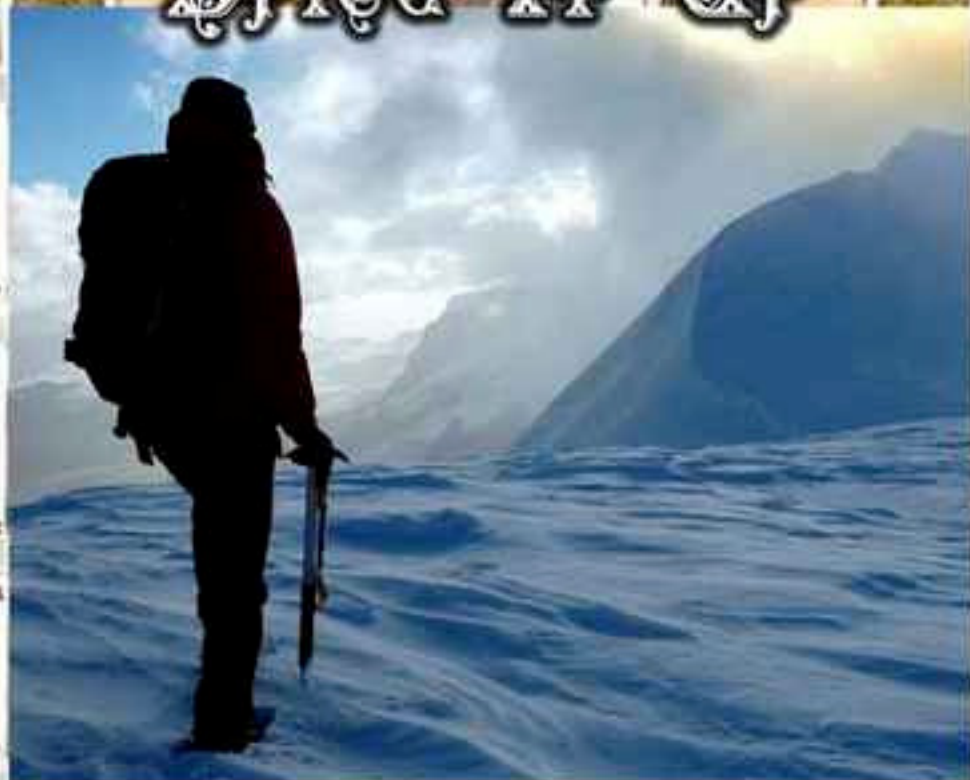


SPICE IT UP



Ginger: The Spice of Life

*Kara Larson*

TORQUERE PRESS

Ginger: The Spice of Life  
*by Kara Larson*

**Torquere Press**

[www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com)

Copyright ©2009 by Kara Larson

First published in [www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com), 2009

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

All his life, Donald had dreamed of one thing: the icy solitude of Antarctica. Sure, reading Lovecraft's *In the Mountains of Madness* might have skewed that desire somewhat while he was in high school, but he'd always loved stories about the last wilderness that was left on earth. Any kind of travel to far-away lands thrilled him, but Antarctica seemed like the prize destination, the epitome of exoticness. He devoured any travelogue or memoir he could get his hands on and had actually amassed a decent collection of Antarctic-related literature. His family all thought he was strange—stranger than usual, even if they didn't give him too much crap about his fascinations. After all, there were worse things to obsess over. And for the normal human being, Antarctica was about as obtainable as the moon. In a family who loved to travel—who had traveled the world over again and again and gladly sent postcards and knick-knacks home to him—his obsession made him stand out all the more.

He wasn't sure what was stopping him—no, he did know. He hated catching others' attention, which would probably explain his lack of romantic partners in the past five or six years. The moment someone's eyes focused on him he froze, which was why he tried to fade into the background as much as possible. That wasn't exactly the easiest task, what with his red hair. There was no beating around the bush; his hair wasn't strawberry blond or auburn. It was firetruck fucking red. He and his sister Nikki had once taken out every color of the crayon box to try and find the exact shade that matched their hair. Every red crayon from copper to red-orange to

brick red and chestnut had appeared somewhere in their hair. And since red hair seemed to be some kind of genetic defect on both sides of their families, Donald's relatives never let him or his sister forget how strange they were.

He had traveled outside his comfortable little town exactly two times in his life, and neither had been exactly pleasant. The one family trip to Hawaii when he was nine had pretty much put a fear of any stranger into him, especially after the one Hawaiian lady swore that the sun would never shine again if he continued to wear his hat. While he recognized now that the lady had meant it as a compliment, it had still scared the crap out of him as a little kid. For the entire rest of their week in Hawaii, he hadn't worn the bucket hat that his mom constantly plunked down on his head. As a consequence, he'd suffered second-degree sunburns that had blistered and peeled and generally caused so much pain that he never went outside again without a hat and slathering plenty of sunscreen on every visible portion of his skin.

Donald had never been comfortable with attention, and that only seemed to make him more self-conscious. Kids, being as evil as they were, called him Albino Boy for his pale skin and would occasionally make snarky remarks about his hair, but he didn't get it nearly as bad at school as Nikki did. She got called everything from Pippi to Little Orphan Annie to Carrots, though she at least hadn't cracked a slate over any boy's head. Once they were older, poor Nikki got tormented by the constant questions about if the carpet matched the drapes, or if there was fire down below. At least guys had a little more class when dealing with each other. Not that it was

Ginger: The Spice of Life  
*by Kara Larson*

excuseable to say such things to a woman, but they didn't harass him nearly as much. He guessed redheaded women were just sexier and more desirable than redheaded men. Or so he'd thought.

Enter London, and his brief, but painful affair with British culture. He'd gone away for a semester, intending to 'broaden his horizons' by studying in another country. Britain had history, it was home to some of the greatest Antarctic explorers, and they nominally spoke English there. He thought it would be a great experience, especially since supposedly the Irish and Scottish had the highest percentage of redheads in the world amongst their population. His own heritage was some bastardized mix of Scotch-Irish and Viking invaders.

Donald was wrong.

He'd wandered straight from the familiar and safe streets of his hometown into a culture that, apparently, doesn't take too highly to redheads. He'd never even heard of 'gingerism' until he set foot on the shores of Mother England, and was railed as a ginger bastard—ginger with that hard, derisive 'g' and dropped 'r.'

