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Torquere Press

www.torquerepress.com

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First published in www.torquerepress.com, 2006

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THE HORNED LORD

All Hallows Eve.

Samhaine.

Hallowstide.

Mortal names for the night when the veil between real and unreal becomes as thin as an orb-spider's web.

I can hear him in my dreams as I sleep; my forever sleep, the death of my dreams. I am chained to darkness for sins not my own, the chants tease my mind. A rich voice, vibrating with the timber of loss says "*Adeo mihi meus diligo, cornu deus. Suscitatio ager, pario orbis terrarum ex suis somnus. Ego sum virgo, sum vestri carus,*" and I can see without sight. Dark brown hair, mahogany eyes flickering in the candle's light. What is he wearing? A few dollars of satin and leather cut tight. Purple, the color of the Gods of old, silver shackles wrapped across; he plays at deviltry. Be careful who you pretend to be on this hallowed eve. Do those sensuous lips know what words drip off their full, red surface? Do those wine addled hands understand the patterns they trace in the air? "*Orior oriri ortus. Orior oriri ortus quod adeo mihi.*"

Rise, rise, come to me my beloved, he calls me. A game, he thinks. A strange picture in a crumbly book is all I am to him. A prop for a party, a game for his friends, but nothing more than that, he believes. Any other night he would be right. Any fall of darkness that did not taste of pending winter and moldy graves could not quicken my heart. Moonlight that did not carry the cast of blood in its light would not drum its essence in my ears.

The howls of blackened cats are Sabbath orgies to me on this night. Trees show their bones to the world ... Can you catch the leaf as it falls? Is your heart pure, or will the heat of your passions drive it from your hand? Apples dangling from rafters just out of reach are the poison of my kiss. Does the wax form winding sheet or veil as it flows down the candle's base? Toss the chestnut to the fire and let me tell you what your future holds.

Beggars of candy, plead for my life, door to door to door, "tricks or treats." Do you remember? Does it sound in your heart of hearts? What of the old ways? Do shivers travel down your arm while you drop sugared sacrifices into the greedy hands of my surrogates? Every child is mine this night. Every adult who dons a mask becomes me. The demons within their souls boil to the surface. Dead and living tread the streets as one. Slough your body; take on mine. Become my priest dressed as murdered cop. Priestesses in stilettos and fishnets troll for souls to feed my hunger. Children's amusements are deadly, dark creatures at my command.

One thing left. One thing more. One more promise, my pet. Think it! Do it! You are drunk, my siren. It is so easy. Pick up the glass and bring it to your lips. "*Cernunnos!*" I

whisper through the eons. My name rocks his body. Blackened nails cut into his palm as he squeezes the chalice. A thousand shards of nightmares glitter on the floor. A single ruby of blood slips down his palm. Forever. Forever. Forever. No more. So tiny, so fragile, sangius, "*Ahhh*." The electric shiver shoots down my spine as the liquor of time is devoured by parchment.

The year is dying and I am resurrected, birthed into radiance by the ache of loss. A sucking wound eating though my psyche draws me forth. "*Vestri nex est hic*." Hisses from my mouth ... I have voice. It has been so long. Is it mine or one I have borrowed? It matters not, I would guess. Although sometimes I would like to remember what my voice sounded like.

My beloved cleaned, swept, and prepared. Guests he thought; he does not know of my arrival? But am I not his guest tonight? A broom of hazel above his bower and dried flowers are strewn across his coffer. Faded colors of summer, beloved, they offer no protection from those you bid enter. Incense, he burns incense. It hangs in the curtains and rugs, lingers in his sheets. The proper taste for a God floats across my tongue; patchouli and bay and pine and wormwood and vervain mixed with cloves, his musk and honey.

What wonders are here? Even my dreams would not have seen this. A tiny space of hopes and past fears; he hordes them like diamonds. The bed of hand-carved wood, his great-grandmother's nuptial rights; do you know what happened here, my sweet? I think not. Childhood romances held in the hearts of trinkets. Worn ribbons of past glories hang limp in shadow. Photographs and memories fade with time. Tragedy and hope are sown patchwork on the blanket. As my hand traces the stitches, I can taste his spirit.

The crone in black has left. Oak-Lord accompanies her through the portal of the years. Their life has passed through the sieve of time. He will cry for them I know. They are his friends. So young, I think. But it is not I who cuts the skein of time. It is their hour. It is rapture which should be in his voice, not screams. Chosen, few are chosen for such an honor. To be the old replaced by the new ... they are the passing. He and I, we are the seed under the blanket of winter. But I know he will not believe nor will he understand. The unforgiving loveliness of wisdom is mine. I will let him mourn when it is time.

Footsteps sound on the stair. The wavering tread of Bacchus brings him to me. I wait in the form he imagined. Blond, because he likes that; my hair breaks just below my ears. Dark pits of black inhabit my eyes. I could be any model ripped from the pages of the pornographic magazines that hide under his bed. Dark and secret rites are lost in their glossy pages. I know the names he has given them. I can see what he desired as they inspired his sighs in the darkness.

I turn at the breath of his entrance. Tracing patterns on the foot of the bed, I consider him. Damnation veils my gaze. What an exquisite form of a warrior. Hard, muscled; a body made for my passion. Shock, disbelief, fear all wick across his face at the sight of mine.

"Who are you?" Vainly he seeks to place me among his company tonight. There were many who came with others this evening. Guests of guests of guests; which one was I?

"The one you have called." I smile and he shudders.

A swallow before he speaks. "Yeah, cute buddy." He thinks he must be careful. The time is past for that. He thinks he must be strong; it does not carry through his words. "Get, get the fuck outa my bedroom!"

Spreading my hands as I approach, I say, "You have asked me to be here." The nearer I come, the deeper the fear. Such an aphrodisiac he offers me.

"You're fucked up. Seriously." He grabs a small wand from the table. A phone, it is called a phone and he thinks that it shall bring him aid. As he thinks it, I know it. "Get out before I call the cops." I understand that if he presses the glowing stars on its surface and speaks to it, men will hear his words. I cannot let that happen.

Lunging across the bed, I seize his wrist with one hand. As I slide off the far edge, I tear the phone from his grip, pulling him back and up off the floor. So strange it is, so light; the skin of it is warm from his hand. A fragile thing that shatters in my grip, glass-sharp edges bite my flesh. Dropping the broken thing, I catch his other hand in mine. My fingers lace into his own. The cuts on my skin well blood as black as midnight. It mixes with the red rivulets drying on his palm. My blood devours his, snaking back up his skin, burning into his wounds with the kiss of acid.

He yells. He struggles. As he thrashes against me, I become excited. I don't even know his name and yet I lust for him. What care I, what mortals call him? He is mine and that is all that matters. I shall give him a new name when it is time. "Are you trying to go somewhere?" I slam him back against a large chest of drawers. The mirror bangs against the wall. Little trinkets and bits of memory topple to the floor. He hisses from the pain. "I don't think so. You and I, we have something we must finish this night."

He kicks my leg. The hard heel of his boots tears through my pants and skin. His powerful fist wrapped in my own, I slam both against the mirror. Spider webs fracture out from his hand. I am not to be trifled with.

He spits in my face. "Fuck off!" Defiance creeps over his features.

"Such language, meus carus." Pushing him back, laying my body into his, I hiss. "That is, however, an interesting proposition." My mouth next to his ear. "Do you realize your guests are all gone away? The phone is a pile of litter on the floor. Who have you left to call?"

Kicking and squirming he tries to drive me off. "You wouldn't dare!"

"I wouldn't?" This man knows nothing of me. "Why not?"

