little tongue sticking out of her teeth, her chubby hands gripping a stick of purple chalk. Then I remembered those photos and my amusement vanished.

"Well, I'm considering opening a new place on West Street; I'm hoping to find the right backers to make a go of it. Once I hear back from the ba — "

My head snapped around in move straight out of *The Exorcist*. "No. Nope. Nada. Ain't gonna happen. No. I'm not backing you, giving you money, talking to the bank for you, writing up a business plan or getting involved in any way, shape or form. Hear me? Nothing. Period. Next subject." That's what this was about. Imagine my surprise.

Molly came skipping up the steps, her knees and hands covered in colorful chalk dust, her clothing askew and her face a sheen of perspiration. Her tongue was worrying that loose tooth and her mouth was scrunched up. She scrambled under my knees, wiping dust across the floor and plopped down on the love seat. She stuck her feet on the dog, who promptly let free some wind. This set Molly off to giggling.

Nothing could have made Quinn clear out faster. He stood, smiling stiffly at Molly. "Hello there again, young lady."

"Lo." Molly pressed harder on the dog, who gave a repeat performance sending her into another peal of giggles. Under any other circumstance, I would have told her to quit.

"Well, I'll stop by again while I'm in town this week, Seth. I'm staying at the Myer's Bed and Breakfast. We could have dinner." He was delusional.

"You don't need to do that. Don't trouble yourself."

"No. It's always a pleasure. I—" His shifty eyes shifted to Miss Molly, who was still squeezing gas from the Bassett hound. You'd think that would get old. Or the well would run dry. But no, it never did. "I've missed seeing you."

"Well, I hope your flight back to the Keys is good."

"Oh, I'm not in the Keys any—"

"You live in a key?" Molly interrupted.

"No Mol, he lives in Florida. In a galaxy far, far away and he's gotta go now."

"Seth. Please. You need to at least hear me out."

"Nope. Here's a great fact for you to remember: I don't." I indicated the steps with my beer bottle. "Watch out for any chalk on the railing. Wouldn't want to get your clothes dirty."

"Bye!" Molly waved and leaned over to pet the dog, trying to get comfortable on the uncomfortable seat. "Uncle Seth we need cushions. These sticks are sharp." She was correct. Cushions. Why hadn't that occurred to me? "I bet Target has them."

I coughed up some beer.

Quinn wavered on the top step of the porch. "You don't have to be such a prick, Seth."

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"Excuse me, Quinn, you wanna watch it? My niece is here." I was a hypocrite. I should stop swearing in front of Molly. I rubbed a hand across my neck, hoping to ease a bit of the tension there without being too obvious. "And actually, I can be anything I'd like to be given this is my home and you're not welcome in it." I spoke to Molly. "Go on; clean up your toys from the driveway."

Unbelievably, she hopped up and did it. Even a six-year-old knows to scam when things are about to turn ugly. "If there's something you want from me, you'd better rethink it. I've given you every last dime I'll ever give you and you're not getting another. *Capiche?*"

Quinn's jaw took on that stubborn line I had come to know particularly in the last month of our relationship. He was a manipulative bastard under his expensive threads and pretentious airs. A real underhanded motherfucker, or he had been to me. Maybe he *had* taken those photos. "I'm not here for money. I came to say hello. I was quite literally in the neighborhood and I wanted to warn you that I may be moving back here."

"Warn me? Why should I care? But listen up. You need to evaluate your own motives, Quinn. You've got no reason to be here in Smithfield. None. If you decide to move back? I don't care. I don't buy antiques any more. I don't see as we'll have a problem."

"I only stopped by to ask you to dinner. We were together a long time, Seth. Things used to be good between us, remember? And I haven't seen you in a while. Aren't you even curious about my life? I missed you."

"Nope. I spent the last six months watching my sister die, Quinn. You don't like children. You proved your worth to me beyond question and on numerous occasions. I don't have a drop of interest in you or your life. Time to go." Had I been clear enough? I stood up and went into the house, not offering him another word. The door whacked the frame behind me.

Monday, June 18th, 9:20 AM

"Mr. Weston? Bob Piccolo is here," Maxine's wary, cigarette-heavy voice croaked into the intercom.

What was she so afraid of? "Yeah. Send him in."

Braced for a difficult scene, I located Bob's file on the top of the mountain of folders on my desk, flipped it open and carefully unfastened the black clips. I leafed through, pulled the separation agreement out and placed it on the opposite side of the desk.

A rap on the door and Bob, one of our site managers, sauntered in. Big, good looking guy from Torrington, he filled the doorway. His dusty khakis and casual plaid shirt indicated that he'd come here directly from the job site up on Midgeon Avenue. He'd kicked the dust off his boots before entering at least.

"You wanted to see me, Seth?" He settled his frame into the chair to my left, sprawling in his confident *I've had this job for twenty years* kind of way. His fingers stroked his heavy mustache.

Things were about to change for Bob. I steeled myself. "Yes I did. We're letting you go."

His sat up straight, eyes wide. "Wha—"

"I noticed you've been over-ordering and I had to look into it." He grew apprehensive. "I ran some cost analyses, and it's clear you've run over budget on a single line item since April. I have these," I handed him a packet of photos, "of you and your cousin Sal loading his truck from the job site last weekend. Rebar. Same item that has not piled up since April. Something a contractor like Sal might find useful on his

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own job sites.”

He paled and leaned forward. “I...I don’t know how...I—Seth, I had nothing to do with this. I can explain.”

“You need to sign this separation agreement. It states that you won’t take legal action against us for wrongful termination or seek unemployment benefits. You can bring it to your attorney first. I advise that you do so. I’ll offer this provided you are cleared out of here and off the premises by,” I checked the clock, “ten fifteen. I’ll need the keys to the company vehicle.” The police were waiting in the parking lot, so he’d have a ride.

“What? I’m not signing anything. Jesus, Weston, Gina’s pregnant. You don’t seriously think I did this, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You can’t just boot me out the door with nothing. I’ve been working here since I was in high school. Twenty years. I’ve never even been written up.”

“Be that as it may, I’m letting you go right now. You can go peacefully and take this with you, or I’ll have you escorted through the building by the police. Your call.”

“What about some kind of severance —”

“Get a job with your cousin, Bob. I want you off the property.”

“But what about my insurance?” he pleaded. “Can’t we work something out?”

Was he obtuse? “Nothing. There’s the door.” I refrained from telling him not to let it hit him in the ass on the way out.

Bob went from white to flaming red. “You are such a fucking dickhead, Weston. Ever since you got here —”

“The company has been in the black. We can’t keep you. The bottom line is: you’re a liability.”

Bob’s hand shook as he snatched the papers from my desk.

I held my hand out and he stared at me like I was crazy. I raised a brow at him. “Keys?”

“Fuck you, Weston.” He dug them out of his pocket, flung them on the desk and left the office.

I stacked the papers up, clipping them together, and stuck the file in my “out” box for Maxine to deliver to HR later. Bob had to go. Go with no insurance, no severance, no unemployment. It was his own damn fault.

I rolled my shoulders. It appeared to be a new habit for me, and I briefly considered calling David to schedule another massage. Maybe make a real “date” and relieve some of this other tension. I’d had him twice in as many days and it wasn’t enough. I needed to focus. Disciplined, I forced thoughts of David and everything else from my mind, and reached for the phone, ready to put out the next fire. It was time to speak with Larry about the call from Ben Martin.

It was already a long day.

Monday, June 18th, 6 PM

After work Molly and I walked three blocks over to the Smithfield Public Library. Set on the end of South Street in that no man's land where the borough faded into a rural country highway, it was gentle, unassuming and understated in its wealth. Architecturally, it resembled a onetime upscale nursing home, but I kept that to myself. The parking lot appeared full enough for a summer function and I was curious to see what kind of turnout he'd have.

We made our way into the children's book room, posters and colorful mobiles strung artfully around the walls. I knocked into a paper kite and sent it swirling in a tight spiral then found a spot against the back wall with the other dads. We nodded.

Molly skipped over to the kids, her pigtailed crooked again. She found Katie in what I assumed was a knot of David's brothers and sisters, their ages anywhere from six to maybe sixteen. The two girls grabbed carpet squares and settled themselves in the blond row. Molly squished in, her auburn hair a draw for my eyes. It kept me from watching the guest author too overtly. David unpacked his box of books and chatted with the librarians as people filtered into the now packed room. There was an easel set up with a large cover of Johnny Doughnut's latest caper.

I felt like I was on Mars.

David was introduced and all over again I experienced a rush of embarrassment for having behaved so badly. I hadn't had the sense to be ashamed because each time I thought I'd never see him again. No question that I'd been an ass.

I held up the back wall with the other rugged men, our masculinity secure in this

endeavor as David, self possessed and remarkable, began to read from what was, I knew now, a very clever book. And then my phone rang and we all swatted our pockets, acting sheepish and brawny. David's eyes met mine from across the room and he shook those twisted curls and smiled. The kids tittered over the ringing phone and their mother's shot me with their looks of displeasure.

I stepped into the stairwell to take the call from *Martin, B. Christ*. He would have gotten this number years ago from Nikki. Squirreling it away in his tree house with all his nuts and tinfoil hats.

"Hello."

"Seth?"

"Yes."

"It's Ben Martin."

I worked hard not to hang up. "Yes. I know."

"You called your attorney on me? What the fuck, man? I called once."

"It was the appropriate step given the circumstances."

"I think you're making a big deal over this. I think we can talk without getting anyone else involved. We're adults. We should get together to talk about Molly's future." He'd been drinking. His voice was loud against my skull as I exited through the glass doors and walked into the heat. A cigarette smoldered in the ashtray by the door, tendrils of smoke following me until I went around the corner just out of its reach.

"I don't think so. Nothing for us to talk about. If you'd like your attorney to contact mine, that'd be fine." He was going to be a problem. An expensive, litigious, ongoing problem. I liked to deal with those head on.

"Well I don't think it's right for some gay uncle to be raising my kid. That's like against nature or something."

"It's a good thing no one pays you to think."

"You need to take me seriously, Weston."

"Isn't my attorney serious enough for you? And I'm busy. I'll let Larry know you called."

"Now hold on there, you don't need to get him involved again. This is between

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us.”

And on it went for another fifteen seconds until I snapped the phone shut. I had entertained the conversation only as an escape from the reading upstairs. I braced myself and rejoined the group of men keeping company at the back of the room. David mesmerized his pint-sized crowd and continued to baffle and fascinate me. His voice was fluid, his body animated, his bearing assured. I had not fully appreciated his talent at every turn. Well. I’d appreciated one of his talents. Fully. We now had photos to remember it by.