He knew he was a little passive for a redhead, that he didn't exhibit all of the vivacity and passion that a stereotypical redhead would. Yeah, he could get riled up into a right temper when he wanted to, but that usually drew unnecessary attention and often of the worst kind. He'd never really exhibited signs of that mercurial moodiness that seemed to follow redheads, not even as a small child. From what his parents said, he'd been a docile child and an even

Ginger: The Spice of Life  
*by Kara Larson*

more passive teenager. It wasn't his fault most people considered it boring. Okay, maybe it was, but he was decently content with his private world of books and expeditions across the Sub-Antarctic seas and continent.

Donald didn't want to blame those two unfortunate incidents, or how many Sunday school teachers had glared darkly at him, mentioning that Judas was thought to be a redhead. All his life, he'd wanted nothing better than to blend in, and it had never really gotten him anywhere. Shaved head, dyed hair, wearing a hat: it all felt fake eventually. He'd tried to be every Spice at some point: Posh, Sporty, Baby, Scary, but none of them seemed to work. Donald was stuck with being Ginger.

It could have been a lonelier life, he supposed. He had a good job and decent coworkers, not that they were friends or even really acquaintances. He saw his family on a regular basis, and made sure to go outside the apartment and the office at least once a day, even if it was just to the laundry room to get some form of social interaction. Even that was a struggle, though, sometimes. Maybe he was just imagining the stares, but each set of eyes that focused on brought back memories of those months in London, trapped in a foreign country with nothing familiar about, and being derided at every turn for the color of his hair.

Maybe there was something to that South Park episode after all.

Ginger and gay and wanting nothing to do with the world—no wonder he loved the thought of a continent with nothing but him and penguins on it.

Ginger: The Spice of Life  
by Kara Larson

\* \* \* \*

"C'mon," Donald muttered, thrusting his hands in his jacket pockets. The line at the Auto Club office was horrible today—much worse than it usually was on a Thursday afternoon. He wondered if everyone was trying to get their car reregistered at the same time, and why they'd all waited 'til the last minute, idiots that they were. Not that he'd waited 'til the last minute, mind. He just hadn't realized that his tags had almost expired. Better the Auto Club than the DMV, though, since even with an appointment, a day at the DMV could take more like a week.

Everyone ahead of him in line seemed to be taking their sweet time, chatting up the cute-looking guy behind the counter. Not that he blamed them, since the guy—of course, he was a brunette—seemed at ease with everyone, giving each person a smile and meeting their eyes with a sincerity that Donald certainly didn't feel, especially right at this moment. Maybe, if his boss hadn't yelled at him for leaving a few typos in an important business proposal this morning, he'd be more charitable toward the world.

He'd always thought that working at the Auto Club was one step above working at the DMV or the IRS. These people were paid to oversell you on car and house insurance, and had to perform DMV duties to boot. Couldn't be that much fun. More entertaining than his own job of proofreading technical manuals, mind, but not that much fun. Not enjoyable enough to warrant a bright smile and brown eyes that actually looked *happy*.

If Donald had been the typical redhead, he probably would have cursed and thrown the most melting-down of fits by now, raging at the sluggishness of the line and the ineffective staff. That, however, would have resulted in far more attention than Donald felt like dealing with right now. Better to slink off into the shadows and have no one notice you. It was perfectly acceptable to rage inside, dwelling on things until they gave you an ulcer or you ended up breaking that little glass penguin Nikki gave you for your last birthday. That's what he always convinced himself of. He'd rather do anything than draw attention to himself. Bad enough he was a short, slightly gawkish guy. Worse still when he was forced to take the ever-present hat off his head and bare his red pate to the world.

His sister kept him in stylish hats, at least, and by some luck, he was one of the few men who could get away with wearing various beanies, golf caps, newsboy caps and every other variety of hat on the planet. Anything with a brim had the added bonus of keeping the sun out of his eyes and off his albino-pale skin. No freckles for him to at least give him a hint of color—Donald was the last of the true redheads, with the pale skin and blue eyes. God, how he envied blonds and brunettes and every shade of not-red in-between.

While he'd been lost in his thoughts, the line had dispersed, and Donald found himself face to face with the handsome guy behind the counter—Bryan was his name.

"Can I help you?"



Donald stuttered, blushed, and looked down at his feet. "Um, registration?" he managed to get out, glancing up and shoving the DMV notice at Bryan.

Bryan eyed the date on the notice. "Waiting 'til the last minute, are we?" He grinned. Donald only blushed harder, sure his face was as red as his hair now.

"Um..." He took his hat off, only to have something to fidget with. "Yeah." A true redhead would have said something witty, would have made some sort of impression on Bryan, who was even better-looking close up than he had been from five people back in line. Bryan's brown eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, and his looks were so ... ordinary. Nice. Handsome, in that boy next-door look, if there was such a thing. His hair flopped around his face, much longer than the way Donald wore his. Donald had always preferred what his sister called the All-American Guy haircut: short, clipped, parted to the right, and boring.

That smile widened, showing off a set of deep dimples. "Don't worry about it, I'm just teasing." Bryan's eyes flickered toward Donald's hair. "You probably get that a lot, though."

To Donald's surprise, Bryan actually leaned forward, as if he wanted to share something important with Donald. "I know the feeling," he said, now whispering. "My last name's Shigut—it's Czech, and if you can imagine the crap I get for it..."

Donald actually found himself smiling back slightly. "Yeah ... Yeah, I guess I do." He dropped his eyes again, not sure what else to say.

Bryan seemed to sense the discomfort, because he went back to processing Donald's registration.

"Anything else I can help you with?" Bryan asked, handing Donald his new tags and registration paperwork. "Travel plans, maps, guidebooks?"

Visions of all those places he'd never been danced in his head as he mentally catalogued his postcards, his bric-a-brac, his magnets. "Antarctica," Donald choked out, not sure where it came from. His eyes actually met Bryan's. "Ant—"

Those eyes widened in surprise, before narrowing again, thoughtful. "I'm not sure if we have any information on Antarctica—we barely have anything on Europe, but..." Donald could sense a bit of excitement in Bryan's voice as the words started to come faster and faster. "I mean, I've..." He stumbled suddenly, as if he couldn't quite get his words out. "I've, um, heard, that is ... I was in Christchurch, y'know, where all the big scientific expeditions leave from, and I spent a couple hours—okay, a whole day—at the Antarctic Centre there."

"I have a postcard." Donald wondered if he had diarrhea of the mouth or something today, since he just kept blurting things out. "From the Centre. My parents got it for me." They'd been in New Zealand only last year, and while Mom hadn't wanted to encourage Donald's 'polar insanity' anymore, Dad was all too happy to send the obligatory postcard. The postcard had a place of honor on his fridge.