A growl and again the challenge comes. "You wouldn't dare!" He does not believe in me. He has called me but he does not believe. What he has seen and he still does not believe. Mortal minds are as fragile as moth's wings.

"Who gave you that lie?" I laughed.

His breath catches. For a moment, he is still. "What do you mean? Who are you? What are you?" In that moment, it happens. The power of my form and his call works through his frame. He can't understand why his body responds, becomes hot to my touch. This is a dark, secret craving for him. He hides it so deep within his heart. Every fervent, whispered prayer, every desire he denied has brought us here.

For he spoke the words tonight. His lips called me forth. His voice gave me breath. His want fuels mine own. I am as much his as he is mine.

"Whoever, whatever I am, do not mistake me for a man. My centuries have taught me that one who 'wouldn't dare' is but a fable. A tale told to little children so that they will not see the wolf lurking under the skin." The smell of his fear, uncertainty and lust is delicious. "Do you not feel that beast moving inside yourself? It wants to run rampant. Let it." Soft colors drain from his face. His fate is written on mine.

"What do you want from me?" His defiance in the face of his own want fans my desire. To have called and not understood ... how fine is a wine that is stolen?

I catch his arms and pull him against my body. My face is breaths from his. "Fight yourself, my little mouse, I like it ... you like it, I know your soul." I lick his cheek and taste tears mixed with desire. Generations of denial fill my mouth. "You want this. You've wanted it forever. Secret, ashamed, you curried that favor. Don't fight the fate that gives it to you." He shudders under the touch of a cat-rough tongue.

Fear and hate and lust show in the brown of his eyes. His glare dips my senses in rime. It was what he has been waiting for, what he has wanted ... his most secret desire.

I push him down, squirming, onto his back, onto the floor. He kicks at me. I grab his legs, spreading them, dragging him back to where I kneel. His tunic bunches at his waist. Ripping the fragile barrier from between his thighs, I open my soul to drink his scent. Tight dark curls exposed, he flails wildly. Still he denies what his body demands, what it shows throbbing between his legs.

With one hand, I fumble with the buttons of my pants and pull myself free. I am his vision tonight. I am his terror. I am his lust. This was the way it is meant to be. For eons, it has been so. Bifurcate ... two at once, all for his pleasure; bone and flesh to rend his heart. The hard head of my cock drives into his supple body. He throws back his head, crying in pain at the granite bite of my entrance. Groaning in ecstasy as my other prick

pushes against his. So cold and so hot at the same time; I am sorry, meus carus. This is how it has been for my servants since time immemorial.

Frost washes down my back. "Crux, so beautiful." Breath breaking in my lungs, I slam into him. His channel sucks on my senses. How long, how long since I felt such as this? As I move within him, I loose more and more control, drowning in the heat licking up my thighs.

Freezing cold and burning hot all at the same time, I will burst before it ends. I am trembling as much as the man writhing, pleading, under me. Fingers rake my skin. Bites and moans drive me harder and faster. The sting as he claws my flesh is an uncommon treat. I like pain. It makes my ardor so much more intense. I feel life when I feel pain.

Never, in all my years of remembering, has it been this powerful before. Chills claw at the back of my legs and charge up my belly. Heat builds in the center of my groin and licks its way down through the nerves in my cock. Convulsions wrack my frame and a wordless scream bursts from my lungs as I pump my juices into him. Flooded with ice, he wails his release, his joining with me.

Underneath the surface of mortal delusion, I wrap his body in my soul. Sleep with me, my love. Drown in my forever sleep, the death of my dreams. To possess ... to have ... to destroy, this is what I am, what you have called for your lover. Mine. Forever mine.

No child will understand why you cry. No man can see the world with the vision I have given you. No woman shares your senses as my caresses make you tremble. Weep for no reason. Scream when no one is there. See my eyes in the darkness. This year I will walk the world in your mind, for I am resurrected in you. Let me feed you my visions, my love. Taste with me the mortal darkness on this hallowed night. You are mine, and I am yours, and we will share these things together.

OUT OF THE WOODS

Fuck his mouth, it was cold! Bare-ass naked, Stas knelt in the forest waiting for the first light of morning to break. It was early spring but ice still choked the Velikaya River. Snow clung to the ground wherever it could hide from the sun. Why did it always have to be hard to do these things? Knees on the earth, facing the east, he felt his balls crawl up inside his body; hiding from the cold. It felt like someone was driving nails through his skin. As his teeth chattered, Stas repeated the words his Baba had taught him:

"I, Stas, stand still, uttering a blessing.

I go from the room to the door, from the door to the courtyard, from the courtyard to the gates.

I go out into the open field.

I go out into the woods.

In the woods stands a cottage.

In the cottage lies a plank, under the plank is the longing.

The longing weeps.

The longing sobs, waiting to get at the sun."

You and me both, Stas couldn't help the thought. Aloud, he chanted, "I am the sun." His words came out in a gray cloud and hung in the air.

"Without the sun let it not be possible for Misha to live,

As a fish without water cannot breathe, as a babe without its mother cannot thrive, as a field without rain cannot grow so may he, without me, not be able to live, nor to be, nor to eat, nor to drink, nor by the evening glow;

neither every day, not at mid-day, nor under the many stars, nor together with the stormy winds.

Neither under the sun by day, nor under the moon by night."

God, Misha was gorgeous. With his close-cropped brown hair and bright green eyes, Misha only had to look toward Stas to have him hard. On quiet winter nights, Stas would hide and watch him standing out in front of the police station in his great coat and blue fur hat with the other officers. They'd smoke and tease before heading home, or inside, or into the streets. In the summer, Misha would wander past his Baba's café. Black paramilitary pants, combat boots and robin's egg blue shirt were all sucked up to a toned body. It had taken him almost a month of bugging the prostitutes and vendors along his beat to discover Misha's name. No one knew where he lived. The best anyone could answer was "outside of town."

Stas wanted him like nothing else. The next words were easy; *make him want me like I want him...*

"Plunge thyself, O longing,

Into his breast

Into his heart gnaw thy way, O longing, into his breast, into his heart;

grow and increase in all his veins, in all his bones, with pain and thirst for me!"

Quickly he dug a small pit in the frozen earth. It was hard going even with his pocket knife. Stas dropped the little bundle with a few coins, a pack of cigarettes and a butt Misha had flicked into the gutter into the ground and patted the earth firm above it. Hopefully it was a good enough offering for the Leshii. Hopefully it would work this time. He looked over at the eight identical sacrifices he'd left over the fall and winter ... probably not; this was one uncooperative forest demon.

"I Stas,

The fair sun, wait, enjoy, and rejoice.

So may he wait, longing to get to me, and having done so, may he enjoy himself and rejoice!"

Stas cracked the seal on a bottle of Vodka and took a healthy swig; swishing it in his mouth for a moment before spitting it over the burial. The next shot he swallowed. Then the rest of the Vodka gurgled out over the earth. Shivering, he ran for his clothes. With a little luck, he'd find a lorry heading back to town. Otherwise, the walk back was going to be a whore.

Luck was with him and he hitched a ride on the back of a motorcycle. Stas generally had luck. His Baba had taught him how to get and keep luck. It was still early morning when he stepped through the door of their little sixth-floor walk-up flat. Stas hung up his coat, gloves and hat stowed in the pockets, and kicked off his outside shoes. The coat room exited into the kitchen.

Daily living took place in the kitchen of their one bedroom apartment. Stas had the six by eight living-room for himself, his Baba slept in the even smaller bedroom with her parakeet. Still, at least here he had his own room. In his parent's apartment, which was bigger, he'd shared a room with his two brothers. The aroma of Baba's cooking engulfed him as he pushed aside the worn Oriental rug, which served as a door between the spaces. The parakeet bobbed on her shoulder, scolding him in greeting.