My gut twisted. I’d not only put those damned pictures out of my mind, out of my computer bag and up onto my dresser; I’d failed to let David know. I needed to get on that immediately.

And I needed to speak with Larry, again, about Ben Martin. Molly Weston and I were a family. No one was going to threaten us and get away with it.

My temper had reached its boiling point and I knew I was frowning. David glanced my way curiously and I struggled to look engaged. Cheerful was out of the question. I was cranky, I was hungry, and all I could think about, as David sparkled like a fucking candle in front of me, was dealing with those goddamn pictures.

Mercifully, the reading ended and it was safe to roll my shoulders and neck. I made my way to the refreshment table and took a chocolate chip cookie. I stared mournfully at my Dixie cup half-filled with tepid lemonade. What I needed was a cup of coffee.

I mulled over those photos. It was inappropriate as hell in the kiddie room at the library but I needed to show them to David. I kept my eye on him as he worked the crowd of first and second graders and their well turned out, book buying moms. He high-fived Molly and Katie, which was sort of cute. The dads were choking down weak lemonade alongside me, checking the time, and trying to make conversation about the Red Sox.

Eventually, David joined us, relaxed and happy. I hoped like hell he wouldn’t offer to shake my hand. That would be too much, although he might do it just to see me falter. I was tired out, and he looked great in a crisply ironed shirt and slacks.

Professional and neat.

"Hey." He smiled wryly. "I'm glad you came."

"Well we were invited by the author; it seemed impolite to blow you off." I winced. All I could hear was the word *blow* followed by the word *you*. They seemed to fill the room. He made me excruciatingly self aware. I clamped down my discomfort. "You're just full of surprises."

"Well, I didn't want to brag, right? World-renowned children's author. Uh. That's a joke, right? I'm struggling like everyone else. But, yeah, thanks for coming."

I was bad at this kind of small talk. I cut to the chase. "So, listen, I'm wondering if you could swing by the house when you're through here."

He gave me a strange look. Disbelief? His eyebrows arched almost to his hairline and his eyes widened. I glanced around. "What?"

"You're hitting on me? Here?" He sputtered on a laugh and I flushed like a fifteen year old. Hot. Red as my hair I was certain. I clenched my teeth. I wouldn't hit on him here, that ass. What did he take me for?

"No. I am not. Just, I'd like fifteen minutes to talk to you," I ground out. Now he probably thought I was selling some kind of pyramid scheme. He nodded, still smiling smugly, and flitted off to bask in the adoration of Smithfield children.

I fumed and choked down another cookie.

I kept my irritation hidden as Miss Molly gabbed and twirled beside me on the walk back to Meadow Street. Her bright flip flops smacked the sidewalk in a sound I had come to associate with the color pink and little girls. *Flip-iddy flop. Flip-iddy flop*. She chatted about David and Katie and the library and her audio books and the snacks and day care and Prissy and Hannah Montana and it slowly dawned on me that she was healing from the loss of her mother. It was a staggering revelation. She was adapting while I still scrambled to find a rhythm to this new life of mine. Without Nikki.

* * * *

David arrived sometime close to nine, well after I'd tucked Molly into her bed at

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seven forty five. Self conscious about the state of the house (messy), and the state of my dress (still in my wrinkled work shirt and pants), I let him follow me through the shadowed hallway into the kitchen. We passed the snoring dog curled up in her bed by the pantry.

David took a seat at the table and I offered him a slice of cold sausage pizza. He was relaxed and handsome. I noted again that he really did look like an accomplished author in a decent collared shirt and khakis. He even had on dress shoes. Brown leather and not too shabby.

I snatched the plate back before he took it, "You're not going to tell me you don't eat dairy or some crap, right?"

"No. I'll eat anything you care to put in my mouth." He winked slyly.

Son of a –

I blinked at him. My stress level was so far off the chart that it hadn't entered my feeble mind that he'd come to flirt with me. That he had his own set of reasons for showing up. That he might want something from me. I swallowed hard. "You want a glass of wine?"

"Yeah sure. Whatta ya have? Pinot Grigio? Chardonnay?"

"What? No." I made a face. "I have Merlot or Cab. I've got a nice Pinot Noir from Sonoma. I don't drink white wine."

"Yeah. I get that. No thanks. I can't drink red wine. It gives me a headache from the tannins. Or the sulfites. One of the two. Or both. I guess I'll have a beer if you have one."

I snagged a summer ale from the fridge, popped the cap, and then paused before handing it over. "You're over twenty-one, right?"

He smile maddeningly, batted his lashes as he took the bottle from me. "Sixteen come September, Daddy."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. He was lightening my mood considerably.

"Twenty-six, Seth. Relax. You haven't soiled me. Yet." Yes, I had. All over his chin and neck and I didn't want that image in my head at this moment. "So. What's the deal? You didn't invite me over to drink and have cold pizza. Unless this is my official Seth

Weston date? Wait. Is it?" His grin widened. He looked around for Molly. "Where's Molly?"

"Asleep. No, this isn't a date." He was kidding right? "I wouldn't give you my leftovers. I have some standards." Not that I'd displayed any with him.

Should I encourage him, or move forward and show him the photos? He was enjoying himself. He took a bite of pizza, his elbows resting on the pine kitchen table, his jaw flexing, his shirt open at the throat, and again I wanted to lick that delicate skin. I stared at the succulent flesh at his throat's hollow and took a sip of wine, tamping down my unreasonable lust for David. Damn it, I needed to keep us on track. I slid the envelope over to him as he took a slug of beer to wash down his pizza.

"What's this? A hallmark card? How sensitive and unnecessary."

"No. I want you to see something."

"Sure." He gave me a curious look, and then dumped the photos out onto the table. It took him a second to realize what was in front of him. Just as I opened my mouth to explain, he flipped out.

"Holy fucking shit, Seth, what the hell is *this*?" David flew out of his chair with such force, it flipped over, crashing onto the floor. He spun around and threw the pictures in my face. I ducked. "*What the fuck is this?*"

He was on me fast, right up in my face. What the hell? I was utterly confused by his sudden fury. In retrospect, I should have prepared him better, but things had been so friendly I hadn't thought about anything other than getting this business over with.

With a speed I would never have expected, he threw his weight forward and roundhouse punched me square in the jaw. I hadn't braced myself and took that hit straight on. I staggered into the work island, hitting my side on the granite. I grabbed David's wrist as he came at me for a second swing. He attacked me with a strength, agility and violence that left me stunned. His face was mottled with fury, his hair wild; he looked like a beautiful and dangerous animal – narrow-eyed and on the attack. Little fucker could hit like a sledge hammer. I was impressed despite myself. "Calm down!" I captured both his flailing fists, my size and strength easily subduing him.

Until he maneuvered, dove under my arm, and smashed my instep. I had to let go.

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He got right up in my space, this time yelling, "What the hell are you trying to pull, Weston?" Rage-induced tears glossed his eyes and understanding dawned that I'd opened a wound. Whatever it was, it cut deep. I snatched both his wrists again, and held him flush against me to keep him from hurting either of us.

"Shhhh. Settle down. I didn't have anything to do with this. They arrived in my mailbox. I found them yesterday on my door and I wanted you to know."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"David." My voice sharp, I reiterated, "They were left here in my mail slot. Right outside my front door." I forced his wrists behind his back, his chin tipped up and his face was somehow both brave and frightened. "Listen to me, carefully. Someone watched us in the parking lot and took those pictures. Someone who knows me and where I live. Someone who probably wants to either scare me or piss me off."

David ceased struggling, my words beginning to work their way through the density of his anger. His body calmed but his voice came out hoarse. "What?"

"I don't know who did it or why, but I thought you should know. I'll call the authorities as well as my attorney. I wanted to speak with you first. I've had calls from Molly's biological father in the past few days and I think this might be related." He'd responded so violently I had to know. "Everything all right, David?" He was such a mass of intriguing contradictions. So mellow on the one hand and then he'd snapped and clipped me. Damn hard. "You okay? Can I let you go?" I relaxed my hold.

David wrenched his wrists free and spun around. I waited while he pulled himself back together; plainly he was having a hard time doing so. I was too aware of his volatile state to say anything that would push him.

But I was damned curious. What the hell was going on?

He stooped to pick up the photos, staring at them as the tension between us stretched to a thin brittle wire. He said nothing. Then with a small shake of his head, he slid the photos back into their hiding place. He handed me the envelope.

"I gotta go." He brushed past me toward the door.

"Wait." I made a grab for his arm but stopped myself. He'd just one-eightied on me and I needed to give him space. I could do little else but follow him as he marched

from the kitchen. I tried again. “David. Wait.” And through the rambling house, down the long hallway that led from the kitchen to the front entry, his strides long and purposeful, his body language closed. His curls were coiling and writhing like angry snakes as he stormed out of my house. Dust rose from the Persian hall runner and, in the back recesses of my mind, I wondered if my cleaning ladies had remembered to vacuum.

We were almost to the foot of the stairs when an earsplitting scream cut through the drama of David’s masterful exit. All thoughts of the photos and David’s bizarre reaction dissolved, my confusion washed away in the certainty that something was wrong with Molly. My heart lurched and both of us turned toward the sound. David flew up the stairs, beating me to the punch, and was already standing in the hall when I got to the landing. Molly frightened and sleep-rumpled, rushed out of her open doorway to throw her arms around David’s legs. Huge, gasping, heartbreaking—heartbroken—sounds came from her tiny sleep-addled form, her face blotchy and tear-stained. I’d never seen her like this.

David tugged her down with him to sit on the carpeted hallway, his back against the wall, the terrified child in his lap. I joined them; standing with nothing much to offer other than to wonder if someone had broken into the house. What else could have set her off? Molly secure with David, I went to her room, checked the windows, under the bed, her closet. I worked through the entire second floor of the house searching for an intruder.

The house safe, I came back to where the two were huddled. David was humming in a low, rich voice, rocking Molly with a casual confidence that seemed far out of my reach. She curled in his lap, the occasional hiccup wracking her frame, but asleep. Molly’s flowered pajamas stuck to her sweat soaked body. Her hair was plastered to her face. David’s shirt was wet with her tears, but he didn’t seem to mind. He reached a hand to me, never breaking rhythm, and grabbed on to pull me down to the floor beside them. I sat, feeling useless, while the two of them rocked peacefully. My jaw ached from the flying fist he’d landed and I rubbed my face. He made this whole comfort thing—this thing that didn’t come naturally for me—look so easy.

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"What the hell was that?" My voice rumbled over his humming.