Bryan's face visibly brightened. "It's just such a fascinating place. I've heard you can actually visit Scott's hut—"

Someone behind Donald coughed impatiently, causing Bryan to blush now.

"Here." He scribbled something down on a piece of paper, shoving it toward Donald. "Let me see what we've got. Give me a call or shoot me an email at some point this week, and I'll let you know."

Donald stared at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand with wonder before looking back at Bryan. "Okay." Visions of penguins danced in his head. "I have a postcard," he repeated, not sure what else to say.

Again, those dimples smiled briefly at Donald. "Call me," Bryan said quietly. "I'll find something for you."

Donald nodded wordlessly, then backed away, toward the line for the cash register. "Thank you," was all he was able to choke out. He felt proud of himself for managing that much.

He wasn't sure how he managed to pay, get to his car, and drive back to his apartment, but somehow he made it.

Fumbling with his keys, he got into his apartment without too many problems, even if he did keep inserting the wrong key into the lock. How stupid had he been with Bryan, bursting out about Antarctica like that? He didn't have the money to afford airfare to the tip of darkest South America, much less the thousands of dollars for one of the good expeditions to Antarctica. He didn't want to take one of those crappy five-day trips out of Tierra del Fuego, where you were lucky if you got an hour in a Zodiac three days out of the trip. If he could pull it off, he wanted to do one of those month-long Heritage cruises to the Ross Ice Shelf, spending each evening learning the intricacies of life at Munroe or Scott

Base. Then again, if he could do what he really wanted, he would have applied for one of those random janitor/manual labor positions that occasionally came up on the Raytheon job search sites. He'd never seen any specific jobs for proofreaders or technical writers, but administrative positions came up every so often—not that he checked. A real redhead would have checked religiously and jumped on the chance as soon as it came up.

Too bad he wasn't a real redhead after all.

He sat on the couch, staring at the small scrap of paper in his hand. *Bryan Shigut*, it said, and gave a local phone number. While Donald wasn't exactly sure what an Auto Club agent could do for him to get him to the South Pole of all places, Bryan had at least smiled at him. Bryan even had the same postcards—had actually *been* to the International Antarctic Centre, which was farther than Donald had been.

Donald stood up and walked to the world map that hung on the living room wall, pins carefully marking all the places he had postcards from. The British Isles were noticeably unmarked, as his parents hadn't even dreamed of going there after the awful twelve months Donald had endured. He was happy that his family supported his eccentricities that much. While Mom had asked him, over and over again, why he just hadn't come home, Dad had at least grunted something about being proud of him for sticking it out with those 'stuck up Limey bastards.'

The world seemed so small, hanging on his wall as it was. His fingers traced the outline of Australia, marked off the steps between Bali and Moscow, and then followed the

twisting Amazon as it crossed the continent of South America. So much in the world that he'd never seen: he'd been born into a family of wanderers and gypsies. Mom was a Navy brat, so she had been raised around the world. That wandering lifestyle seemed to have deserted her when she had kids, though, since Donald and his sister were raised in one house on one street in Southern California. After all those years, Donald really hadn't seen much reason to leave. He'd gone to college here and he'd probably die here, because it was comfortable and familiar and so easy to hide away.

When he was a kid, he'd dreamed of entire countries of people with red hair, lands where no one was ever called carrot top or Pippi or Little Orphan Annie. Being a guy had excused him from that, at least; no one would ever compare *him* to Anne of Green Gables. Then again, if he was Anne, he probably would've cracked a slate over Gilbert Blythe's head too.

He didn't like his sheltered little life. He didn't like his routine of getting up at six thirty in the morning, doing a quick run on his treadmill before he got ready for work. He didn't love his lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, carrots, and the occasional treat of a chocolate chip cookie. Part of him wanted something different, something so far from his normal life, but he knew it would never happen.

Just like he'd never actually call Bryan.

He let go of the piece of paper, letting it flutter to the floor.

So much for the spice of life. Some people were just made for blandness.

\* \* \* \*

Life went on. Donald got up, went to work, read Michael Palin's latest travelogue at lunch, and then came home at night. For a while, he tried not to think about Antarctica and Bryan, so he watched National Geographic and Discovery, occasionally mixing it up with the latest history documentary about ancient China or the great empires that once covered the continent of Africa. He dreamed of elephants crossing the Alps, marching on Rome; of meeting the blonds and redheads of Kalash, deep in the Hindu Kush and said to be the descendents of one of Alexander the Great's lost legions. All the while, the harsh frozen whiteness was pushed back from his consciousness. He knew it wouldn't last long, but at least it would give him some peace for a little while.

While he dreamed, both asleep and awake, he still did nothing to actually accomplish anything. Maybe that was his greatest failing: his complacency. He refused to get off his butt and actually do something about life.

A real redhead...

A real redhead would have noticed the giant dog standing in the middle of the sidewalk in front of him before he almost walked into it. A real redhead would have used his secret psychic powers to discern that the mottled black-and-brown dog, whose head was almost level with Donald's chest, blocked his path before the dog let out a loud, "Woof!"

Donald blinked, trying to regain his sense of composure. "Um, hi?" Dogs didn't bother him anywhere near as much as people did, but this one was still ... startling, to say the least.

The dog's gaping maw opened, and it barked again, this bark rattling and echoing in Donald's chest cavity. "Woof."

"Houston, we may have a problem," he muttered to himself. "Um, dog, if you would mind shifting out of the way..."

The dog only stared back with deep-set brown eyes.

Donald looked up, hoping to see a person attached to the leash that the dog was trailing, quickly noticing that he wasn't in luck. "Great."

Hindquarters and long, whip-like tail began to wag. The dog came closer, pressing its huge jowls against Donald's arm and licking it.

Not knowing what else to do, Donald lifted his hand and cautiously petted the dog on the head. "Nice puppy," he said softly. "Too bad I don't have a ball, because that might actually distract you long enough until I could get away." It was his fault for taking a new way home from the library. He usually walked down the main street, but today, he'd decided to cut through the park instead. This particular part of the sidewalk cut between two overgrown hedges, leaving a space barely wide enough for two people, much less one person and one overlarge dog.

The dog's eyes seemed to focus on Donald's dark blue bucket hat, his headgear of choice when it came to blocking out the sun. He knew he looked ridiculous in it, especially with its extra-wide brim, but at least it was better than the FOB straw hat his sister had gotten him last Christmas as a joke. She was one of the few redheads who actually seemed to have melatonin in her skin. He hated her for it.