Baba had his breakfast of an egg and milk soaked bread on the table waiting for him. Brownish water dripped from the heater into the sink, spattering the dry dishes racked above. As he bent to kiss her forehead, "So what did you ask for in the woods, Stas?" A chubby hand came up to pat his cheek.

He sighed. Baba knew him ... she knew what he liked. But it always pained her a little. She thought Stas ought to give her grandchildren. "Baba, I just, I just wished him to know I was here." She also knew exactly who *he* was.

"And Stas, who steals cars, asked that a *Ment* would know he was there." Baba turned from the stove and whacked the back of his head with her ladle. Beets ran like blood down his neck. "Is your head made of wood boy ... a policeman, what are you thinking?"

Stas didn't steal cars, but that's what he told Baba he did. She would not be happy with his actual position with the Bratva. He was far higher up in the Russian Mob than the milk-sucker of car thief he'd started out as.

Stas wiped the borscht off with the corner of her apron. A few more lines of worry worked into her face. To ease them he chided her, "I love you, Baba. Don't fret. I can take care of myself." Then he blew her a kiss and earned a smile. Wolfing down the food before he headed to bed ... the things he did were more suited for the night shift.

It was late afternoon when he woke. Stas stripped his sweater and headed toward the water-closet. Crudely drawn eyes peered from the small of his back. They'd held him down and forced the blue ink under his skin. Below the eyes was the word *Goat*. Each of the three men who'd put the grin on him hadn't lived more than a week ... all went in gruesome and inexplicable "accidents." After that, they'd recognized him as *Koldun*, a sorcerer, and no one would dare lay a hand on him without his say. His fame spread. When he got out of prison with his two stars on his wrist, the *Organizatsiya* tatted an upside down spade on Stas' left pec. Stas, their secret little weapon for dealing with rivals.

Stas had the gifts of spoiling and calling. He remembered summoning the Leshii when he was ten. Baba had taken him out to the forest and made him drink a tea of wild mushrooms. Colors faded into light behind his eyes as he'd cut down an Aspen tree. It fell facing east. Bent over and looking through his legs, Stas had chanted, "Leshii, Forest Lord, Come to me now; not as a gray wolf, not as a black raven, not as a flaming fir tree, but as a man." A leaf had fluttered to the ground and where it landed stood a tall man, brown and green like the forest. He had whispered in Stas' ear. From then on Stas knew things and could do things.

Doing things brought him far more money than stealing cars. Dressed in American jeans, Italian shoes and a t-shirt under a raw silk jacket, Stas figured he was ready for the night. The t-shirt was red. It set off his pale skin and dark hair. He could have done with a shave; the five-o-clock shadow was heavy on his face. Mentally he shrugged. They didn't pay him to be a pretty boy. Stas was good-looking enough to be a *Bliad*. He'd whored when he was young and money was tight. Money hadn't been tight for a long time.

A thick wool coat and hat protected him from the chill. First his usual rounds and then he'd head toward the club where the brethren met. Utilitarian apartment complexes in red, gray, and brown, blocked the sky. They made it darker and colder than early evening should be. If there'd been a better place to move to, Stas had the money to do it. There wasn't anyplace better. Leftovers from the communist era were the best that could be had. New construction was a joke. Stagnation ... his city was stagnating.

He looked everywhere for his Misha. He was not by any of the heating vents, where prostitutes and officers gathered to stay warm. He was not on the steps of the police station smoking with the other men. He was not chatting with the old women as they

closed up their stalls in the markets. Stas sighed as he ducked through the back door to Baba's café. Depression always set in on those evenings when he didn't catch a glimpse of Misha. It made it hard to work.

As he exited the store room into the tiny café, he gave Baba a kiss. "I came to say good morning and goodnight." A bit of meat and cheese off someone's plate went into his mouth and Baba slapped his hand.

"My friend is sick, very sudden." She handed him a roll to keep him from thieving more. "I won't be home tonight. I am going there after I close here." Her smile was the same one he'd always gotten as a little boy when she had chores for him. "Feed the parakeet for me."

Half the roll went into his mouth. "Yes, Baba, I will feed that nasty bird." A burst of laughter from the corner caught him. Two Ment rose from a table and shrugged into their coats. His heart stopped. With a painful hitch, it began to beat again. Hazard of his profession; a fear of police. They had nothing on him. As they stepped away, his heart stopped again. Misha. Long-sleeved black shirt over the light blue one, and his intense green eyes were laughing.

Stas had never spoken to Misha, but God how he wanted to. Baba looked up from under heavy lids. Stas caught her staring at him as he stared at Misha. Without looking she reached above her head and retrieved one chipped mug and then another. Scalding chai went into both. "Well mister, 'I want him to know I'm here,' go let him know you're here." Indecisive, Stas shifted his weight. Pragmatic as always, Baba picked up both cups and held them out. "Stas, remember, you can pray to God, just don't quit rowing toward shore." How did she always know what to say? Swallowing, he took the tea and headed around the counter. It smelled of cinnamon, ginger and milk.

A spark flared as Misha lit another cigarette. Stas almost couldn't do it. *Luck*, he reminded himself, *you make your own most of the time*. Magic sometimes had to be helped along. He thumped down the mug in front of the man. "My Baba thought you might like some more tea." Misha's eyebrows went up as a little tendril of smoke threaded out of the corner of his mouth. Stas wanted to reach across the table and pull that mouth onto his. Instead, "Can I sit down?" Misha's shrug said it didn't make any difference to him.

They sat for a while. Misha smoked. Stas drank tea. Baba would kill him if he didn't try something. "What do you think of the new governor?" Politics were lame but fairly neutral conversation starters.

Misha stared through the steam blanketing the window. Smoke swirled around his head. Stas was about to give up, shifting his chair back when Misha spoke. "He could get up your ass without soap." Low and earthy, Misha's voice held whispers of wind threading through the aspens. His smile was drawn tight across his teeth.

Pulling a twisted pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, Misha shook one loose and offered it to Stas. His fingers were long, fine and delicate, ending in buffed nails, which could have stood a trim. They were the fingers of a pianist or an artist, not a police officer.

Pushing his hair behind his ear, Stas laughed. "Yes," relieved to be finally talking with Misha, "he lies like Trotsky." Stas reached for the pack with his left hand. Four points became visible at the edge of his sleeve. Misha caught his wrist. The pressure of his thumb pushed the fabric farther back revealing the two stars in blue ink. Questioning green eyes slid up to his deep brown ones. Stas didn't want to answer those questions. He jerked his arm away. Nearly falling over the chair as he stood, "Tea's on the house." Then he fled past his Baba and out into the city.

How he had botched that chance gnawed on him. There were people to meet, but he'd rather have just gone home and wallowed. He felt like a horse with pedals—useless and stupid. A small disco in a seedy part of town was where he always met with the men who he worked for. Music thumped around him. Russian techno-pop, Stas preferred it to the American and European imports. When it was time, he drifted up the stairs into the back. Three very large men in suits sat at a table. Several other men, large but in a different way, were scattered at strategic points throughout. His boss kissed him on the cheek, hugging Stas to his flabby chest. Offering Stas a shot of vodka, the man settled into a chair. "So, my friend, how is the job coming?"