"Night terror. Hasn't she had one before? Kids have them sometimes."

"No. Never. Well...not to my knowledge." Had Nikki or Annabelle said anything? I couldn't remember.

David moved to place her exhausted, damp form into my lap. A row of white circles traveled in a line up her freckled cheek—the imprint from David's dress shirt. "Here. You need to hold her." Like she was a puppy? I froze. Hold her? Other than after her mother died, I couldn't recall ever holding her. Annabelle was the one who did that. Sure, I held her hand a lot, and ruffled her hair, but holding her? It seemed the kind of thing someone else should do. That someone else should be responsible for. I wasn't exactly the comforting type.

"Seth. Take her." I nodded, my hands patting her shoulder with a painful inelegance that demonstrated my lack of experience. "Holy shit, Seth. You need to comfort her. What the hell? Haven't you done this before?"

My face burned. I tightened my lips, which made me wince, and gripped Molly to my chest. "We're fine. I'm fine."

"Seth. Katie told me that your sister died." His voice carried in the upstairs hallway. I hadn't told him anything. At all. When would I have? It wasn't like we'd had any conversation. I'd seen him as either a nuisance or a sexual aide. I settled Molly against me, careful not to wake her.

Her mouth fell open and she hiccupped.

I had to say something. David waited, open to my grief, his anger gone and concern visible in the lines of his body and his face. I knew that I needed to tell him what had happened, although it wasn't something I wanted to revisit.

"Yeah. She died in April. She had cancer and...it was aggressive. Ovarian cancer. We'd just turned thirty-six. She died the next week. Nik gave me full guardianship of Molly—I mean, I've been in charge since she started to fail in February. But I had help until about a month ago. Molly's had a tough time." I leaned down to place a small kiss on top of her sweaty head as my throat closed up. She was warm and salty and familiar.

"You've had a tough time, too, I imagine. I'm so sorry. You were twins?" I nodded.

David shook his head, wondering, "Where's the rest of your family? How come no one is here to help you two?"

I hated this part. "Molly's the rest of my family. My parents are out of the picture. They wouldn't come out for the funeral because they...took my being gay personally. They booted my ass out the door when I told them. It wasn't the happy clappy event it seems to have been for a lot of other people. So, Nikki and I made our own family. We always have. She followed me out here when I came for school. And when she got pregnant, they were on their own. He didn't want them. But I did." I swallowed past the now huge lump lodged above my Adam's apple. Looking down at all that auburn hair, the color so much like her mother's, I fought the emotions welling inside me. I missed Nikki. "I thought she was over this. I thought she was better."

"Who? Molly? Over what? Are you kidding? She's never going to be over this. You've just got to keep trying to be her parent and love her and make sure she knows you'll never leave her. That's huge." He tilted his head, an almost sad expression rippled across his features and then fled. The hall light reflected in that absurd gauge stretching his left lobe. His gaze turned assessing and I didn't care for it. Or his silly earring. "She needs to feel secure. I bet the nightmare means she's scared of losing you."

I wondered if he was onto something there.

"And for your information, it wasn't a happy clappy event in my house either, Seth. Don't think it was. It was painful and there were a lot of tears. But, at the time, it seemed the least of our problems." He paused. I had no idea what he was referring to and he didn't elaborate. "Besides, my family wouldn't ever turn their backs on me. They'd lose their favorite babysitter." He got up and reached for my hand, then helped me to my feet. My one arm clutched Molly. Again, it surprised me how much strength David had packed in that tight frame.

His hand squeezed mine and then he let go. "Put her to bed. I gotta head home. Catch you later, Seth."

He disappeared down the stairs and I caught that lingering scent of almonds. What the hell was that? *Soap? Shampoo? Massage oil?* His footsteps descended lightly on the treads, then the click of my front door and he was gone. He'd given me no explanation.

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No clue of what had really happened down stairs.

I tucked Molly back into her bed in what was no longer the guest room. Hadn't been for some time. I settled her covers, brushed her hair back from her face, and took a look around. She'd been in here a solid year, her dolls and clothing and staggering amount of pink doodads making a mess of the place; making it somehow her own. I hadn't done much to make it permanent. I needed to paint this damn room pink. Get some pink curtains. I sighed. Another trip to Target loomed on the horizon. I sensed I'd be spoiling this child if I wasn't careful.

Wednesday, June 20th

I exercised in my home gym every morning before work. I'd taken an empty room on the second floor and filled it with an elliptical and some free weights. At six eighteen the phone rang. I knew even before I picked up it was going to be the increasingly difficult and verbally unimaginative Ben Martin. This was the fourth call. I wiped my face on my shirt and answered the phone.

"Yeah."

"Weston?"

"Yeah. Just get to it. I've got things to do."

"You think this a joke?" His voice hiked an octave.

"Isn't it? What's your goal, Ben Martin? Do you have a plan? Are you trying to get custody of Molly? Visitation privileges? Are you making a political statement? Or, I know I'm reaching here, are you after money?"

"You think anyone's going to let you keep the kid?"

He was serious? "As original as that thought line is, Ben, you need to understand that the law in this state is clear. I believe it'll come as no surprise to my attorney that I'm gay. You gave up your rights. I have guardianship. I'm her next of kin, officially. So tell me, what is it you really want?"

"To drop this forever?"

He *was* serious. Unbelievable. "You did that six years ago. What will it take for you to stop calling? Another charge of harassment? I can handle that."

And he hung up. These calls were a waste of time and he was pissing me off. I set

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the answering machine and went to take my shower. Did he think I meant how much money do you want? Idiot.

But while Molly was brushing her teeth and getting ready for her day with Miss Pat, I was on the phone again – this time with Trooper Gervase.

Wednesday, June 20th, Late Afternoon

We were hanging out in the driveway after work. Molly was riding her bike in circles, the dog was sleeping and snuffling, I was busy hosing mildew off some lawn chairs and eating a granola bar, when a green Ford Escape pulled up to the curb. It was packed with people. David Cooke climbed out of the driver's seat as kids spilled out of every door. There were eight people crammed into that vehicle, like some kind of clown car in a circus. The Cooke Family Circus. I shut off the hose. Molly dumped her bike and ran down the driveway to Katie, who scrambled out last. I wondered if she'd been riding in the glove box. Where the hell had he fit all those kids? And wasn't that against the law?

David pointed my way, and then addressed the horde. "This is Mr. Weston. Behave or I'll kill you." I hadn't spoken to him since Monday evening, and I knew instantly that he was here to apologize for his outburst.

A teenage girl, impossibly blond, lean and pretty, came over and held out her hand, "Hi, Mr. Weston. I'm Claire Cooke. I'm eighteen. If you need a sitter, anytime, I'm available and my fee is negotiable. I have tons of experience, obvi, and I have references." I took her hand, speechless. What the hell did *obvi* mean?

"Just excuse her. She's trying to buy a car and she's shameless about drumming up business." Claire smacked him in the head, the gesture painfully familiar and lost to me forever.

There were too many people, blond people, milling around my driveway. I felt unusually introverted, hugely tall and old. I was used to the tall part. All the kids were

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talking at once, the noise raucous and high-pitched, and, glancing over at Molly, I saw that she was basking in the attention and having the time of her life. The kids admired her new bike and then they all started tearing through the grass after the dog, who incredibly, was *running*.

"So. Sorry to show up like this, uninvited, but my parents live on Old South. I promised them I'd take the kids to DiPino's."

"They have good calamari," was the only thing I could think of to say.

David smiled carefully and spoke to me as if I were addled. "Yes, but not on the menu for this crowd. I thought, while they're on West Street, maybe we could talk for a few minutes."

I glanced at Molly, who was running behind the bigger children, her sneakers muddy, her face glowing.

"She can go up with the kids for pizza." Doubtful. I hadn't ever let her do something like that. Was that strange? I must have looked skeptical at his pronouncement, because David went on to assured me, "Claire will keep an eye on them, and Mary's fifteen, she's good. They'll be fine."

"I don't know. She's only six."

"Seth, she'll have fun. The kid needs to have some fun. Katie's six, too. It's right up the street and we have cell phones."

The kids tore down the driveway toward us and I braced myself for collision. They stopped mere inches from my feet, breathless and laughing, everyone chorusing their hunger.

"I'll take them up. We'll be about an hour, okay, David?" Claire took the two small girls by the hand then turned toward me. She was a straight-shooter, that one. "Is that all right with you, Mr. Weston? This one's on me." And she grinned so wide I could finally see the resemblance to her brother. She had that manipulative gene.

"Please, Sethie, please please please?" Molly begged while bouncing. I was going to lose this battle.

"Okay. But you are to stay together and not let go of Claire's hand until you are in the restaurant. No. Soda." The kids groaned in unison. Even David groaned. What? I

relented. "One soda." She squeaked and jumped up and down more rapidly.

"Can it be root beer? Please?" I sighed and nodded. The group left in a jumble, taking the sidewalk by storm. They were only going a block and a half and I knew this was no big deal, but it was still hard. I needed her in my sphere of control.

"She'll be fine, Seth, and back in an hour. And she'll tell you all about her adventure." I swallowed. Molly was all I had left in the world and I liked her either with me, Annabelle, or in school. David went on. "She's really a nice kid and she's well behaved. It's Paulie Claire's going to have to nail to the floor. That's why we brought Mary. She'll sit on him."

"C'mon in." He followed me to the steps of the porch and on into the coolness of the hallway. My air conditioner chugged away, keeping the house a blissful sixty-eight degrees. The entry way was clean; the ladies I employed had come today, so the house smelled of pine sol, dryer sheets, and fresh linens. I loved Wednesdays.

Tuckered out from her run and searching for a place to sleep, Prissy strolled in behind us and plodded into the kitchen. We headed for the den, my favorite room in the house. A TV, a sofa, some books, and wireless internet are all I required to relax. It was a comfortable room. David began with no preamble as we entered. "I wanted to stop by, say that I was sorry I hit you—I'm not usually violent—and I thought maybe you should know what I found this afternoon."

He pulled a familiar manila envelope from his back pocket and casually tossed it onto the freshly dusted surface of my coffee table. I sat down on the couch and opened it—inside were the expected photos. They were the same. My face was still sinister and I had another moment's regret. I squelched it. That episode had been consensual, regardless of what was revealed in these images.

David took his keys and his phone from his back pocket, placing them on the table and sat beside me on the couch. He eyed the photos critically. "I look far too into this. Not as much the victim as one might think given that attractive snarl on your face. And the way you're fisting my hair. You were really butch. I can't believe how exciting that was." I caught his sly look. I had no idea what he was up to. It was fascinating and irritating.