"No, no way. I don't think so." He put his free hand on his head, claspings the hat tighter to his scalp. Thank God he hadn't gotten any books out today. "The hat does not equal chew toy. If you think—"

A soft growl rumbled up from the dog's throat.

"Okay, here, have a hat."

The dog mouthed the hat, eyes still focused on Donald. His tail began to wag again, hindquarters moving with it.

"So that didn't exactly distract you..." Donald sighed. "Um, fetch? Sit? Stay?"

The dog blithely ignored Donald's attempt at commands, and his hat completely disappeared into the dog's mouth.

"I didn't want that back anyway."

"Chewie? Chewie!" The shouting voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Donald couldn't quite place it. The dog, however, raised his head as if he recognized it, and his tail began to wag even more furiously.

"I guess we've found your owner then." Hopefully that meant that Donald could at least pass. Hedges hemmed in the pavement, and he wasn't all that eager to run through a bush to get away from a drooling, rabid beast.

"Chewie!" The voice was closer now. The figure running toward them was tall, brown-haired, and reminded Donald of someone. He usually didn't notice people, since eye contact meant that you actually had to acknowledge someone's existence and make some kind of impression on them. But this guy, especially with the way his hair flopped into his eyes...



"Bad dog, Chewie!" the man scolded as he drew up close to Donald. "Thanks for—" He peered at Donald, a look of recognition on his face. "You! With Antarctica."

Donald blinked for a minute. "Bryan?" he said slowly, trying to remember. Then he felt his cheeks heat up. "From the Auto Club."

Bryan nodded. "Bryan Shigut. You're Donald. Donald ... something Scottish."

"McPhearson," Donald supplied, holding out his hand like his dad had always drilled into him. "It's McPhearson." He hoped he sounded a lot more confident than he felt, but doubted it.

Bryan took Donald's hand in his, shaking it lightly. "You didn't call," he said, giving Donald a reproachful look. "I thought we had a connection, what with Antarctica and all."

Donald knew his cheeks had to be rivaling his hair in color now. "Um..." he stammered, not sure what else to say. "I'm—" "Busy, dating someone, shy, a social outcast, haven't been laid by anything more than his own hand in four years ... He didn't exactly want to open the conversation with, "By the way, my last relationship—if you could call it that—was more of a trainwreck than actual dating..."

Bryan peered closer at Donald, still holding on to Donald's hand. Donald squirmed, trying not to pull away and hide under the weight of Bryan's gaze. "You are gay, right?" Now Bryan sounded uncertain, and he combed his free hand through his hair, making it all the more unruly. "My gaydar's usually pretty good, and you were cute and—"

"Cute?" No one had ever called him cute before, or if they had, it hadn't been in his hearing.

Those brown eyes were so serious now, so surprised. "Hasn't anyone ever told you?" Then Bryan groaned. "That's why you didn't call me. Because I made that crack about your hair."

"No, I—" he tried to cut in, but Bryan was really worked up now.

"I tried to flirt with you, and I made that dumb comment about your hair, and you probably hate that and—Chewie, what are you eating?" Bryan finally let go of his grip on Donald's hand, then pried open the dog's massive jaws with what looked like practiced ease. Donald shuddered slightly as one of those hands pulled out the remains of Donald's hat. "Shit."

"Not yet," Donald cracked, trying to be funny about it. That only made Bryan look more miserable.

"And my dumb-ass dog ate your hat." Bryan looked like he wanted to drop out of sight. "I'm so sorry, Donald. I'm such an idiot about all this."

"I gave him my hat. It wasn't—" Donald took a deep breath, wondering how normal people did this. Both Bryan and the dog seemed fixated on him now, their eyes boring into his very soul. "Um, can you ... can you not look at me for a minute?" When had his shyness turned into an anxiety attack waiting to happen? Had he been that out of touch with people for so long?

Dropping his eyes and focusing on his feet, Donald said in a rush, "Don't worry about the hat. I gave it to him to distract

him so I could get away." That probably sounded even dumber out loud than it had in his head, but there wasn't anything he could do about that now.

Then, to Donald's surprise, he heard Bryan laugh. It was a nice laugh, too, one that sounded like it came up from the belly, a real laugh, not just one of those fake, polite ones you got when you told a really bad joke.

He peeked up at Bryan, who was grinning again, that bright smile that Donald had admired so much at the Auto Club. Bryan leaned closer, looking curious. "And there you go, looking up at me through those eyelashes. Are they really blond?"

Waiting for the question about the curtains and the drapes, Donald held his breath and nodded.

But Bryan's only response was, "Cool. I've never seen anyone with eyelashes and eyebrows that color. Sunburns must be a bitch for you." Then Bryan sighed. "There my mouth goes again. Stupid."

"No, I..." Donald looked down, took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the intense focus of Bryan's eyes. "It's okay," he said slowly. Then he held out his hand, hoping this was the right thing to do. "I'm Donald McPhearson."

Bryan burst into that smile again, looking relieved. "Bryan Shigut. Nice to meet you. I think you've met Chewie the mastiff..."

\* \* \* \*

Donald figured that it couldn't hurt to walk Bryan and the dog home. Bryan had offered to buy him a new hat, since his

old one was apparently Chewie's new favorite toy. Bryan was surprised that the dog hadn't shredded it yet.

"If he gets anything soft, he usually guts it in seconds," Bryan said as they walked toward the new apartment complexes by what used to be the old Air Force base. "I brought him back a stuffed kangaroo dog toy from Australia, and he'd chewed one of the arms off not even a minute after I gave it to him."

"Australia?" Bryan worked for the Auto Club; maybe he got travel discounts or something.

Bryan grinned. "Yeah, I love travel. I just got back from a three-week vacation. I think I'm six years in the hole, vacation-wise, but work doesn't seem to care, since it's not like I'm taking paid time off. Which reminds me."

Donald eyed Bryan warily. "It does?"

"I didn't find out anything about Antarctica through Auto Club, but if you want some recommendations for cruises, I went on a great one last year."

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at Bryan. "You've been to Antarctica?" Even a deaf man could have heard the longing in Donald's voice. He'd never actually known anyone who understood his desire to go there, much less someone who'd actually made the trip.

Bryan turned back, flushing slightly as he did so. "Yeah, work doesn't like me announcing that all over the place. Especially since it's not a destination they specialize in, y'know? And I've only been working there for a little while, so..."