Stas sipped the cold liquid, savoring the icy flare on his tongue. "It will be done tonight." A few days ago, Stas had buried eggs, his white swans, in the grave of a murderer. In exchange, he'd taken the soil from the pit for his own. As he worked he'd chanted, "As this corpse has died unrepentant, so may Alexis Magin too die, unrepentant." This Stas sprinkled in the man's path. After Magin walked across it, Stas collected the dirt, mixed it with snow and tied it in a little bag. At the forest this morning, Stas screamed, "As this dries and withers so shall you!" Then he'd tossed it into the highest branches.

When it was very late, or very early, Stas would finish the job. Bareheaded and wearing only his shorts, he would circle Magin's property with a burning candle, chanting for his death. Spoiling was cold work in winter. After nine circuits, he'd break the candle in two and bury it upside-down at the edge of the forest. Within a few days, Magin would be dead.

Sometimes it bothered him, what he did for his bosses. But then he would justify it to himself. These were very bad men, brutal men, he was removing. And the way Stas did it there were no collateral casualties ... no children and family who went down because they happened to be in the way.

As his boss was nodding his approval, whistles and screams sounded from below. Fuck his mouth! The club was being raided. Sometimes the Ment did that, just to show the mob they still could. Two bruisers headed downstairs toward the front of the club. Three others swept the big-shots down the back way. Stas ducked into the restroom. One tiny

window was cracked for air. He forced it open and crawled through. Few but Stas were wiry enough to fit through this exit. Most of the *Organizatsiya* were either bruisers or let themselves go with too much good food. The roof was slick, and his fingers ached from the cold. His winter over-clothes were still in the coat room and there was no way he was going back for them.

They'd be watching the alleys and yards where the doors came out. The bathroom window wasn't visible from the street, blocked by vents and pitches of the roof. He jumped to the roof of the warehouse next door. Again, most of the Bratva couldn't have made the span. His feet hit the tar paper with a thump. The startled caw of a black raven dropped him on his ass with fear. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. The bird cocked its glossy head, ruffled its feathers, considering him with clever green eyes. With another croak, it flew off into the night. Keeping low and moving quickly, Stas made it to the far end of the roof. They weren't watching here. Dropping onto the frost-covered garbage in the alley, Stas risked a quick look back at the chaos down the street. Then he ran for home.

It was quiet when he made it to the apartment. His keys were in the pocket of his overcoat, but Baba always kept a spare in a chink above the door frame. He went to put the key in the lock and the door swung open. Stas swallowed. Then he shook himself. Baba was getting old. Sometimes she forgot to lock things. Back when the communists had been in charge, you didn't need to lock doors. That had been most of her life. Silence in the apartment ... no scolding from the bird. That was odd. It always scolded him if it hadn't been fed. He stepped into the coat room and his hand brushed against his coat. The coat he'd worn tonight. The coat he'd left at the club. Cold fingers of fear worked up inside his gut.

He should run.

The voice that came from behind the rug stopped him. A voice that sounded like the wind and the woods and the wild rose about him, "Come inside, Stas." Swallowing his fear, Stas swept aside the carpet and stepped into the kitchen. Apart from the cracked tile counter, rickety metal table and chairs, it was empty. He turned toward the left, where the living room would be, where his bedroom was. The hanging-rug that served as his door had been pulled back against the wall.

A match sparked in the darkness. Misha sat on his bed, his face bathed in the flame's glow as he lit his cigarette. "Now why did I know that Stas the car thief would show up here tonight?" A feral smile cracked his face as he clicked on the small lamp on the wall. "Because I've been watching you. You're no car thief. You're much, much worse than that. Months I've hunted you. And now here you are."

Stas cursed himself. The spell had worked. Misha knew he was here. Misha even knew his name and where he lived. But he'd wanted Misha to love him, not be obsessed with catching him. "I don't know what you're talking about." Baba was right. His head was made of wood. Removing his light jacket and stepping into the room, Stas tried for casual

indifference. He could tell by the hard set of Misha's jaw and his predatory eyes that he failed miserably

"Shut up, cock-twister." With a groan of aging springs, Misha stood and stepped into Stas' body. Voice low, near his ear, "You kill people. Very bad people, but still you kill them." He was so close Stas could taste him. Cologne that smelled of bay and juniper flooded his senses. Those long fingers wrapped around his bicep and pulled Stas into a hard chest. "You curse them and they die. No one will ever believe me if I tell them how Stas does these things. But it is what you do. I've watched you do it." Misha was fumbling at his own hip. "I swore I would catch you and confront you with it, with what you have done. I would see that you got everything you deserved for it."

No. This was not the obsession he'd wanted. It was supposed to be love, it was a love spell. A handcuff clamped hard on his wrist. Unwilling to believe he stared at the metal circling his arm. Misha pushed him back onto the bed. Stas didn't even have the wits about him to struggle as Misha pulled the other arm up and locked it down. The cuffs were looped through the top bar on his old iron bed. Stas stared at them. Why had he done that?

Hands braced on the mattress, splayed to either side of Stas' hips, Misha leaned in. "And the more I watched you, saw you in your Baba's café, or on the street, I knew I'd never be able to prove it. No court would make you pay for it." He shuddered, "But I couldn't stop watching." Stas' gaze jumped and he drowned in the depths of brilliant green. "I kept thinking of how I could punish you. What I would do to you when I caught you. Those thoughts made me think of other things. Always gnawing at me, making me think crazy things." Misha's hand clamped on his face, squeezing his cheeks and forcing Stas to look at him. "What do you think I should do with Stas who knows how to spoil?"

The only window was covered by a heavy oriental rug. Baba wouldn't be home, and Stas knew Misha had somehow discovered that. If any neighbors came to see what was going on, the sight of the police would send them running. The Ment had a reputation for delivering rough and ready justice when it suited them. No one would be willing to interfere. All Stas had left was defiance. "Blow my cock and make a wish."

Running his hand down Stas' neck and chest, Misha's touch landed on a t-shirt clad stomach. "You think I'm going to hurt you." Misha leaned in closer, weight heavy on Stas' body, knees between Stas' thighs. "I stopped wanting to truly hurt you months ago. But," Misha's fingers began working on Stas' belt and zipper, "I've been thinking and dreaming of doing things to you. I want to hear you scream." Hooking his fingers Stas' waistband, Misha yanked. "I'm going to make you beg, plead, scream for me." He drove his mouth onto Stas'.

Stas nearly died as Misha's tongue forced itself between his lips and teeth. His tongue was so long it almost went down Stas' throat. Misha tasted like nothing Stas had ever experienced. It was deep and rich like the forest after rain. A brutal, demanding kiss; put a pot in the fire and you can't be surprised that it gets hot.

He'd fanned the flames of Misha's obsession nine times over. It was beyond his control and he didn't care. Misha was here. Misha wanted him. Strong hands tore his pants and briefs off his body. Lifting his hips, he helped as best he could. Stas moaned as Misha sucked on his tongue, ran his hands over his body, and toyed with his cock. Rearing back, Misha left Stas handcuffed to the bedstead in just a T-shirt. His cock was exposed, throbbing under Misha's stare.

Misha stood between Stas' legs unbuttoning his uniform shirt. Watching him undress was everything that Stas had wanted. First, the heavy black over-shirt, then the blue one underneath came off. Both he hung on the bedpost. Shirtless, clothed in just his paramilitary pants and boots, Misha had Stas panting. Gold brown hair crawled in a tight line up from his navel and fanned out lightly across his chest. Misha's stomach was taut and hard. Just enough muscle rippled under the skin to show he could do his job ... well. Stas swallowed as Misha drew his long, black baton off his belt. It was an evil piece of polycarbonate weaponry, almost two feet long.