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"So. You were going to tell me why I have to eat soup for a week." I rubbed my jaw to remind him while I stared at the photos. I didn't want to, but they kept luring me, their presence distracted me and turning me on. They were downright pornographic. It was startling, uncomfortable and...arousing. I cleared my throat. "You really want to look at these?"

"I do. I sort of have been caught on film before and I wanted to see how I compare." He said it offhandedly, but I heard the underlying pain of betrayal.

"Who did that to you?"

"My college roommate, Steven. It's one of the many reasons I live alone now. He thought it'd be funny to post some pictures of me and this guy I'd hooked up with. It was awful. I almost killed him. I mean I literally beat the shit out of him with my bare fists and then I destroyed his computer. With a baseball bat."

"Well, that's impressive. It probably worked as a deterrent for him to do it again, right?" David had a hair trigger? Was he dangerous? I doubted it. He was feisty and protective.

"He apologized, by the way. But everyone had seen them. Everyone in the dorm. My professors. Everyone. I was outed. It was humiliating and I wasn't ready. I was barely nineteen and I went a little crazy afterwards and did some self-destructive things. You know, the tattoos, the piercings, the children's books, a girl." My eyebrow went up. "Anyway...if those pictures were copied or someone publishes and distributes them, my writing career is over. But more importantly, my family would be devastated."

"I'll find out who took these and I'll take care of it."

He smiled, as if charmed by my vehemence. "You are the ultimate control freak, Seth Weston. I like that." Leaning in, he took me by surprise and pushed me back into the sofa with two hands on my chest. He scrabbled over to straddle my legs. "And we have the pictures to prove it," he purred. I sat still as he wantonly rubbed that eager, plump mouth against mine.

This was a new development. His jaw was baby smooth. He must have showered and shaved before coming over here. That almond fragrance was stronger and I knew

now that it was his soap, not some kind of residue from his day job.

I sank into the cushions, spread my arms wide, letting them rest against the back of the couch. I settled my legs, while he draped himself over me. I was curious to see what he had planned. "So, what's this? Your apology for punching me, or is this your big move? I thought we had things to discuss."

"We do. I have a list of questions starting with, what's your middle name and ending with, do you have herpes, but the kids will only be gone for another forty-five minutes. I thought my apology was more important." He ran his supple fingers through my hair, forcing my head back, and then he leaned in to kiss me fully. I gave him the reins for now. This was interesting. "Your hair is the most amazing color."

"Mm. I hear that sometimes." It was a dark rich red. Not much to be done with it but keep it short and clean. It was thick, though, and would curl if it grew any longer.

"Well, I like it." He whispered while massaging my scalp, those magic thumbs working my tired forehead. He had me in his control now, this boy wonder. My tension eased and I groaned.

"Yeah, I can see that. Keep going." I closed my eyes, relaxing into both the massage and his comfortable weight on and against my body. I wondered what he weighed. Not much.

I reached out to run my hand down his slim spine to that sweet tight ass of his and palmed it, cupped it. He wiggled back into me, with a happy sigh and I knew he was up for it. I smiled while my fingers explored the seam running down his jeans until I was trailing along that hot center I was hoping to suck and lick and fuck and tongue.

David's kiss moved to my cheek and then to my eyes, which was weird and unnecessary. It seemed to turn him on, though, so I let him do it. He whispered, "And your eyes are so green. They're like new moss or leaves."

"Mmmm..." The friction of his fingers circling and working the patch of stress behind my ears was heavenly. As was the heat of his crotch. I was sprawled like some pasha and he was all over me, my nimble, needy, horny harem boy. Yeah. This was working out great.

His lush mouth moved down my neck, his hands sliding around the front of my

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shoulders. "Do you think we have enough time?" he asked, deftly releasing the row of buttons down my shirt. His fingers sifted through the copper hair on my chest. Did he have a thing for red heads?

I glanced at my watch, lifting my wrist off the back of the couch. "We've got forty-two minutes. It all depends on what you have in mind." He tugged my shirt tails from my pants. I lifted my hips, gripping him nearly by the balls to keep him from tipping back.

"Oh. That's plenty of time." He sighed drawing his t-shirt over his head and I got a look, for the first time, at his nipple piercings. I almost came.

"Holy shit, you're just full of surprises, aren't you?" I tumbled him back onto the couch with a fast, powerful push, his spread thighs opened wider and his hot crotch lined up in exquisite perfection with mine. His cock, long and ready, pulsed into the heat of my own erection. I was drawn to that gleaming trinket in his flesh. I ate the fine, tiny silver hoop, sucked it, tasted the bite of metal against my tongue, pulled it until his nipple stretched and tightened and he moaned, the sound vibrating against my face. I wanted him, this weird, pierced, tattooed boy. I was going to explode inside him and I couldn't wait. My God. He was exotic and beautiful and unexpected.

And he was laughing at me.

"Gee, Seth, if I'd known you liked them so much, I'd have flashed you the other night. You're one of those stern, kinky republicans aren't you? I knew it."

My mouth left his tit. "Shut the fuck up and help me take your pants off." The clock was ticking down and I needed to get inside him. I was terse and frantic, which seemed to amuse David. As if this was part of his plan to make me fucking crazy. I yanked my sleeves over my hands and unbuckled my pants, got up, slammed and locked the door with a click. I kicked off my shoes, peeled down my socks and then stripped my slacks completely. My cock in its nest of auburn bobbed before me, the vein thick. I fisted my hands. "I don't have a condom."

David shimmied out of his jeans. He had nothing on underneath, but now, in the light of day, I could see the trailing serpent tattoo twisting up his thigh. My mouth went completely dry. "You have any more surprises?"

"You'll have to find out, big guy." He smiled batting his eyelashes, making me grind my teeth, and then, bless that sweet thing, he found a condom in his jeans and waggled it at me. "Surprise."

"Well, look at you."

"I knew what I was coming for, Seth. Didn't you, when you saw me get out of the car?" I shook my head. I hadn't had a clue. David drew me down between his slender thighs. My eyes followed a path from the serpent tattoo, to the splendor of his cock, then to the rings in his nipples, the ringed tattoos around his biceps, and finally to the blue gauges in his ears. He was everything I had never ever wanted. And I wanted him badly. I ran a finger along the ink on his thigh as he traced kisses along the hair trailing my abdomen.

He was whippet thin, yet muscular, his muscles long and perfectly delineated under my palms as I felt my way up his smooth body. His wide succulent lips mouthed me as I knelt over him. I fondled those piercings and grew even harder when he rolled the condom on me, his hands gripping and slipping and sure. He pulled me on top of him whispering sinfully into my ear, "I lubed my ass before I left the house, Seth. Really well. Lubed and stretched and practically fucked my own fist thinking about you. I came just getting myself ready, imagining how hard and wide your cock would be, how you'd fuck me and be rough and pissed off that I was going to come here and make you do this and how we'd only had a few minutes. How desperate you'd be. How you'd lose it and hold my legs up over my should—"

I did lose it. Right there my control snapped and I went wild on him. I shoved my tongue down his throat not sure if I really wanted to shut him up because he was driving me nuts or if I needed to eat those filthy, delicious words. I forced his knees over my shoulders and, Jesus, his ass was as ready as he'd promised, that teasing beautiful bitch. I slid into his puckered eager hole, firm and demanding.

He yanked my back by the hair, breaking the kiss, and those vibrant eyes locked on mine, "You like that, Seth. Don't you? Like it when you lose that tight hold of yours?"

I drove all the way home as he hissed and his eyes rolled back. "Yeah. I like it fine." I gritted out, not letting him adjust, just taking him because if ever anyone had

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asked for it, it was him.

David licked my mouth, "Me, too, baby."

Oh God.

His mouth, oh-so-soft, those full, succulent lips, I leaned in to kiss tenderly even as I reared back and plunged into him, all the way to the bottom of that cavern, until I couldn't reach any further. His body was hot, willing, perfectly prepared and open for me and I couldn't fuck him hard enough, fast enough, deep enough thinking about how he'd planned this for me. He was curled in a ball underneath me, his ass tipped up, his balls shriveled to a wrinkled knot. His body shuddered every time I hammered his sweet spot. This wasn't going to be pretty, but nothing so far had been with him. It was visceral, freeing, wild, and primitive and I'd lost my ability to hold anything back. He'd ruined me with his ridiculous taunts and humbling enthusiasm and those exotic tattoos and piercings.

He had my fucking number, for sure.

The couch groaned with the force of my desperation, our bodies slapping and fighting and straining until I felt the spasm in that dark embrace around my shaft. I couldn't look away as he started to come; his face sweaty and his mouth open, panting tiny breaths as he climbed closer toward the edge. He clawed my hips. His fingers scraped into my skin. He flushed and I drove hard and shoved him into his release. He shot quick, pumped and cried as I lapped into his mouth. Then I let my orgasm scream through me, jacking into his slender slutty body, and at the same time clutching him tight and near like a dear, favorite treasure. I ceased moving and became all sensation, fusing myself into his perfect flesh. Branding ownership onto him. I had a flash of such possessive fury I came with his name on my lips and his knees against my cheeks, my sweat soaked forehead against his.

"Yeah. I'm here," he whispered and I turned my head and tasted the white flesh of his knee, trying to get my breath back, my mind back...goddamn, my heart was slamming, my legs were cramping and he had to be squashed. Perspiration beaded on my forehead and wet him.

I pulled back, but he clutched me for just a second, "Wait. This is the part where

you kiss me and tell me it was great.”

“You’re a bossy one, aren’t ya?” But I did kiss him, soft and slow and lingering, and then I bit him lightly and slid out. “Shit.” I checked the time. “We’ve got about eleven minutes.” I dragged him up by the hand. “Your legs okay?” I tried to use my best ‘after the lovin’ tone of voice, but we needed to get a move on.

He spun to sitting and reached for his clothes, but I stopped him. “C’mon just gather ‘em up and we’ll hose off real quick.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to impose...”

He was such a character. Grinning, I took his hand. “C’mon.”

Thursday, June 21st, 4:30 PM

I stopped by the post office before they closed. It was yet another beautifully maintained historic building on South Street, just across from St. Joe's. The summer sun had coaxed the vivid colors from the potted flowers along the sidewalk in the historic district. It was a balmy, perfect June afternoon. I'd ducked out of the office for a quick meeting, and then opted to head home and work. I picked up the mail from my box, dumping most of it in the recycling bin by the door, and that's when, for whatever reason, I remembered my massage scheduled for Friday.