Donald forced his brain to put Antarctica aside for a second. "What else have you done?" Pretty much everyone in his experience had gone to school, gotten a job, and stuck with it for the past ten years. He'd been at his company for nearly four, and that's just because the proofreaders were the first thing to be cut in the big budget 'right-sizing' at his last job.

Bryan looked thoughtful. "Taught ESL in the JET program after I finished college. That was when I got infected with the travel bug." He grinned. "Cooked on a yacht in the Great Barrier Reef. Worked at a corner market—literally, a shack on someone's property—on the main island of Tonga."

And he'd managed to set foot on the last untamed frontier on the planet, and was both cute and personable to boot. Okay, maybe Bryan babbled a little bit, but it helped fill the silences that Donald couldn't seem to fill.

He must've been staring at his shoes for too long—almost time to get them resoled—because Bryan actually put a hand on Donald's shoulder, and he could feel a wet nose poking at his elbow.

"Nothing much has come of it," Bryan said softly. "I just made my own way. Find a new job every now and then." He gave Donald a crooked grin. "The spice of life and all that."

Donald snorted. His life was about as exciting as a side of steamed rice. Without the soy sauce.

Bryan must've sensed something about Donald's mood, because he didn't press any further. Instead, he prattled on about Chewie and how he'd acquired the huge mastiff. Donald caught something about rescuing the dog from a shelter a few

years ago, because the dog's former owners hadn't realized how big Chewie would get.

"I know he might not be with me as long as other dogs, but I still love him." Bryan lifted up a hand to pat Chewie on the head. "Even if he did eat the couch."

Donald blinked, jolted back into reality. "The whole couch?"

From Bryan's heavy sigh, Donald got his answer. "And the screen off the back door, and the door jamb, and..."

"But you leave him when you travel." If Bryan was gone that often, always flying off somewhere on a whim ... He knew there was a metaphor in there, and it probably tied into his own paranoia and loneliness, but still, he kind of felt bad for the dog.

Bryan had the decency to at least look a little ashamed at that. "I never like leaving him. I know he's not just a dog, but I just can't seem to stay put. I need to wander." He stopped, looking up at the building they now stood in front of. "Here's home. You want to come inside?"

Donald choked. "To see your etchings?" Wasn't that how it was done in all those old novels Nikki had devoured when they were little?

Bryan grinned. "If 'etchings' is what they're calling it now..." He shook his head. "Naw, I found a couple books on Antarctica. Did you know that Lonely Planet makes a guide?"

"Just updated it. I have it on order at the bookstore."

He looked at the small, slightly shabby looking apartment building. Two story and needing a paint job, it appeared to only have about four apartments, two up and two down.

Bryan led the way up to the lower apartment on the left, and turned to see if Donald was following. "You coming in?"

Donald rocked back and forth on his heels, hesitating. It wasn't like going into Bryan's apartment would require commitment or the start of a relationship or anything. He was just going in to look at Antarctica photos—one more thing to taunt him at the end of the day.

"I've got ... things..." He waved vaguely in the direction of 'away' and started to inch toward the sidewalk. "I can't."

To his credit, Bryan looked disappointed, even if Chewie didn't seem too impressed. "You have my number still?" That look of disappointment was replaced with a hopeful expression.

"Yeah, um, I think."

"Call me?" Donald wasn't sure why Bryan was being so persistent, but at this point, he was willing to do whatever he could to get away from Bryan's pleading brown eyes.

"Yeah, I—" Without another word, he took off back the way he'd come.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Out of instinct, he tried to pull his absent hat down farther over his eyes, only to realize that he'd lost it. At least he had others. Still, though ... One more piece of evidence pointing to the sadness of his own life.

As his feet automatically found their way home, he couldn't help feeling like he was letting an entire race—could they even call themselves a race? A mutant race?—of redheads down. History was peppered with redheads who had taken a stand about something and shone brightly because of it in the annals of history: Queen Elizabeth I, Menelaus, Erik

the Red, Boudicca. While he wasn't thrilled to add Judas Iscariot to that list, it was true that Judas had, in his own way, made a difference.

Nikki had gone on to make something of her life. She was successful at her job, had a wonderful husband, and had even managed to pop out 2.5 gingers of her own. She hadn't let the stigma of growing up red bother her in any way. She wasn't in therapy—at least, not for that—and she seemed like she had her life perfectly together.

Maybe it was time to take a stand of his own.

Donald stopped in his tracks and turned to face the direction of Bryan's apartment. He could do this. He could stop being a spectator and participate in his own life. He could control his own manifest destiny, or whatever the phrase was.

"Carpe diem," he muttered to himself, marching his feet to the beat of it. Right, left. Carpe, diem.

Head held high and actually looking the world directly in the eye, he arrived on Bryan's doorstep, filled with something he hadn't really felt before: purpose. So, with one deep breath, he knocked.

And the door was opened by some beautiful Asian boy, maybe mid-twenties and all golden skin and black silk hair. Shit.

"Um..." Had Bryan been inviting him in for a threesome? Was this guy just a roommate? Had Bryan been playing him the whole time? Men were bastards like that. Remember London, after all. Remember Will, that fuckwad, and how he'd lasted all of two months and a couple quick tumbles before



deciding that Donald didn't leave enough of a lasting impression for a relationship to, well, last.

The guy gave him an expectant look, and Donald just swallowed, not sure what else to say. "Um, Bryan—"

With a snort, the guy pointed to the door on the left. "Wrong apartment, fruitcake." And the door slammed in Donald's face.

Relief filled Donald's heart, easing tension that he hadn't even known existed. He backed down the steps and went over to the door on the left, scared at the happiness that rushed through him at the sound of Chewie's bark.

"Down, Chewie!" Bryan shouted from inside the apartment. "Let them ring the doorbell at least." The door was flung open, and Bryan stared at Donald, both hands holding onto Chewie's collar and straining at the effort.

"Hi," Donald said, not sure his follow-up should be. "Um ... plans changed?"

Bryan burst out into that sunny smile again. "C'mon in. Chewie's happy to see you." The huge mastiff's brindled hindquarters were wagging in a slow, laconic way. That was about the level of excitement Donald could handle at this moment.

"Yeah. I will. I, uh, I will." It wasn't exactly crossing the South Pole, but Donald did feel like this was some giant leap for mankind—or, at least, Donald McPhearson.

\* \* \* \*

Bryan's apartment was decorated in the same travel theme as Donald's, but that was where the similarities ended.