With a laugh, Misha twirled his baton in his fingers and then slapped it into his other palm. The crack made Stas jump. Cuffs cut into his wrists as he jerked. Misha slid the long black stock under Stas' chin, lifting his head. "Do you know what I'm going to do with this?" Stas' eyes went wide and Misha grinned. Broad and feral, it stretched over too many teeth. "I'm going to punish you. Punish you for making me want you so much. For invading my dreams night after night." Wrapping his fingers into shoulder-length black hair, Misha yanked Stas' head back. Then he shoved Stas' shorts in his mouth. He ran his tongue along Stas' ear and whispered, "Wouldn't want the neighbors to hear." Misha's voice set fire to Stas' blood and he whimpered. "Don't worry. I don't intend to put it up there. I want other things up there."

Strong hands grabbed Stas' hips. Pulling him, turning him over, Misha forced Stas to his knees on the edge of the bed. One finger traced the tattooed eyes. Ice wove under the skin of his back. "I bet you fought them when they did this to you, eh Stas?" Stas looked over his shoulder. Misha's green eyes were sad but hungry. Then he smiled at his captive. "Why do I think you don't want to fight me?"

Misha's arm went back. The rod in his hand came down. It cut the air with a low whistle. Stas heard the pop, had time to tighten, before the pain ripped into his body. Lunging forward, away from the brutal blow, he screamed into the fabric. Heat flared across Stas' ass where the baton collided with skin.

Another blow landed hard. Stas writhed, fighting the restraints. He grabbed for the iron bed. Stas grasped at anything to steady himself. Yet another strike burned across his cheeks. Misha's fingertips curled, catching the swell of his ass. The grip set fire to his abused skin. It felt so good. Then another blow bit into his flesh. A fifth strike cut across the fading burn of the others. It stung. It burned. It was so intense. Moans came as the pain slowly wound into pleasure. Vicious blows cut across Stas' ass and thighs. His body writhed, pulling against cuffs binding his arms. Metal cut into his skin. The pain crawled

through him. It wound down his balls and into his cock. So lost in the sensation, the ache, the hurt, Stas barely realized Misha had stopped.

His ass was on fire. His cock burned purple between his legs. If anyone touched it, his skin would split. Long fingers squeezed his sac. Misha toyed with Stas' weight as his tongue traced the welts. Stas shivered under the touch. Then Misha's hands slid around his cock and Stas sobbed. It hurt so good. Stas screamed, choking on the cloth, as wicked teeth sank into his ass. Misha bit again, stroking Stas' cock. Stas bucked. Every mark was bitten. Every bite was followed by a stroke. Teeth sank into his flesh. Fire shot down his shaft. Stas lost himself, screaming into orgasm.

Collapsing, hanging onto the bed for his sanity, Stas was aware of Misha moving behind him. Long fingers soothed Stas' death grip on the rail. The snick of the key sounded and one wrist was free. Stas couldn't hold himself up. He dropped into a ball on the mattress. The scent of his own come was heavy on the sheets. "Let's get rid of this." Misha tugged at the cloth in his mouth and Stas spit it out. Gently, Misha rolled Stas over onto his back. "I wouldn't take you like a goat."

Stas was trembling. He didn't think he'd ever get his body back under control. His tongue ran the outline of his lips as he watched Misha unlace his boots and unzip his pants. As Misha's clothes hit the floor, Stas hissed. Misha was damn near unfuckable but still beautiful, the skin just pulling back from his head. His own cock jumped at the sight. Hard? Stas couldn't believe he was getting hard again after that. Reaching to the shelf above his bed, the clank of the cuff against the iron bed rang in his ears, and startled him. Still shaking, Stas fumbled for the gel he kept there. It dropped off the shelf, hitting him on the shoulder before landing on the sheets.

Laughing, Misha pulled him to the edge of the bed. Red fabric bunched beneath his body as the t-shirt rode up. Leaning in, one hand under Stas' head, the other stroking his chest, Misha bent down to kiss him. Stas' own hands were exploring the cut of Misha's muscles on his arms and back. Savoring the salt on skin, their mouths toyed with each other. Then Stas parted his lips, inviting Misha in. Misha's tongue drove into his mouth and Stas lost himself in the incredible taste of Misha.

Misha slid his knee between Stas' thighs, pushing his legs apart. Misha's throbbing erection slid against his still sensitive shaft. He moaned into the kiss as Misha rubbed them together. "Shall I get you ready for me, Stas?" The words were whispered against his lips.

What a question. "Fuck your mother, yes!" Stas had been ready for Misha for ages.

A firm grip pulled Stas' un-cuffed hand between them. Cool oil spread across his fingers. "You help." Guided by Misha, Stas reached to take hold of him. After months of wanting, it hardly seemed believable that Misha's cock was in his hand. Coating the length with the gel, making him slick and knowing exactly why he was doing it ... anticipation was eating Stas alive.

Stas jumped when the gel touched his skin. Misha's long, slick fingers slid down across Stas' balls and up into his hole. Stas' back arched as he hissed with pleasure. Shudders screamed through his body as he worked Misha and Misha worked him. Then Misha's fingers were gone and his cock was there. Sucking in his breath, Stas tightened, expectant. Misha pushed his throbbing head into the tight hole. Stas cried out as Misha spread him. It felt like hot oil as Misha slipped inside. Slowly, letting them both savor the need, Misha drew out each thrust. Stas could feel the walls of his body being pushed aside. Each movement drove a little farther. Each push went a little deeper. Each plunge brought them closer.

Misha stilled, trembling, as his hips met Stas'. His tongue rode his lips and his green eyes were half-lidded in ecstasy. A low, throbbing laugh vibrated through both their bodies. "Are you ready, Stas?" His fingers latched onto Stas' hips. Then he began to move. Frenzied lust seized Stas. The pace Misha set was insane. Screaming, begging, Stas clawed the sheets, trying to keep from being driven through the mattress. It only drove Misha harder and faster.

Stas reached back. His hands locked onto the bed frame as Misha pounded him. Legs wrapped around Misha's hips, he hung on for dear life. Misha's hands covered his own, grinding the metal into Stas' palms. Bed springs screeched with every thrust. Thumps of the head-board against the wall added a backbeat to their moans. The cuff swung, clanking against the iron bed off tempo to their rhythm. Complaints from the neighbors were sure to come tomorrow. Fuck them all. Stas threw his head back and howled.

Both were trembling. Misha's head dropped against his chest as he rammed into Stas. He crawled onto the mattress, still pounding, lifting Stas' hips off the bed. The tempo was vicious. It woke the ache in his pummeled ass. Bucking, twisting, Stas screamed, "Misha!" Misha roared as his body jerked, convulsed, and flooded Stas with come.

Stars swam before Stas' eyes. He could hardly breathe, much less move. His hands dropped limp behind his head. "Good God, Misha," he panted out the words, "I'm not going to be able to fuck for a week after that." Stas would be lucky if he could walk tomorrow. He'd be lucky if he could walk in a week.

Misha growled. The sound throbbed through Stas' belly. "Fuck your mouth. After waiting so long you think I'm going to be satisfied with just once?" He latched onto Stas' mouth, drowning them both in his kiss.

Hours later, their scent overwhelmed the room, a warm heavy smell that filled the senses. Dawn was coming. Misha was a machine. Nine times, nine times in one night, Misha had fucked him, made him scream and beg for more. He'd kept coming. Even when there was nothing left to give, his body had jerked and twisted in ecstasy. Finally, Misha slept, strong arms thrown over his chest. Stas felt like he'd fucked a thousand cunts. It would be a while before his own body relaxed enough for him to sleep, exhaustion or no.