Stepping into the sweet summer air, I found my cell and called the spa. The phone rang as Quinn drove by the front of the building in his shiny new Mercedes. I saw the unfortunate moment he noticed my car. He parked in the spot next to my Land Cruiser. "Smithfield Spa!" The chipper voice of Deidre the up talker sang into my ear. She made every statement a question. It was grating but generational, so I did my best to tune it out. I was almost to my car.

"Deidre, it's Seth Weston."

"Hello Seth Weston! How may I help you?"

"I need to switch therapists. Can you book me an hour with David tomorrow?"

"Oh no? Was there some problem with Linda? I realize Linda had to leave last week? And she had to pick up her daughter? But she'll be so disappointed?"

"This has nothing to do with her services. I'd prefer to have a different therapist tomorrow."

"Oh. Please hold?"

Quinn climbed out of his car, over dressed as usual, and gave me an encouraging wave as he headed toward me. I ground my molars and hit the door lock, ignoring him.

"Seth!"

Shit.

I nodded at Quinn. What was the deal? I'd been clear to him on Sunday that I wasn't interested.

"Mr. Weston? This is Deidre?"

I sighed. "Yes, Deidre."

Quinn crossed my path. He looked at the phone in my hand and raised his eyebrows at me expectantly. Obviously he wanted my attention. "If I could have just a min—"

"Mr. Weston? David's not available for massage tomorrow?"

"What? Did you tell him it was me?" *What?*

Quinn pretended I wasn't standing two feet in front of him with a phone to my ear. "I said if I could just have a min—"

"He's unavailable?"

"He's available. Tell him to make himself available." He could move things around. He wasn't performing a kidney transplant; he worked in a glorified beauty parlor.

Quinn continued. "—maybe we could grab a cup—"

"Can you not see I'm in the middle of something?" I blasted.

"Oh. Excuse me, Mr. Weston?"

"Not you, Deidre. Is David there now?"

"He's with a client?" Shit. Was she asking, telling or making it up? "He's almost finished?"

"I'll bet."

"Excuse me?"

I passed Quinn and headed for the car.

"You tell Mr. Cooke to call me, please. Got that, Deidre?"

"Yes, of course?"

Happy Ending

I clicked both my jaw and the phone shut and got into the car, Quinn glaring at me. He grabbed the door before I could shut it. He simply reached in. He'd always been powerful and fit, if overdressed and he held the door effortlessly, stepping into the wedge-shaped space. Up close and personal. His tone was smooth as the silk tie he had knotted beneath his linen suit jacket. "Look. I'd like to speak with you. You're being extremely unreasonable."

"Is that what you've come back to town to tell me? Point taken. And let go of the door. I have to go pick up Molly. If you want to speak with me, you have my number. Have a nice day." I started the engine and shifted into reverse. "You should back up a pace there, Quinn."

His face closed and he got mean, "So that's it. I broke it off, sold you the house and now I'm the bad person because I didn't wait for a more convenient time to walk away? What was I supposed to do, Seth? Stay with you while I was that unhappy?"

"I'm not having this conversation on the street."

"You're never having this conversation. You don't converse, you never have. That was always the problem." And he stepped away, his clothing as bright as the June flowers lining the street.

I left without looking back.

* * * *

At six thirty, Molly and I walked Prissy down Meadow Street. The term 'walk' was used loosely in this case. We dragged that dumb dog down the block, stopping every three and half feet so that she could sniff, piddle, sit, scratch or sniff. It was an exercise in futility. Molly had on a pair of Barbie roller skates and she was bravely trying to skate on the sidewalk encumbered by her various pads and her bike helmet. She was cute, but not a roller skater by any stretch of the imagination.

My phone rang as I towed Prissy another forty-two inches down the pavement. "Hello?"

"I'm not going to be your massage therapist, Seth."

David. He seemed put out. "Why? What's the problem? I tip well."

I had the pleasure of hearing him sputter. "Don't treat me like an imbecile. I'll give you a free massage when you take me out on that date, 'kay? Remember the *date*, Seth? But no way am I going to do that at work. It's unprofessional and it'll cost me my job."

"You're being dramatic."

"You're being a prick. I'm not massaging you for cash, got it? Not going to happen. And Linda will be crushed, for *whatever* reason. You know, she relies on her steady clients. No. That's my offer."

I capitulated. He wanted a date? "Fine. We can have dinner tomorrow if you're free. And then we can go to your place." That ought to fix things up.

"We can have dinner." I could hear him smiling. "What time? Is this a date? You need to tell me. I need to actually hear you say the words, Seth. So that I can shower or not. I wouldn't want to presume."

"Yes, David, this constitutes a date. Will you please have dinner with me tomorrow night? I'll see if Annie can take Molly for the evening."

"Who? Who's Annie? Look, just let her stay with Katie and you can hire Claire to babysit. She's babysitting Katie anyway. She's very reasonably priced, I understand."

"Well—"

"Don't be so nervous. I'll pick them both up from Pat's tomorrow and bring them to Claire. I can take them to the boardwalk and then, I don't know, I could be over by seven." A note of hesitation, or reservation appeared.

"You are really something. Bossy."

"Is it a problem?"

"I'll be sure to let you know when it is."

"Okay." David finally ran out of steam. "So tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah. Sounds fine. But I cancelled my appointment. I'll expect some kind of repayment."

"Why am I doing this? Why?"

"I think you know why." I was flirting. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done it. I seemed rusty.

Happy Ending

"All right then. I'll see you tomorrow," he said again.

Prissy continued to plod her way toward the corner. I was feeling optimistic, and amazed by the positive turn my sex life had taken. David had brought a little color into my life and I found that I...liked it – that I liked him.

Molly wobbled further down the side walk, waving and smiling and grabbing onto lampposts. She was pretty entertaining. There were a few kids out on bikes, or walking up to Tommy's, the quaint, family run pharmacy on the corner of Meadow and West Street. They had penny candy that cost a nickel; a real treat.

My phone rang, again. No caller I.D. "H'Lo."

"Hey you queer bastard!" Ben Martin wheezed drunkenly into the phone.

I sighed. I had been feeling damned good a second ago. "Seems pretty early to be this impaired, Ben. Although, I can't say as I'm shocked."

"Yeah, well, it's after five."

"Is there something you need?"

"How's your little queer boyfriend?" He giggled. Beyond drunk, he bordered on incoherent. Great.

"Fine. How's yours?" I hated myself for saying it, but it seemed warranted. I asked, "How can I help you, Ben?"

"You can back the fuck off. All I want to know is if my kid is doing all right. And if Nik left me something. She was supposed to leave me something. And the fucking cops showed up at my job. They said I was harassing you."

"Imagine that."

"Look, I think Nik left me some stuff, right? She told me she would."

"Really? When was that?"

"I don't know. Last March? She and I talked and she said she'd leave some money for me."

"You extorted money from a dying woman? That's disgusting." If he'd been in front of me, I'd have ripped his throat out. How had Nikki gotten involved with this asshole? No wonder I'd never met him.

"Extort is a strong word, right? Maybe we only made an agreement."

“What kind of agreement?” Nikki hadn’t done anything. Her will stood. She must have lied to get him off the phone. It sounded just like her. Actually, it sounded just like me, too.

“You can pay up what she promised, and I’ll –”

“Even if Nik had left you something, which she did not, I’d make sure you didn’t see a penny. Hear me? You call me one more time and you’ll be in jail. Understand? One more call and I’ll be the one showing up at your job. I’ll kick your ass all the way to the town barracks.” I hung up. I wasn’t going to entertain this fool any longer. I was done. If he wanted to fuck with me or my family, I’d take him apart. Was there a person on this planet, other than my own dysfunctional parents, not motivated by my bank account? Molly could have every penny I had and then some. Everyone else could go to hell. I was sick to death being used.

Molly was heading back toward me, Prissy wagging her tail, her long basset ears drooped to the ground. She turned her waddly self around and we started our slow progress home.

Friday, June 22nd

I got home at six, not as tense as I thought I'd be having had to forego my weekly massage, but I had every intention of getting a rain check on that one later this evening. Stop and Shop had kindly prepared what I'd serve for this dinner date David had wrangled out of me. Ready-made fare covered the countertop: rotisserie chicken, baguette, bagged salad, mashed potatoes. We'd go out from here for dessert. I was thinking maybe his apartment. I was sure there'd be something tasty there.

David called to confirm that Molly and Katie were down at the boardwalk with him. I was faintly apprehensive, but fully intended on going through with the plan. I hadn't been on a date in a few years, although this didn't really represent my notion of a date. If things went well, I did want to go to the city with him or to the shore. I was stuffing all the wadded up plastic bags into a cupboard, the table set, a chilled bottle of Pinot Grigio waiting on the counter, when the doorbell rang.

From the entry, I could see Quinn standing at the door, his pressed pants pleated sharp as blades, his shirt crisp and blinding white. I sighed, looking at the last guy I'd been out with, and opened the door with great reluctance.

Up close, Quinn was sweaty in his dry cleaned clothing. "Seth."

"I thought you were going to call, Quinn. I'm busy. What do you want?"

His jaw tightened noticeably and then Quinn pushed into my house, uninvited. "If you would give me five flipping minutes, Seth. I don't think that's too much to ask."

"Well, yeah, actually it is." He sauntered on by. I couldn't grab him and throw him out the door, although I would have about six months ago. However, if he screwed this

thing up for me tonight, I swore to God I'd kill him. I wanted to get him out of here before David arrived. David was not the type to model good behavior when he was irritated. "I've got plans this evening."

"I'm sure you do." He smirked. And that fucker swept right down the hall toward the kitchen like he still owned half the place. I found myself following in his wake, wanting to wrap my hands around his shirt collar and throttle him. Why did he keep turning up like a bad penny? What could we have left to discuss? It had to be money. It was always money.

He came to a halt, his focus narrowing on the bottle of white wine sweating on the granite and all the other food items set out in their various state of undress. "This is nice. Your idea of a well prepared meal, as I recall. Hot date, Seth?" His inquiry pissed me off even more.

"No, brownie troop meeting. What do you need, Quinn?" I went to the fridge for a coke. I didn't offer him one.

Quinn squared his shoulders, making himself taller, or puffing up with self importance, and opened his maw. "I stopped by the other day to speak wi—"

My cell phone rang on the counter. It startled us both into silence, and then I picked it up, glancing at David's number. I hit talk. "David?"