While Donald's books were organized by category and author, Bryan's seemed randomly stuck in the bookshelves, sharing shelf space with odd knick knacks and souvenirs that made up an even more eclectic collection than Donald had. Donald's postcards and Antarctica memorabilia were arranged carefully and aesthetically, while Bryan's travel mementos were hung haphazardly on the wall. An African mask lay on top of what looked like Chinese silk, while postcards were pinned across a faded world map that looked like the one that had hung in Donald's fourth grade classroom. The whole room seemed cluttered and disorganized—and even more of a home than Donald's small, neat apartment, where he'd lived the past seven years.

"It's..." He eyed the dog hair on the battered couch, the chew marks on the wooden coffee table.

"Crap, but it's home. When I'm here." Bryan grinned. "And I'm here probably nine months out of the year, give or take, so..."

"Your job pays the rent?" He wasn't going to judge, but he might be overpaying for an apartment just as shabby and just as small, on the 'better' side of town.

Bryan shrugged. "An inheritance pays most, and then I sublet it to friends when I'm gone. Jon next door takes care of Chewie then." At the sound of Jon's name, Chewie's tail began to wag.

"Jon's Asian? Young?" Handsomer than anyone deserved to be?

There was Bryan's grin again. "Remember: I'm the door on the left, he's the door on the right." His smile faltered. "If you

come back, I mean." It helped a little, when Bryan looked uncertain about whatever was going on. He seemed so full of confidence. Now, though, his blush made Donald feel better. "Um, Antarctica! Right."

Rummaging around in a woven straw box on one of the bookshelves, Bryan brought out an envelope, a handful of brightly-colored patches and a battered photo album. Donald couldn't help staring. This was better than the Antarctica exhibit they'd had at the aquarium a few years ago, complete with moldy mockup of Scott's hut. This was actual memorabilia from the frozen continent itself. This was...

He touched one of the patches with a reverent finger. "No T-shirts?" he asked, smiling slightly.

Bryan's mouth quirked up in a grin. "You have no idea. Everyone got Antarctica crap for Christmas that year. I try not to think about the hole it left in my wallet, since every station only takes cash." He pointed to a flag that hung on the wall: a blue and white shield rimmed in gold, with two penguins facing each other in the center around a map of one of the Antarctic peninsulas. "From Chile's Antarctic station."

Donald had to blink back tears. "You've been there."

Bryan nodded, looking like he had something caught in his own throat. "Yeah," he said softly. "I have." And he handed Donald the photo album.

Donald flipped through page after page of vivid pictures: icebergs, orca and seals, penguins. He traced the stark black outline of an orca against the white of the ice, feeling his heart pounding in his throat. There was a hut that he recognized as Robert Falcon Scott's last refuge against the

cold and starvation of the 1910 Terra Nova expedition. "Is it really—"

Again, that slow nod. "Exactly as when Scott ... left it," he said softly. "Except for the smell of rotting seal meat, it's ... yeah."

Donald noticed that their fingers lay close together on the page of the album. His hand automatically sought the warmth of Bryan's. "That's why," Donald said. "That's why I want to go there. To see this. To..." He struggled, not sure he could find the right word. "To remember."

"To mourn," Bryan added, his face flushing with color and excitement. "Because, while Shackleton was great, Scott died on the ice. And, from what the memoirs all say, he wasn't as pompous about it."

Scott had been Donald's hero since he was a kid. There wasn't a book on Scott or the Terra Nova expedition that he didn't own or hadn't read.

"He set out to reach the Pole, and while he didn't do it first, he still did it. And died of it." Donald traced the edge of the photographs, *wanting* so badly that it hurt.

Bryan opened his mouth to say something, probably even something profound, but Chewie interrupted it with a bark. "I think someone's hungry," Bryan said, looking a little disappointed. Donald knew the feeling.

"I'd probably better head home too," Donald added reluctantly. "I'm supposed to have dinner with my family tonight..."

"Sounds like you're looking forward to it," Bryan said, standing up and making his way toward the kitchen. Chewie happily followed, obviously anticipating dinner.

"They aren't bad. They travel—probably as much as you." Donald sighed. "I just—"

Bryan smiled slightly, an understanding smile. "You feel inadequate?"

Donald nodded furiously. "Exactly. Because they go and I..."

"Easy enough, we should just switch families. No one in my family likes to travel, and yours can take me traveling with them." Bryan's easygoing solution sounded so tempting, so...

Unrealistic. Donald felt himself shrinking into his old shell again. "Um, yeah, I have to..." He made his way toward the door, unable to take his eyes off the flag that hung above the couch, and everything it stood for.

"Maybe we could get coffee next week? Or dinner?" Bryan looked like he was trying not to sound too eager or hopeful.

Donald tried to evaluate the past hour or so. He'd honestly enjoyed Bryan's company, and the Antarctica memorabilia had only awakened that hunger in him for more of the adventure he'd denied himself. "Yes," he found himself saying. "That would be good, I think. Yeah."

Bryan's answering smile was enough to warm Donald's dull life for the rest of the week.

\* \* \* \*

It was almost two weeks before he could get together with Bryan. Work deadlines, a complete overhaul of the manuals he was proofreading, and family commitment after commitment took up all of his time. He did leave messages for Bryan, but never heard back. So it surprised Donald when Bryan finally called his cell phone.

"How about tonight?" Bryan asked, skipping the greeting and going straight to the message. "Wasn't that manual due to QA today?"

Donald sighed, wondering if he was up to being social. "As long as we can stay home," he said, feeling like someone had run him over with a steamroller.

"How about I cook you a nice meal?" Bryan asked, his voice full of concern. "I can send Chewie off to play at Jon's, so he won't try and molest us while we eat. We can watch that new documentary on NatGeo."

As much as Donald wanted to spend the evening alone, hiding from the world, this sounded like a palatable idea. "Okay."

"Great! What do or don't you eat?" He could hear the sounds of scrabbling coming from the other end. "I can make pasta. Or we could order pizza. I'm kind of a shitty cook, but I'd be happy to boil water and nuke veggies for you."

Donald chuckled, unable to help it. "That's fine with me. As long as it's food, I think I'm good." He checked his watch. "Twenty minutes okay?"

"Sounds good. I'll send Chewie over to Jon's now."

"Don't—" Donald started to protest, but then Bryan hung up. He didn't mind the dog *that* much. Chewie was just ... a lot of dog for one person to handle.

He drove to Bryan's house, trying to backtrack his way from the park. He found it without too much trouble, and this time actually knocked on the right door. When Bryan threw the door open, Donald couldn't help smiling back at the exuberant grin he received.

"Wine?" he asked, holding up the bottle of Two Buck Chuck he'd bought at the Trader Joe's around the corner from work.