He rolled on his side and hissed. After Misha's beating, Stas couldn't even imagine what his ass looked like. Nicotine now, sleep after that, and he'd worry about the rest of it sometime tomorrow. Stas drew the cigarettes from Misha's uniform shirt. As he brought the pack to his mouth, intending to snag one with his teeth, Stas caught the unmistakable scent of Vodka and earth. Long fingers curled against his stomach. A serpentine tongue swept along the edge of his jaw. "Stas, love," the chuckle was low, wicked, animal, "next time just bring my cigarettes home. You can stop leaving them in the forest." Stas looked over his shoulder into shimmering green eyes. "They're always so damp when I dig them up."

HARVEST

Summer was dying, dead almost. Mortality's sharp kiss blew in with the wind on the last day of the season. The clapboard farmhouse brooded on a swell of land. Immense, boundless, the lead heavy sky swelled beyond derelict silos and glared through missing boards on the barn. Grahm tucked his hands into the pockets of his gray windbreaker. With a woof, the old farm dog, Lady Stump-Tail, bounded past him. The tailless mutt had been boarded with a friend of his Ma's for a bit. Now she was home and happy. Grahm wished he felt the same.

Not much farm left anymore. There never had been much farm, just a few acres hemmed in by woods. Too long alone, his Ma and the farm slid into ruin together. And he hadn't noticed until it was too late. Grahm had tortured himself that afternoon with the filial duty of visiting a woman who didn't recall her own son's face.

"Peter," she'd said, calling him by his Da's name, "remember to do it."

Leaning against the window, staring into a room with two hospital beds and no hope, "Do what, Ma?" She'd been a beauty once, a fiery redhead courted by dozens of men. It was where he'd gotten his green eyes. Somehow, his Da had won her heart, passing on a sturdy build and hair the color of walnuts. Da had gone years back. Grahm figured that Ma's mind had left her to be with him.

"Burn it." The words hissed like dying coals.

He'd humored her. What else was he supposed to do? "Burn what, Ma?" Da had called her Ma too.

"The scarecrow." Her eyes bright and hot, "You got to remember to burn it tonight. It'll be mad if you don't. Burn it so it doesn't come back and find us."

Things like that finally made Grahm realize he had to let her go. Let them both go. This farm was part of letting go. Clean it up. Clear it out. Move on. It was time for that. He

trudged toward the back of the house. Habit. Farm kids always knew you came in through the kitchen. A parade of mewling kittens stalked Graham's steps.

Tattered clothes snapped in the wind catching his eye. A stick mannequin lorded over a garden plot full of overgrown corn, tomatoes gone to seed, and rank weeds. The scarecrow, every year his Ma had made one, always a double of the year before. Graham smiled to himself, wondering. Carefully he set down the bags holding a few supplies he'd picked on his way. Plastic rattled with the breeze adding a harsh, modern edge to the shush of the leaves.

Gingerly, Graham stepped over the broken rail fence and wandered between the rows. Up under the ragged flannel his fingers searched. There, sewn to the decaying flour sack body. Whispering, "It's got to have a heart, Ma," letting his mind fill in with a five-year-old's voice *how's he going to know how to take care of things without a heart?* Just a little tin trinket, but he'd won it and it was important then.

Graham yanked the pole from the earth. Brushing the wisps of straw hair from his jacket, "Well, fella, that's it for this year." Wistfully, he smiled into painted eyes. Flecks of brown were still visible on its burlap face, "Maybe forever." Then he dropped the scarecrow on the dirt. It was time to get going on the house. Three weeks of vacation to get it all done. He'd planned to go to Europe, but duty had called and there was no one else to handle it. When he started the outdoor cleaning, he'd dismember the thing; get the charm back then. After twenty-seven years of the elements, another week wouldn't hurt it.

Plodding through the corn, back the way he came, Graham heard his phone ring. He yanked it off his hip and, with a flip, had it open and to his ear. "This is Graham."

"Hey, Graham, it's Jason." A familiar, caring voice caressed his ear. "I just heard about your mom. You doing okay?"

Jason, he'd spent a lot of nights listening to that voice. "As well as can be expected." Jason hadn't called in ages, not since they'd split. He wasn't a bad guy. They just hadn't been compatible as a couple. Apparently, everyone had known it but them. Four years of making each other miserable had disappeared before they'd had the courage to call it quits. "Her church helped a lot in getting her to the right doctors and in a place quick. Came back a few weeks ago and signed all the papers for that. Now I just got to get the old place ready to sell."

"It sucks, man." A dutiful pause. "Look I could drive out, on the weekends, help you out with things." The offer was reticent at best, but Jason meant it if he'd made it. That was the kind of guy Jason was.

Graham shooed away the horde of stray cats pawing at the groceries and snagged the bags. Already seeming vacant and abandoned, the farmhouse stared down on him. With a shudder, he stepped from its shadow into the maw of the back porch. "Thanks for the

offer.” There wasn't any bad blood between them, but Grahm wasn't sure he was ready to be in a big house, alone, with just-friends-now Jason. “Let me think about it, okay.”

A little relieved sigh sounded on the other end of the line. “Yeah, do that.” Jason probably had about as much desire to be in this house, alone, with just-friends-now Grahm. “Call me if you need to talk. You'll do that, right?”

“I'll do that, Jason.” He propped the phone between his chin and shoulder. “I promise.” Digging Ma's rabbit's foot key fob out of his pocket he hedged, “I'm going to get something to eat now, watch some TV or something and hit the sack early.” The key snicked in the lock and the back door drifted open. “Maybe we'll get together when I get back to the city.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, again hesitant, “maybe coffee or something. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Coffee, sounds good.” Both knew there wouldn't be any meetings for coffee. Not for a long time. “See ya.”

The longest night of the year, Grahm spent it in a house full of dry leafed memories. Stumpy padded through the rooms, non-existent tail wagging. Some of the tamer cats dared slip inside, sliding around his ankles while begging for scraps. He needed to find homes for all of them soon. Baloney sandwich in one hand and a belt of scotch in the other he slumped in his father's chair. Grahm watched a lot of nothing before drifting to sleep in front of the tiny TV.

Windswept scrabbles, off-air static and old house creaks invaded his dreams. The sky was dark; the kind of dark that only existed deep inside a restless sleep. Standing on the porch, staring out over the fields, Grahm felt his heart claw at the inside of his chest. Things were not quite right, like they'd been painted with muddy colors mixed with too much water. Something was waiting, wanting ... out there in the field. He sensed it moving, coming closer. It was angry. It didn't like him. It was going to hurt him and he couldn't stop it.

Wham!

The bang shot him out of sleep. Another thump and his heart started again. Half the shutters on this place were loose. With the wind, it was a wonder the whole place didn't sound like a drum set. Even the dog was a little disturbed by the sounds. She lay on her rug, whining and growling at something invading her own slumber. Grahm struggled from the chair to his old bed where he tossed more than he slept. Memories and mice feet; hard to sleep soundly with both gnawing on his mind. It would take a while to get used to the old house.

He was up and puttering around with making coffee and cleaning the kitchen before day break. Stumpy was under foot, and almost toppled him more than once. He finally had to

push her out of the house. Beat up jeans, T-shirt and one of his Da's old jackets were good for clean-up clothes. Graham sipped his coffee on the porch making plans for the day. The early blue light of morning broke over the fallow farm. None of the cats were out in the yard. They hadn't eaten the food he set out. Odd for farm cats; they were usually greedy, opportunistic beasts. Graham searched absently, mind not really focused on that issue. His gaze wandered out across the fields. Something was moving through the overgrown field.