"Seth. You've got to come down here. Please. Get in the car and come down to the Boardwalk right now. Oh, Jesus, I'm so sorry. Fuck. Jus—

"What's the matter? Calm down." I knew that it was Molly. Something terrible and Molly combined to render David frantic, barely coherent and hyperventilating. Remorse, quick and painful cut me. I shouldn't have let her go. And then everything stilled, time slowed and molasses filled my veins. Had she fallen in the water? Been bitten by a snake? David choked, almost in tears. My hand clenched the phone. "What happened? Is she hurt? Breathe and then tell me what happened."

"We were walking, almost to the wooden bridge, where the reeds are tall, and this guy comes out of nowhere..." His voice cracked and he stopped. I waited, fear fracturing my rigidity. It took David a few breaths before he calmed down enough to continue, "And I guess he just knocked me on the head with something. I don't know. I

Happy Ending

blacked out. I don't know, Seth. I have to call the police. He took her. Katie said this man scooped her up and took off running." He was gasping and raw. His guilt and terror were pulsing through the phone, sending me, finally, into motion. My fight or flight response propelled me forward as I ripped the back door open tumbling down the back steps and ran toward my car, the grip on my cell so fierce I thought I'd shatter it.

"Call 911—I'm coming right now. Did you look for her? Tell Katie to stay with you." I tried to remember if we'd ever spoken about abduction, if her school had, if her mother had, and I was sure, on all counts, that we had not. We'd assumed that we were safe here in Smithfield. She was only six.

I was in my Land Cruiser before I remembered my keys were in the bowl on the table in the front hall. I jumped back out of the car, my sweat running cold, and Quinn stepped into my path, his face concerned. "I'll drive you. Seth. C'mon." I didn't question his offer, I needed his help. I was somehow in that sleek Mercedes. Within seconds, Quinn was pulling far too carefully away from the curb.

"Faster. Please." My home was a half mile away. "They're at the boardwalk." And that was all I could get out. I sat clenching and unclenching my fists, my body pumping adrenaline, until we drove into the dead end where the back path to the boardwalk sliced into the darkening forest. The vast nature sanctuary encompassed much of the south western edge of Smithfield. David's Escape was parked along the edge of the trail. I was out the car door before the vehicle had completely stopped and set off at a sprint. I left Quinn and his Gucci loafers behind on the dirt road as I ran, taking the left fork where the forest opened. I flew down the narrow wooden walkway that looped the wet lands. The muted, sun-bleached boards creaked with my passage, scaring the beavers and snakes and crawling critters lurking beneath. Birds called. Tree frogs sang. Cicadas buzzed in the thick air. A breeze blew the grasses gently in the marshy area to my left as I sped, flat out, along the path. The rhythmic thud of my shoes resonated in the early evening tranquility as nature calmly accepted the frantic pulsing fear driving me. I was awake in that nightmare where I could never run fast enough or get there quickly enough to save her.

Up ahead, I found David waiting, blood coursing down his neck, soaking his shoulder. A very frightened Katie latched onto his hand, crying. He was gray. "Jesus, sit down before you fall down." I pushed him down onto the boards and he all but fell. "What happened?" I stared up the path, trying in vain to remember what she had on. Hoping to see her come skipping around the bend, all this a colossal mistake.

I needed to do something and my gaze fell on David. Red stained his yellow t-shirt. He didn't look half as injured as he did stricken with shame. "Seth. I'm sorry."

"Who was it? Someone we know?"

"I don't know...a blond guy. He was...maybe your age and, and he came jogging over the bridge—but not a jogger, you know?" He struggled to make sense. "Like dressed in jeans and work boots. We were just walking along. Counting the stupid birds... and the girls were gabbing and the next thing I know, I'm picking myself up off the ground and Katie's hysterical. Shit, Seth, he grabbed her."

My heart pushed adrenaline through my system. My chest constricted with the effort. It was clear David hadn't seen much and, damnit, I needed him to know more. I turned to Katie, small and terrified beside her brother. "Where did they go, Katie?"

From across the pond, sirens approached. They were nearing the west entrance to Smithfield Woods.

Katie dissolved further into tears. She'd been crying off and on, her face streaked, her eyes puffy and painful to see. My question set her off again. She pointed toward the bridge. "He picked her up, 'n she was trying to hit him 'n he picked her up 'n he ran away." Her breath hitched on each sentence.

It looked to me that David probably needed stitches; the blood was flowing down the side of his head. He had a gash in his hairline that was easily two inches wide. I pulled my polo over my head, wadding it to make a compress, and placed it carefully against David's scalp as he sucked in a breath and jerked. "Katie I want you to hold this, okay? Hold this against your brother's head? Do you understand? I need you to be his nurse." She nodded. Her little face earnest, her blue eyes wide and intelligent. "I want you to keep this right here while we wait for the police."

She put her slender hand over the compress and David winced again as she

Happy Ending

pressed down like a real trooper. Her voice high but firm, "Hold still."

Those tough Cooke kids were an impressive lot.

"Shit. Easy, okay?" David's lips whitened but he did as he was told and let his kid sister take care of him. That was somewhat alarming. "How's your vision?"

"Just go find her."

"Stay here, I'm going to go look." I started calling for her, my hands cupping my mouth. "*Molly!*" My voice carried far across the expanse of wetlands. Mosquitoes landed, biting, impervious to my increasing despair – or perhaps feasting on my fear. A pair of swans crossed the water, as my desperate call went unanswered.

I felt the pounding of feet on the path, the boards bouncing and creaking, as Quinn, elegant and unwanted, came into view. I jogged back to meet them and saw David's eyes narrow. He recognized Quinn instantly. "What the fuck is he doing here?" He brushed Katie's hand away and staggered to his feet, disbelief wrinkling his forehead and curling his lip.

"He drove me. Sit down, you're still bleeding."

"No." David held my shirt against his head as Katie shrunk into his side.

"I wanna go home, Daddy." Katie sobbed. I wondered if she was hurt or confused.

"I know, pumpkin, we have to wait, 'kay? Then I'll have Claire come get you. It won't take long." He brushed her hair with a caring hand, but he stared accusingly at me and then Quinn.

"Ah. The boy toy." Quinn's gaze raked David, his attitude stupidly out of place.

"*Jesus.*" David looked sick. He'd been hit hard enough to blackout, maybe he had a concussion. "She's missing. You stupid asshole." His voice broke again.

I ignored them. "*Molly!*" I called now to the south where high weeds blended seamlessly into the woods about two hundred yards away. Where was she? They could be anywhere.

I took off at a jog checking the ground, the path, the reeds, the brush, the deep water, the pond: I tried to take in every detail of the day, shouting her name endlessly, as the sun began slowly to sink behind the thick forest of pine where, thankfully, Trooper Tony Gervase came striding with great authority across the second bridge. My

relief was short-lived. This clarified things vividly for me. Molly was missing. Not hiding. Missing. Taken against her will. From me. Tony's dark, experienced eyes took in as much, hopefully more, details than I could ever hope to. His radio made intermittent noise, squawking and barking and I knew that every trooper at the barracks was on this. Everyone in Smithfield, possibly the county, was poised and waiting for what information David, Katie and I could give them.

"If you're coming this way, Seth, you need to hold up." He called from the foot bridge.

It took everything I had to stand there and wait. The evening air brought more mosquitoes up from the dank weeds along the water's edge. They feasted mercilessly on my arms, my naked chest and back, my neck, my head, as I stood there swatting and tense.

"Seth." Quinn asked. "Do you want me to wait back at the house?" I felt vomit work its way up my throat as I spun around to knock his lights out. He waited calmly, his question as inappropriate as his presence here. I knew he didn't mean to sound high-handed or unfeeling. He simply embodied those things and was fast becoming the perfect outlet for my grief, but David, closer and closer to the edge than even I, reached him first. In a move I knew firsthand, he surprised Quinn with a well-aimed blow straight in the jaw. We all froze as Quinn's head snapped back, his balance lost, arms flailing, he stumbled sideways. His feet slipped off the narrow walkway, and he fell into the marshy grasses that butted the walk. He landed on his ass in the mud.

David's trigger switched again. I didn't need this. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He turned, blood drying across his guilt-stained features. I ignored it. Ignored Quinn. Ignored everything but Tony Gervase, whose hand gripped my shoulder to squeeze.

"What happened?"

As Quinn lugged himself out of the water, sloshing back onto the raised wooden path—wisely keeping silent—David began to recount the afternoon. Tony interrupted only to ask pertinent information: What was she wearing? What did the abductor look like? Was it someone we knew? Did she go willingly? Had she been injured?

Happy Ending

I was going to be ill. My chest squeezed the air from my lungs. Tony asked me if I could think of anyone who would want to harm her. My eyes flickered unconsciously to Quinn, whose face blanched in shock, then back to Tony. "I think it was Ben Martin, the man whose been calling me. I told you about the photos."

Tony's radio crackled and he moved back a few yards to speak to whoever was on the line. I paced feeling useless, shaken, unnecessary, and angrier than I'd ever felt in my life. Quinn stood dripping and mud-stained, no doubt trying to figure out a quick escape from this messy family situation. I couldn't look at him. Would he press charges against David for assault? I'd have assaulted him on my own if David hadn't beaten me to the punch.

My movements took me up and over the bridge, searching the reeds and high cat tails, seeking foot prints, hoping for any evidence that they'd been past here. My eyes scanned the slats.

"Seth." Tony's deep baritone brought me back. "They have him. Ben Martin, he's at the west gate passed out in his truck." But my relief was short lived. Tony added, "But Molly's not with him."

* * * *

We started immediately, before more help could arrive. The distance between the two points—where she'd been abducted and where Ben was found—was only about a quarter mile. She was somewhere between the bridge and the west gate. I didn't think he'd hurt her; it didn't make any sense because all he wanted was money. What could he have hoped to achieve with Molly in tow? But it was plain that his actions were premeditated. He'd followed David and the girls here and he'd taken her. Although, drunk, he'd acted impulsively. I clenched my teeth and kept looking.

Tony found Molly's purple jelly shoe in the weeds on the far side of the third bridge. A stone and iron structure, about twenty feet in length, it was set high up off the water and curved in a careful arch—a deadly drop for a small child straight into the shallow, rocky water. "Seth, can she swim?"

"I think a little. I bet she could wade through that though, it's not deep." I scrambled down the embankment calling her name. The edge of the bridges met the board walk high up the bank and from my vantage point I could see a scrap of pink wedged tightly underneath the wooden lip.

Molly.

I think I called out. I may have. I must have. I plunged through the water, up to my thighs, the water sucking at my feet, slowing my progress. Again I experienced that eerie inability to move toward my goal— that slip of pink nestled between the boards and the earth. The mud held my shoes, the rocks slimy and slippery. It wasn't far. It felt like an eternity.