Bryan grinned even wider, taking the bottle out of the bag. "Two Buck Chuck! Perfect for our bargain spaghetti and bulk-bought sauce." He let Donald in. "I did spring on real garlic bread for us, though. And a salad I actually chopped *and* tossed."

Donald put on his 'impressed' face, noticing the appetizing smells of Italian food wafting out from the kitchen. His stomach rumbled in response. "God, I'm hungry," he said, blushing as the words tumbled out of his mouth. "I mean—"

"Don't worry about it. I know you've had a long week." Bryan's hand touched Donald's shoulder briefly, then Bryan grabbed Donald by the hand and dragged him into the kitchen. "Come. Eat."

And then Bryan blushed, as if he caught the irony of that just as quickly as Donald did.

The food was good: nothing gourmet, but still filling and tasty, which was exactly what Donald needed. Bryan kept refilling both their wine glasses, and Donald was beginning to appreciate the warm fuzziness that stole over him.

"It's just so out of the way," Donald said, gesturing with his wineglass at the map on the wall. They sat on the battered couch, feet propped up on the coffee table. "No one goes there." He peered at Bryan, trying to focus on the right one of two that seemed to dance before his eyes. "How'd you get there?"

"Inheritance money," Bryan said, burping an Italian food burp. Donald could almost taste the garlic from where he sat, all but leaning up against Bryan's slumped body. "Parents died five years ago and I've got no sibs, so I sold the house and decided to go traveling." Though it came out as matter of fact, Donald could still hear some of the regret behind it.

"You sold the house you grew up in?" That sobered him up a little. He couldn't imagine leaving the town he was born, much less actually getting rid of something that represented childhood and safety and comfort to him.

Bryan seemed to sober up a little too, because he eyed Donald speculatively. "You've lived in the same house all your life, huh?"

Donald nodded, not liking where this was going.

"You travel at all?"

"England," Donald said cautiously. "Hawaii, when I was a kid."

Bryan's jaw dropped open. "That's it? Why? You make good money; your parents go everywhere..." Those brown eyes narrowed as they studied Donald. "You're scared," Bryan said finally, sounding triumphant. "You've got your nice little life, and you're scared to leave it."



"I did leave it once!" Donald shouted, not wanting to put up with this anymore. "You don't know anything about it."

"I know your type," Bryan said, and Donald dreaded the next words. "Typical redhead. All smoke, no fire."

Donald just stared at Bryan, not sure what else to do. So he fled, just like he always did. He bumped his way toward the door, resisting the urge to tear that Antarctic flag off the wall as he passed it.

He'd just about reached the door itself when a hand grabbed his arm. "Wait," Bryan said in a quiet voice. "Wait. I'm sorry. I—"

"I thought your family didn't like to travel," Donald said, the first thing that popped into his head.

"They don't—my aunt and uncles who are left. Mom and Dad loved it. That's why I went to Antarctica; it was the one continent they missed." Bryan's smile was sad, pained.

Donald put a hand on Bryan's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "I'm sorry," he said, not sure of what else to say. "I'm—I'm not good with this stuff, y'know? The social stuff."

Bryan's smile warmed a little. "I noticed at the Auto Club," he said in a teasing tone. He took Donald's free hand, linking their fingers together. "You aren't an easy guy to get to know, Donald McPhearson."

"I know." Donald tried to keep the regret out of his voice, but failed. "Not many people try to. And I try not to let them."

"Why not?" Bryan squeezed his hand. "What happened in London?"

Donald's throat closed up. "Stupid crap, stupid names, just ... stupid people," he managed to get out. "And I can't—"

Bryan kissed his knuckles lightly. "You can," he said. "You're better than all that crap."

"A real redhead—" Donald stopped, surprised that the words actually came out of his mouth.

"A real redhead," Bryan prompted, kissing the knuckles of Donald's caught hand again. "A real redhead would react exactly like he's supposed to, in character with his own personality." Bryan smiled slightly. "It's not like you're some cookie-cutter guy who should fit the perfect mold."

"I'm shy," Donald started. "I have no social skills, I hate—I hate people."

Bryan rested his forehead against Donald's, staring into Donald's eyes. "You hate people, or the attention?" he asked softly, eyes searching what felt like the depths of Donald's soul.

Donald dropped his eyes; the answer was obvious enough.

"You're passionate. You're kind. And you're afraid." Bryan tipped Donald's chin up with one finger. "And there's nothing wrong with that."

"You're afraid of staying, afraid of dying," Donald said suddenly, as if it all fit. "Afraid of..." He hesitated. "Commitment?"

Bryan shook his head wildly, almost bumping Donald's forehead. "No! Just ... just being static. Being..." He smiled slightly. "Ordinary. I always wanted to be a redhead."

Donald snorted. "So someone could call you 'filthy ginger bastard'?" He mimicked the hard British accent, emphasizing the cutting "guh" sound of the "g."

Bryan's fingers lightly touched Donald's hair, running through it softly. "That's what it was? Fuck, Donald..." The fingers slipped down, caressing Donald's cheek. Donald tried to hold himself back, not wanting to lean into the touch...

But he did.

"God," he whispered, relishing in the warmth against his face, turning into the touch like a cat would. "I missed this."

"How long?" Bryan asked, kissing his mouth lightly. "Months?"

"Years," Donald groaned against Bryan's mouth, wanting to capture it again. "Oh, years..."

Bryan's hand strayed, moving over Donald's back and crushing him close against Bryan's chest. Donald was relieved to find that Bryan wasn't too much taller than he was; yeah, he had to lean up to kiss Bryan, but he didn't have to go up on his toes. He didn't think he could handle that without wobbling.

The kisses grew frantic, and Donald could feel Bryan's erection rubbing up against his own. Resisting the urge to grind against it, Donald slipped his hands down over Bryan's worn jeans, stroking Bryan's thick cock through the soft material.

"God, Donald." Donald never thought he'd hear his name said like that, in that desperate, hoarse tone. "Donald, please..."

Donald slipped his hand into Bryan's now-tight jeans, grasping the thick cock and rubbing it lightly. He felt the round cock-head, not surprised to find it slightly sticky with what felt like pre-come.

"Bed?" Donald asked in a rush, trying not to let his fears hold him back.

"Bed," Bryan grunted back, his mouth attached to Donald's neck like a limpet.

They fumbled with clothes and bedcovers until they were good and naked, flesh against flesh. Donald knew how willing his body was, but just hoped it would be strong enough to wait a little. Bryan's mouth found his cock, and the exquisite wet heat was almost more than he could handle.