Stumpy pricked up her ears and then whined. Hoarfrost gathered on the back of Graham's knees and neck. It clogged his lungs. Then he laughed. Nightmares invading the day. Just some guy out there, maybe using the property as a short cut. Maybe not. The man seemed to be heading toward the house. Graham called for Stumpy. Dogs were good at making strangers think twice if they were up to no good. Instead of obeying, the mutt crawled under the porch. Shaking off the lingering fear, Graham stepped off the porch and wandered to the edge of the yard. Only a few weathered posts told him where, exactly, that was.

Scruffy, straw-blond hair was cut ragged and whispered over the man's maple eyes. Thrift-store clothes hung loose on his rangy frame. Jeans faded white gaped at the knees. Cracked, tattered boots, soles worn to shreds, could hardly bear walking as he trudged across the field. The flannel shirt he wore was missing half its buttons and his old, canvas jacket had more holes than fabric. Every step he took teased Graham with glimpses of the hard brown body underneath.

For all his shabby attire, the visitor's lanky frame was possessed of a supreme self-confidence. Eyes half-mast, he sucked in the scent of the wind. It teased with the tendrils of his hair, drawing them out like golden streamers. Smiling at Graham as he approached, the man offered a country greeting, "Winter's coming early." His voice held the rustle of fall leaves in its depths.

A lingering sense of unease wrapped around Graham's gut. Bad dreams and unannounced callers ... caution couldn't hurt. He decided to play it direct. "Who are you and what are you doing on private property?"

"Name's Ward." Cocking his head and studying Graham, he replied, "I'm looking for work."

Drifter, Graham figured, looking more for hand-outs than real work. "This isn't a working farm." Although ragged, Ward didn't look much like a drifter. His clothes, even worn through, were clean. The man himself only sported the amount of dirt you'd expect from someone who'd just walked across a field. Down and out maybe, but he wasn't *a bum*.

Joints loose, smile bright, the man squinted into the sun. "I know that. You're Graham aren't you?"

"Do I know you?" Suspicious, he asked, "You live around here?"

"We met before, but it was ages ago. No reason you'd remember me. Only know your name 'cause your Ma spoke of you." Thumbs hooked into fraying pockets, Ward splayed his fingers out across his hips. "I used to work here for your Ma, summers and fall. Helped her in the garden, 'cause she was getting old. I thought she forgot about me this year ... clean up time and all. No one's been around."

Ward looked maybe five, six years younger than Grahm. When he'd left for college at eighteen, Ward would have just been a kid. "She got sick ... been sick." He was right. There would be no reason he'd remember someone like that. Grahm had tried to forget most of this town anyway. The only reason he'd ever come back was his parents. Even those visits were rare. Tapping his temple, Grahm sighed. "Her mind."

"Oh." Ward shrugged. "She was a bit odd sometimes. Wore that big pink garden hat and would just talk and talk. Tell me that the pansies can't be next to the roses 'cause they'd gossip ... that kinda funny old lady talk. I'd do my job, listen. But I didn't think she was mad."

"Slow build up. Apparently she'd been hoarding stuff for a while, could keep it pretty together for a bit at a time but finally ... Ladies from her church came to visit and saw the newspapers and trash she'd hauled home. Realized she wasn't really *here* anymore."

"Wouldn't have known that. Never been inside, well kitchen maybe a couple of times." Ward shrugged and looked up toward the house from under his bangs. "What you going to do with the place?"

"Clean it up. Sell it. Working on the inside right now. It's a bitch of a job."

"The outside's going to need work." Ward clucked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "I need work. You need help."

Somewhere in the conversation, Grahm's unease had vanished. "Okay." What the hell was the going rate for down-on-their-luck labors these days? Grahm racked his brain and came up with a random number, "Hundred, hundred-twenty-five a week? Sound fair?"

Ward, ran his tongue inside his cheek, thinking. "Sounds good enough. I know where the tools are. I'll get started."

Ward was a hard worker; Grahm had to give him that. Every time he brought another bag of moldy books and magazines from the house, the brush pile grew. Even the garden patch was clear. He'd have to remember to ask where Ward had dumped the scarecrow. Later, then he'd get the badge back. It didn't make any sense why it was so important. Things like that never did.

When the sun was nearing midpoint, the local church bells made him pause. He'd forgotten you could hear them so clear at this place. Growls from his stomach told him it

was time to take a break. Farmhouse rhythm; in the city he was a slave to the clock. The city seemed so far away. And maybe, right now, that wasn't a bad thing.

Two Cokes, two sandwiches and Graham headed out the back door. He tripped over the bowl of cat food on the porch, sending kibble skittering across the warped boards. He'd have to clean that up later. Lady Stump-Tail was not in residence under the porch. Probably was off chasing squirrels in the woods. She was too old to catch them.

Walking across the field, Graham could see the hired hand at the edge of the property. An old fashion scythe, God knew where Ward had found it, swept arcs inches above the ground. Ward's tattered flannel flapped from a nearby tree. Ragged cut hair kissed the nape of his neck. Sweat shimmered on his bare back. Ward's muscles bunched and relaxed in an easy, practiced pace.

Graham paused and just watched for a bit. Fit, twenty-something, with classic features and a warm smile, Ward was pretty stunning. He had the kind of body that would be good to pull close. Then Graham shook himself back to reality. No sense having those kinds of thoughts. "You know, I would have rented one of those high powered mowers for that."

Ward turned and smiled. Propping himself on the handle, he said. "Don't have much use for those things. They get bound up in brush like this." He took a Coke from Graham's outstretched hand and popped the top with his thumb. "Simple works good for me."

Shoving his own soda under his arm, Graham nodded. "I see that." Graham took a bite of his sandwich while passing over the other. "Thanks, by the way."

Ward parted the bread from the meat. "For what?" Half of the baloney went into his mouth and was swallowed without chewing. Then he did the same with the bread.

For a moment, Graham just stared. Oddest way Graham had ever seen to eat a sandwich. Then he mentally shrugged, he probably had a few odd habits of his own. "You just kinda stepped in and did it. I was a little hesitant this morning. Figured you were full of shit." He smiled, a little embarrassed. "But most guys would have just said fuck the field until I said something or done a half-assed job. You jump in and do what needs to be done. Thanks. It's a big help. Bigger than you know right now."

"I meant I wanted to work when I said it."

"I get that now. Sorry for doubting you, for letting my prejudices get a hold of me." Graham thought a moment and snorted some of his Coke without intending to. "I, of all people, should know better than that."

"Why?"

"Never mind." Waiving off further explanation, he hedged. "I just should. And on that

point, I'm trying to figure how to say this without being an ass if I'm wrong." Subtle was never his thing. "I'm about to get started on my dad's closet. Those might be just your work clothes ... but I noticed your jacket and your boots. You could stand something better. I'm gonna put it all on the back porch. Take what you want, the rest I'll call some charity to come get. If you don't need it then forget I said anything, okay?"

Ward crammed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. Then he downed the remaining Coke. All of it went down in a single swallow. Picking up the scythe, he tested the heft in his hand. "Might take a look at it later." He paused. "Not that I need it. But, you know, might be good clothes for this kind of work."

"Good for work clothes." Letting him keep his pride, Graham shrugged. "I'll probably snag a couple pairs of pants and some shirts myself. Don't want to wreck my own stuff."

"Yeah," Ward nodded turning back to his work. "No sense in that."