Molly was deeply hidden under the slats, and I reached up and into the dim burrow to grasp her warm little ankle. Tony was warning me to stop. Like hell I was going to stop. I yanked her out of her hidey hole, her clothing, her pink shorts and Minnie Mouse t shirt, streaked with mud and leaves, cobwebs and dirt, wet grass sticking. She started kicking, absolutely silent, and my heart eased. I knew that she was all right. Just scared.

"Molly. Molly it's me, baby. It's okay. I'm here." I got her all the way out, her eyes opened, shining with tears, and her wet thumb popped out of her mouth. There was blood down the front of her t-shirt and on her chin. She took a breath and burst into gut-wrenching tears, all the while clutching me tightly. "I'm here honey. I've got you." I held her securely, tucking her into my chest, relief bringing a surge of gratitude so profound that I felt light-headed. "It's okay, baby, hush."

"Seth." Tony led us both toward the shore as stinging insects swarmed us, the crickets and frogs chirping and singing in jubilation now as we climbed back up on the path.

Back on the boardwalk, David waited, tears in his eyes, Katie attached to him. "Oh thank God."

Tony came to check Molly. "Hey there, you all right? Hurt anywhere?"

She shook her head, her forehead rolling against my shoulder. She didn't want to speak to the stranger. Her tears were soaking me.

Happy Ending

My throat tightened. "How long do you figure he had her?"

David piped up, "It couldn't have been long, Seth."

I knelt down and placed Molly on her feet. "Stand up for me, little bit. Can you do that?"

She knuckled her eyes, nodding bravely. Her mouth quivered, but she tipped her chin proudly and stood still. "Did he hurt you, Mols?"

I'd kill him.

She shook her clever head. "He grabbed me and then I bit him. I bit him and he cried and dropped me and I ran away and hid." The blood on her face and shirt were Ben's.

"Good girl. Good thinking." She didn't appear hurt, her clothing was filthy and wet, but she didn't have any of her own blood on her. "I'm really proud of you," I choked, scooping her back into my arms. Tony's radio squawked and he herded us along the boardwalk.

We were nearly to the park exit when I looked back at David, Katie snuggled in his arms, riding high on his hip. His wide hand strayed to smooth her hair, and for a moment, her turned face relaxed, trusting on his shoulder, they looked identical but for their coloring. Their pose less like siblings—and more like mine and Molly's. David's eyes met mine; his mouth, so normally giving and welcome, tensed and I knew. I turned away, confused and unreasonably angry at this deceit, trying to recall our conversations. Had he told me Katie was his sister or had I assumed? Why would he lie? Why—how could he have given her up?

I lifted Molly more securely as we walked to the vehicles, lights flashing in the dense forest, troopers and ambulance on the scene, the scent of pine like Christmas. Exhausted, I shelved any thought of David. I followed Tony, hoping to make sense of the afternoon.

Saturday, June 23rd, 11 pm

Molly insisted that she go to Annabelle's as planned. Six years old and turning into a demanding wench. I was amused and relieved. I didn't want this experience to have made her any meeker. Far from it, she seemed empowered by the foiled abduction. She'd been smart enough to get away. Scrappy. That's what I liked. That's what Nikki had been like.

It was what David was like. I pushed that thought away.

I went up to the Village for a drink, hoping to give the photos to David. I wanted him to destroy them so he'd know they were gone. It was one of the mysteries surrounding him that I'd like to get some answers to, but I had no idea who'd taken the pictures.

Ben Martin had gotten soused at Gocchi's, a pizza joint/bar in Bantam, and had been driving through Smithfield when he passed David loading Molly into his Escape. Tony informed me later that Ben followed them and then parked at the other entrance, a half mile away.

Plan? No plan. He wanted a cut of Nikki's insurance money. His notion was that I'd pay in order to keep him from seeking custody of Molly. It was all outlandish and overreaching. I suggested that maybe he could try drying out and getting a job. It seemed unlikely. He claimed I'd pushed him over the edge. Had I? I wasn't in any way responsible for what had occurred, although I could have, maybe, heard him out. Apparently, I had a problem listening.

Still, he'd scooped Molly up of his own volition, and when she bit his cheek with

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all the power in her six year old jaws, he'd dropped her and she'd run, hiding in her tiny den. By that time David was calling for help and Ben had fled on foot, only to pass out at his vehicle, having quickly wet his whistle with a bottle of Jager.

I believed that our genes soundly beat his genes as they had formed and created Molly Weston. She was going to be just fine.

I figured I would be, too. I'd called Bob Piccolo earlier and dropped the charges against him. He'd been an asshole, for sure. He'd stolen from the company. But I also knew his cousin Sal and he'd probably put Bob up to it. Blackmailed him or coerced him. I realized I didn't want to discount twenty years of loyalty and dependability. While I couldn't hire him back, or even recommend him for a job elsewhere, I knew he'd gotten in over his head. I gave him his severance, which was generous on my part and allowed him benefits. It was as much as I could do.

The bar was packed, as usual, and I wove my way through to stand in the corner near the wait station. No sign of David. I blended into the back wall, looking around in what obviously was a single-minded search. One of the older waitresses came over to ring out an order. She slid me a knowing glance, "He's not here."

"Excuse me?"

"David. He's not here."

I flushed. "What makes you think I'm wait—"

"Look, Mr. Weston. You've been coming in here for two years. David refused to wait on you because you made him nervous. He swaps tables as soon as you sit down. That's what we call a 'red flag'."

"Excuse me?"

She laughed and her pony tail bobbed. "He likes you. And now you like him. You're circling each other. Hello? This is like talking to my seventh grader." She rolled her eyes and walked away.

This place was driving me insane. I left through the back door, the smell of French fries and the sound of the screen hitting the frame reminding me of last week's romantic interlude in the bushes. The parking lot was dark, weak circles of pooled light spilled here and there, more pretty than effective, and a real draw for the bats.

David's lights were on, as I made my way slowly up the stairs, wondering what the hell I was doing chasing after him. Returning the photos, getting answers.

Through the paned glass of his door, I could see into his place. I knocked and waited as he came briskly down the narrow hallway in that direct, busy way of his. Back lit, his hair coiled and bobbed. He unlatched the door carefully, his tee shirt and jeans covered in spots of something blue. His feet were bare and for some reason, they were blue. He swallowed. "Hey, I wasn't expecting you to come by."

I drew my gaze from his naked feet. He seemed so slight standing there in the open door way. Almost frail. The fine bones of his face were striking yet vulnerable in the harshly contrasted light of the stair landing. Flecks of color scattered across the bridge of his nose, his chin and neck, his hair, his hands, and I realized that he was covered in speckles, splatters and out right hand prints of blue paint. He'd brought new color into my life, surely, but what the hell was this? "What the hell are you doing?" I asked gruffly. Those words shouldn't have been my first.

At least his expression changed from subdued to confident. His eyes flashed and his cheek ticked. Then he sighed one of those huge breaths through his nose. "I'm rewriting the constitution. What do you think I'm doing?"

"Are you painting?"

"God, Seth. Sometimes I really wonder about you. Yes. I'm painting."

"A room or are you a painter, as well? Is there something you can't do?"

"Evidently I can't paint...c'mon in." I followed him down the hall, taking in the black and white photos of his family lining the walls. There was a large, poignant photo of him and Katie. She was a toddler in bibbed overalls. He smiled into the camera, far too young to have her.

We turned the corner and entered a vast room with high ceilings and tall, multi-paned windows looking out over the green and West Street. There were two rooms off the far end, facing the parking lot. Bedrooms, I assumed. Books lay everywhere. On the coffee table, the over-stocked bookshelves, the window ledges and stacked on the floor. The kitchen was part of the room. A long book-laden counter served as his table. The cupboards were without doors, their contents disorganized but oddly homey. The

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Smiths sang softly from speakers set high on the wall. The place really suited him.

In the near corner, an easel was set up. His canvas was...perhaps a portrait. Or a barn? Painted blue.

"This your blue period?"

He ignored me. "You know you never spoke a single word to me after we found Molly. Not one." His voice was so tight in that big space. Strained.

"I hadn't realized. I was not myself."

"I know that," he assured me. "I know that you were relieved and I'm sorry if I'm being self centered, but you said nothing. To me."

"I—"

"And then you glared at me and got in the cruiser and—that was it. You didn't call. Not that you owe me a phone call," he hastened to add, "Or need to check on me. But, I didn't know if I should call."

"David—"

"And I didn't know if you held me to blame, or who took her, or if she'd been hurt."

"David."

"Or if you had gotten back with that over dressed asswipe. But mostly because I needed to know if you both were all right." He turned his back and went over to the easel where his tragic painting waited for improvement.

I finally heard him. "What are you talking about? Back with *Quinn*?"

He shrugged, "He's been hanging around all week. On West Street, you know? Like, every time I turned around, he's having dinner or lunch downstairs. He came to the spa and had his hair cut. He's chatty with me, came on to me, sort of in my face with his...interest. He was there last Saturday when we—well, when we were together in the parking lot."

"No he wasn't."

"Yes. He was. I waited on him in the restaurant. You were in the bar. He tipped me pretty well. He was trying to lure me into his clutches. He came on strong. Seth, trust me, I know when someone's trying to pick me up."

"I don't doubt that. But, no offense, you're not his type."

"You're such an asshole." His voice broke as he stared out the window. "I'm not your type either, Weston. I get it. Loud and clear."

I'd have agreed with him a week ago. "That's not true."

"You know what? I want you to leave." He stood quietly, wearing his hurt openly. "Besides, I've got to clean up this mess." He slapped at his work with a brush, blue paint splattered. He was absolutely correct: he was no painter.

I took the brush away, surprised that he let me. His fingers found mine briefly, and I trailed my thumb against the smooth pads on their tips. I wanted to curl my fingers into his. But I didn't. "Listen. I wasn't saying you were substandard. Quite the contrary. I meant that Quinn has always been attracted to men who could provide material things. You are far more than he could ever handle, in the best possible sense. And you're right, I should have called and asked how you were doing and told you what was going on. That wasn't well done of me. How's your head?"

"Fine."

I knew that was a lie. "So, what do you want to know, David?"

Brave and forthright as ever, he laid it out there. "Do you hold me responsible for yesterday?"

"No. Not at all. That was Ben. And I guess partly my own fault for reacting the way I did. I pushed him. He was already infuriated that Nikki died and didn't leave him any money. Which is completely unfounded. Why would she? They were never married. He came back to town and saw us in the bar and he concocted some scheme or plot to bribe me for money. Then he got drunk and he saw you with Molly. He acted rashly and tried to take her." It made me sick to consider how close they'd been to leaving. "Jesus, he could have passed out driving her through town and killed them both."