"I'm—I'm—" was all he could gasp out. A slicked finger teased at his hole, slipping in slightly. "God, Bryan, I'm—"

It didn't even take full penetration before he shot, falling back against the pillows of Bryan's rumpled bed. "Oh, God," he moaned, feeling his life flash before his eyes. He slumped against the pillows, knowing he should reciprocate.

His hands fumbled, then found Bryan's still hard cock. Lotion somehow found its way onto his hand, slicking it up. Fingers now good and lubricated, Donald slid them up and down Bryan's thick shaft, tracing the lines of veins that pulsed there. A little tickle to Bryan's balls, and Bryan's cock contracted, dribbling come all over Donald's hand. Bryan slumped against him, breathing heavily.

"We'll try more later," Bryan said. "God, I haven't come that fast since I was a teenager."

Donald tried to grin in Bryan's direction, but only succeeded in falling face first into a pillow. "Later is good. Coming is good," he muttered. It made sense in his head. He wasn't sure how it sounded outside of his mouth.

Fingers carded their way through his pubic hair, winding their way through the short ginger stubble at the base of his cock. "It's red," Bryan said, voice full of wonder. "You're ginger, through and through."

This time, Donald didn't flinch at the nickname. Of course, the orgasm probably helped. "Carpets and drapes match," he mumbled, pressing his lips to Bryan's forehead.

"Spice of life," Bryan added, sounding sleepy. "Except not in spaghetti, no matter what anyone tells you."

Donald grunted in response, not sure his brain could handle anything else.

\* \* \* \*

Donald woke up in the middle of the night, crowded between a huge, hairy body and a longer, leaner one. For a moment, he wondered where he was. Then dog drool dripped on his leg, and he realized that he was somehow sharing Bryan's adequate queen-sized bed with both Bryan and Bryan's hundred and eighty pound dog.

"Donald?" Bryan murmured sleepily. "You okay?" His hand found Donald's. "Oh, Chewie's home. Jon must've let him in."

Donald wormed his way closer to Bryan, trying to get out of the puddle of dog drool. "Did we lock the door?"

Bryan snorted. "I think we're lucky we closed the door." He curled up closer, one hand drifting southward toward Donald's cock again. "I think someone's getting ideas."

"And someone's dog is also drooling on my ass." Donald scooted over, wrapping the sheet around himself. "Chewie shares the bed?"

In the dim light of the room, Donald could barely make out Bryan's eyes. "Only when it's empty," Bryan said matter-of-factly, sounding more awake. "And it's been empty for a while."

"So..." He wasn't sure what he wanted to say, or how to say it. "Now what?"

Bryan leaned up on one elbow. "We date, I guess," he said slowly. "I'm not going to ask you to move in right away. But I would like to travel with you."

Donald's heart began pounding in his chest before he even knew what it meant. "Travel?" His voice cracked again.

Bryan's soft mouth kissed him lightly. "Not everyone thinks that stupid shit about redheads. In fact, some people think you're rather hot. I know Chewie does."

Donald chuckled. "I guess so." He supposed all those people could've been staring at him all those years because they were attracted to him, but he had his doubts. "Travel?"

Now it was Bryan's turn to laugh. "Don't know if I have enough money for that trip yet, but I think..." He paused for a while. "I think we will."

His heart caught in his throat again, and Donald couldn't swallow. "You'll drag me there."

He could hear the warmth in Bryan's voice. "I will drag you there, and then I'll take a picture of a penguin crapping on your foot, and you'll love it so much..."

"I'll love it." He could say that now, knowing that the same phrase might apply to something—or someone—else in the future. "I don't think I've loved anything in a long time."

Bryan's voice was gruff as he rolled over to kiss Donald again. "I don't think either of us have," he said quietly.

\* \* \* \*

Two years later, Bryan presented Donald with an envelope for their anniversary. "Open it," Bryan urged.

That old, familiar feeling of dread pooled at the pit of his stomach as Donald opened the envelope. "If you're dragging me off to some misbegotten corner of the globe now," he started. Then stopped.

Plane tickets to Auckland, New Zealand, and then to Invercargill. A bus ticket to Bluff. And a cruise pamphlet, made out for November—only six months away—in the name of Donald McPhearson.

To Antarctica.

"We stop at the Scott hut and the Discovery Hut," Bryan said softly. "I hope you don't mind..."

"I thought you didn't have any money!" Donald's hands shook, and he stared at Bryan in disbelief.

"Remember all those extra hours?"

Donald nodded.

"And we both save on rent now."

And, with Chewie gone to live with Donald's sister and her family, food bills were suddenly a lot lower—as were furniture replacement bills.

"I'm going to Antarctica." Donald still couldn't believe it.

"We're going," Bryan corrected. He grinned. "I couldn't let you go alone."

Donald kissed Bryan fiercely, not knowing what else to say.

"Thank you," he whispered over and over again. "Thank you."

Visions of penguins in their black and white tuxedos filled his head, followed by orcas chasing seals chasing birds among the icebergs. He couldn't comprehend it: a month of endless day, to be followed by a month of endless night.

"Maybe I picked the right spice," he said. Sporty and Baby and Scary had never been to Antarctica. Posh could probably afford it, but Ginger...

"What?" Bryan asked, distracted by where Donald's hand found itself.

"Ginger. I picked the right spice to be," Donald repeated, before realizing that there was no point. "Bryan. Love."

Bryan smiled at him. "Yes. Love." He poked Donald in the arm. "It's time to get off your ass and stop mooning about it. You've lived enough of your life on the couch. We need to go out and see more. Not to mention, get your passport all straightened out."

Donald shook slightly, not even trying to comprehend the work that was ahead of them, and how he was going to get six weeks of time off from work—since they'd probably want to see a bit of New Zealand and Tasmania on either side of the month-long cruise.

"Call it 'research' and write it off on your taxes," Bryan said, as if he could read Donald's worried mind. "How many vacation days do you have hoarded away?"



Ginger: The Spice of Life  
*by Kara Larson*

As Bryan's mouth found his, Donald couldn't help but think of how his life had changed. Yeah, they'd only been on small trips so far—back east, up to the Pacific Northwest, to Hawaii to prove that no native women wanted to sacrifice Donald to any sun god. While he doubted they'd ever see London together, he couldn't help letting the slightest bit of hope and excitement grow in him. Antarctica. The last frozen wilderness. The elusive seventh continent that so few visited.

Maybe ginger was the spice of life after all, if it got him all the way south and around the world again.