"But she bit him and got away. She's a smart one. You've got yourself a dirty little fighter there."

"Yeah. She's proud of herself."

"That's good. I'm proud of her, too."

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There was more, I was sure. "What else?"

"What's the story with Quinn?"

"There is no story. He showed up uninvited, you called and he drove me down to the boardwalk. Case closed. I haven't heard from him since. I have no idea what he wants, but I assume it's the same as Martin."

"Money? Seth, that guy's loaded."

"No. That guy appears to be loaded. There's a big difference. It's like a scam he runs, dressing successfully to reel the big fish in. He's not all bad. He's a great cook. And he's...he's just got low earning potential and expensive taste. And crappy timing."

David looked affronted. "That is all bad, Seth. That defines *bad*. It's greed. He hurt you, whether you can ever admit it or not. He hit you low and hard and right where it counted at the worst time. He should have been there for you. It was a rotten thing to do. You have every right to be angry with him." I didn't argue. "Although I shouldn't have hit him."

"Probably. But he's gone now so I guess I should thank you for delivering a message he wasn't getting from me. Man, that's a great right hook."

"God. You must think I have anger issues. I don't. It's... been a tough week."

"Tell me about it," I agreed, "and I...I'm sorry I didn't call. I should have." We stood close, but not touching, while the paint dripped on the floor and the music played. The scent of his clean, sweet body mixed with the fumes of paint thinner and I had to stuff my hands into my pockets before I followed through on my need to stroke their backs against the hard line of his jaw. I wasn't sure that he'd allow me. Or that I would stop there. Besides, I had a question of my own. "So, when were you going to tell me about Katie?"

He sighed and bent over to wipe the floor with a rag, smearing paint in a perfect blue circle on the blond hardwood floor. And then I wondered, inappropriately, why the hell he didn't have something protecting the floor? Eventually he said, "You know, I wondered if that's what kept you from calling. That maybe you're...disappointed in me. It's not a big secret. A lot of people in town know, but it's just easier if we go on this way."

It had been the reason. I just didn't understand. "For whom?"

"For Katie. She's been with my parents since the night she was born. I...couldn't take care of her. I was nineteen, and I was messed up, and I'd come out—been outted—and then there I was with this tiny baby. Katie's mother did not factor into the equation."

"Where is she?" I tried to picture him with a woman and I couldn't.

"I have no idea. Nor do I care. "

"So you gave Katie up?"

"I knew you'd see it like this. Like I've in some way shirked my responsibility. "

I was striking him right in his weakest spot. This was the thing that most likely kept him awake at night. Made him work three jobs. Kept him living a mile from his parents' door. But the fact was: it did bother me. He had given her up. "How should I see it? You tell me."

Pain made his face harsh. "I wanted her but I had no way to care for her, Seth. Paulie was almost two and my mom...she brought Katie home and added her into the mix. She's my child on every piece of paper, my parents aren't her guardians; but she lives there, inside all that chaos learning how to get along with people and being part of a big, crazy family. That's what I wanted for her. What she deserved. I know you think that this is fucked up, Seth. That I've abandoned her or that I've walked away. But it works. She's with me all the time. We're close. She knows I love her and that I'm her father." His voice grew accusing. "She isn't an inconvenience or an afterthought or a duty."

I saw that for what it was. A direct hit. And low. I didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Is that what you think? We're coming along. Christ, Nikki died recently, David. Don't you judge us."

"Yeah. Well right back at you!" he snapped. "Not everyone lets go of their children due to tragedy—or disappointment and anger, Seth. Like your folks did."

I wasn't going to get into this further. My relationship with my parents had nothing to do with him or this conversation.

I drew the photos out of my back pocket, sealed in their envelope. "Look, I came by

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to give these to you. I wanted you to destroy them. So you wouldn't wonder."

He took them, his painted hands splattered in dark indigo, each pore and contour outlined. "Fine. Thanks."

Hurt and angry and probably confused by my sudden withdrawal, David waited. He couldn't know that what I needed was to pull him into me, gather him close and feel his warmth mingling with mine. Not to offer him comfort, but to maybe take a little for myself.

Instead, I walked out.

* * * *

I got back to the house and there was the ever timely Quinn, perched on the unwelcome wicker love seat, another cashmere sweater tied artfully around his shoulders. He watched as I came up the steps. It was so obvious now. I couldn't imagine him hitting on David or slinking around in the dark. However, the proof was in the pudding: here he was and the truth snapped into place. Maybe the Key West night life had changed him, or maybe I had never seen him for what he was. Jealous.

Dangerous.

Quinn waited with his usual courtesy for me to take a seat. I leaned on the railing, folding my arms across my chest. It was warm on the porch, and cars were active on Meadow Street, but I wasn't inviting him into the comfort and tranquility of my home. "So. You going to tell me why you took those pictures?"

He had the decency not to pretend. "I came back all set to look at some rental space, open a new shop, and yes, I need some financial assistance."

"Not surprising the way you blow through cash. But how could you believe that I'd be willing to help?"

"I thought maybe you could put in a good word for me. I wasn't going to ask you for money directly."

I bit my tongue.

He lost his bluster, his voice changing, "And I wanted to see you again. I found a

place Saturday afternoon. And then I went up to the Village for dinner, and I came on to your friend. David. He seemed so available. A sure thing. And I was lonely—I've been lonely."

"Keep going. Because the thought of you lurking in the parking lot like some kind of pervert is beyond comprehension."

"I wasn't *lurking*. I was in my car getting ready to leave and I saw you. I watched you and then David came outside and the two of you, together...well it made me nostalgic. And angry. It hurt seeing you with someone else. I never imagined that you'd want someone else, let alone someone that wrong for you."

"So you took out a camera and invaded my privacy."

"I'm sorry. I can't explain. I don't know what came over me."

"You delivered them. It was a threat."

"I'm sorry."

He blinked at me apologetically, but I didn't trust him. "And this was going to be, what? Your way of weaseling yourself back into my checking account?"

"No—"

"Or is this your idea of how to entice David into offering you the same treatment he offered me?" My voice was gaining in volume. "Is this your dating strategy, Quinn? Because he's too good for you. Shit. He's too good for me." I was furious. "Hear this. I'm not helping you open another business venture. Stay the hell away from me and mine, you understand?"

He didn't flinch at any of my words. I hadn't opened myself to anything with Quinn this time around and still he managed to sting me.

"Yes. I wanted you to see how inappropriate he was for you. I'm sorry. But then I realized that we were never going to be together again and that I was behaving like an ass. And then yesterday I came by to apologize and tell you the truth, and that ordeal happened with Molly. I was out of line there as well. I was just so...jealous."

At least he apologized. I'd like to say that I didn't care, but I found myself relieved that a bit of the Quinn I once knew existed under the new, emotionally unstable, stalker Quinn. I couldn't understand his actions, but his regret, and his confusion, was sincere.

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He sat on the wicker seat, his hands laced together, knuckles white. "I left Florida. I didn't like it and I wanted to come home. It was ridiculous to think that you'd want to see me again. And then I got so damn angry. I couldn't understand how you could choose that boy over someone more suitable."

"Like you?"

"I'm embarrassed and horrified, Seth. I am. I know I made a mistake; I just wanted my old life back."

"How do you know David?"

He shook his head in resignation. "I lived here for over a year. I know a lot of people. You'd grown anti-social. It was another part of the problem and another reason why I left—that and the fact you'd gone from being hard and sometimes unreasonable to cold and unfriendly. You changed."

Had I? I worked long hours and socializing had begun to infringe on my down time. He probably had a point. And then my family moved in and I had tough things to deal with. Alone.

"You have to tell me. What do you see in that man, Seth? He's wrong for you."

"None of your business." It had taken less than a week for me to see that as inappropriate as David appeared on the outside, inside, he was perfect for me. That appearances were often deceiving, because he balanced me. He made me feel like I'd joined the land of the living again, and that there were things to look forward to. Good surprises around every corner—particularly when we were naked. I needed to go back to his goddamn apartment and start all over again. Crawl if I had to.

I was startled when David stepped around the corner of the porch, still covered in that blue paint. All my anger at Quinn dissolved at the sight of his slight, beautiful body and those unruly curls. He must have cut through the parking lot and walked the tangled footpath behind Meadow Street, following me home. Relief flowed through me. His attention was focused on Quinn, who seemed somewhat undone by David's sudden arrival on my porch. David planted himself beside me. A breeze fluttered his hair and the neat perfection of his sideburn sent a rush of longing through me. I reached for his hand, unable to stop myself.

He gave Quinn a look that was as firm as his voice. "Will you destroy the pictures, Quinn?"

"David." I expected him to explode, to knock Quinn out with that amazing hook of his. Instead, he stood there tall as he could, willing to trust this over-dressed idiot. "We can involve the law if we need to."

Quinn sucked in a breath and I realized that, yet again, I'd taken the wrong tact.

"It's not necessary, Seth." David gave me a squeeze. Given his history, given the implied threat to his family and his career, why wasn't he demanding action? I would. And then, it hit me. For my sake. He wanted to take this leap of faith for me. I'd be apologizing all damn week to make up for being my usual inflexible self.

Quinn got up, reaching out a hand to David who shook it. "You have my word."

* * * *

David's palm smoothed across my bicep, his head resting comfortably on my chest as we lay naked at last in my bed. We'd made it up the stairs, losing our shoes, our clothing, and our injured feelings in a messy trail to my room. Dried paint flecked the sheets and stuck to my skin. He'd marked me.

"So, when will we have that date, do you think?"

I smiled into the darkness, my hand finally allowed the pleasure of sifting through the twists of his hair. I wrapped a long dark curl around my index finger, stretched it, and watched as it snapped back. "You mean this doesn't count as a date? You're a lot of work, you know that?" I felt him laugh. "What do you want to do?"

"Tomorrow. We can get the girls and go to the shore. It's Sunday, we have all day. They'll love it. We can lie in the sand, watch the boats, build a sand castle. We can take them to Abbott's." He rubbed his head into my hand, enjoying my attention. "What do you think?"

A day out with the kids? It was at odds with every notion I'd ever had of dating, but it was appropriate and fitting with this new life of mine. "Sounds perfect."

And I meant it.

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We hoped you enjoyed this erotic romance by L.B. Gregg. Be sure you check out *Gobsmacked*, the first book of the Men of Smithfield series and our full selection of erotica at Aspen Mountain Press!

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