Graham watched the handy-man, on and off, all day. About the third time he looked out the second floor windows and caught himself searching for that strong, brown form, he admitted he was lonely. About the twelfth he admitted to himself that Ward was just all kinds of interesting. In ways he shouldn't have been. Odds were that he was straight and not interested in Graham. Still Graham decided to tempt fate while giving himself some company. When Ward came up to store the tools, he jogged into the barn. "Hey ... it's hell cooking for one," he stopped, suddenly unsure, "and I'm, uhm, sick of baloney sandwiches. Want me to make you a hamburger?"

Ward hooked the scythe on a peg. "I got a few things to finish up real quick." He turned and flashed a smile. Late summer sun filtered across his frame making dust particles dance like fairies in his hair. "But, sure. Never pass up a free meal."

"Okay," Graham found himself grinning like a fool in response, "just come up to the house when you're ready." He stepped away and then stopped. "Hey, Ward," he called, turning back, "Take a look for the dog before you come up, will you? She's getting old and I haven't seen her all day."

"Sure," nodding, "I'll go take a look for her."

Waiting, Graham fried up a couple of burgers. He saved a bit of ground chuck for the kittens, but none of them came around. Strange, usually anyone's presence in the kitchen brought the fluff balls running. A soft fall on the porch announced Ward. He stepped into the kitchen. Blood stained his jacket and hands. Graham's eyes went wide, "What the hell?"

"I found her, the dog." Body held stiff, awkward, Ward kneaded his left arm just below the elbow. "In a ditch, over by the highway."

Graham grabbed his coat. "Where is she now?" There was a vet not far away. The quick

shake of Ward's head stopped him.

Staring at the floor, he mumbled, "I wrapped her in a tarp, put her in the barn." He went to put his hands in his pockets then thought better of it. "I'll bury her tomorrow." Ward's face was unreadable.

"Ah damn." Grahm slumped against the counter. "Shit. She was getting old anyway, but that's just not a nice way to go." Death was a way of life on a farm; it was something you never forgot. It still hurt some. "Wash up in the sink. Burgers are almost done." Even if Grahm could rationalize it, Stumpy's death dampened his mood. Dinner was eaten quietly out on the porch. Even the cats seemed to be in mourning. Not a one showed as much as a furry ear.

The golden orange glow of the harvest moon snuggled in the palm of black on black clouds. Ward leaned against the porch rail, one arm draped over the top of his head the other falling loose at his side. Tattered clothes played tag with the wind. "Thanks for the meal. It's been a long time since I had food like that."

Grahm snorted. "Just hamburgers." Grabbing the plates, "You off?"

"Yep." Easy and slow Ward stretched. "I'll go find a place to bunk down tonight."

So he hadn't been far wrong. "You don't have a place to sleep?" Stray dogs, stray cats, stray people; his mom had collected them all.

Ward smiled. "As long as there's open sky, I got a place to sleep."

"Yep, you do. You're staying here." Grahm's bedroom door had a lock. Ma had put locks everywhere in her senility; two and three on some doors, both sides. There was nothing worth stealing in the house anyway. If, in the morning, Ward and a 13" TV were gone, it wouldn't be much of a loss. "Take one of the spare bedrooms. They're musty as all hell, but it's a bed." Jerking his head toward the kitchen, he said, "Go grab a shower. I'm going to clean up down here." After sweeping the cat food off the porch and tossing the dishes in the sink, Ward headed upstairs. Halfhearted drizzle sounded from the bathroom.

Grahm slipped into a pair of plain sweats. The cats and dog, the situation tugged at the edge of his brain. However, nailing it just seemed beyond him. Enough time to worry about it tomorrow. Stepping into the hall with an extra set of pants for his employee cum guest, Grahm came up short.

Ward stood at the bathroom door, towel wrapped loose over his hips. Gauze swathed his left forearm. Before Grahm could ask, "Cut myself out in the field." Ward cocked his hip against the frame. The towel slid, baring more skin and a glimpse of tight blond curls. "Are those for me?" Easy, slow Ward moved across the hall. His hand brushed Grahm's ear before landing on the wall behind his head. "Thanks."

Grahm shuddered. "No problem," he strangled out. There was too much sun bronzed skin. Ward's eyes were too bright and his smile far too inviting. Loose pants did nothing to hide Grahm's sudden interest.

"So, Grahm," a dry, twisted laugh came as Ward toyed with one of the dead-bolts, "am I the one who needs a lock?" Fox sly eyes and a wry smile peered from under damp bangs.

"Not unless you think you do."

"Even if I needed it, I don't think I'd want one." Ward's knuckles grazed Grahm's chest. "Do you," Ward whispered against the base of Grahm's neck, sending shivers coursing down his spine, "need a lock tonight?"

Grahm ran his hand up under the towel. Ward's skin nearly burned his hand it was so hot. He jerked and moaned under Grahm's touch. "You sure about this, Ward?"

"Yes." Ward hissed. Grinding himself against the caress, Ward lifted his hips into Grahm's hand. "Feels so good," he growled. Ward pulled Grahm back into the bedroom. Towel and extra pants lay abandoned in the hall. They stumbled to the bed. As he shrugged out of his sweats, Grahm tripped them both up. Ward landed on the bed. Grahm landed on Ward.

All the day's watching and wanting boiled over. Grahm's hungry mouth ravished the lean body beneath him. Every muscle and line received attention. Where Ward's hip met his thigh, his balls, the base of his throbbing cock; Grahm devoured their flavor. As he worked bronzed skin to a fever, Grahm fumbled in the nightstand, finding what he needed by touch and desperation. He never broke contact with Ward's flesh.

Ward was his for the taking. There was no way he was not going to take this wonderful man. Grahm breathed in the scent of need and soap as he teased the tip of Ward's prick with his tongue. Ward thrust up with a strangled moan. Enjoying the reactions, Grahm teased Ward unmercifully ... licking and toying with the tip. By feel alone, he snapped open the cap and managed to slick up his fingers. Gently he circled Ward's hole. His other hand massaged heavy balls. Kissing the very apex, drawing off the little, sparkling beads that tasted of Ward, Grahm pushed a finger inside.

A heady, deep growl rewarded him. Ward was lost in the sensations, his eyes unfocused. It was such a thrill to know that he was doing this to Ward. Grahm stroked just where he knew Ward needed it. Another snarl and Ward's hips jerked upward. Grahm had never been with someone so responsive. Ward's body reacted like he'd never even touched himself before. It was intense. It was beautiful. Finally, when Ward was shaking, Grahm wrapped his mouth over the purple head and sucked down to the base.

"Wait, what, oh..." Ward babbled as he lost control of his hips, slamming into Grahm's mouth. Nearly wailing, "No!" he shuddered his release; fingers clawing at the covers, trying for purchase. Everything he had, Grahm took.

Grahm crawled up across Ward's trembling body. Staring down at glazed over brown eyes, he laughed. "Been a while has it?" While he devoured the site of Ward near insensible below him, Grahm opened the condom and rolled it over his own cock. A little more gel and Grahm kneed between Ward's legs.

Ward grabbed his arms, fingers digging in hard. "What do I do?" Maple eyes were wide and unsure.

"Haven't you done this before?"

"No, nothing like this."

"Oh damn." Grahm swallowed. He rocked back on his heels, pulling Ward to sitting. "Come up on my lap." Trying to settle his own weight, Grahm moved Ward so that he was straddling Grahm's hips.

"Why?" Ward's mouth was burning insanity under his chin.

"Cause then you can control things." He positioned them, took control for the moment. His cock throbbed against the entrance to Ward's body. "Okay, now take it at your own pace." He tried to keep his voice reassuring. It was so hard when all Grahm wanted to do was ram into Ward. Ward's mouth found him. There was a desperation there that almost shredded Grahm's control. Slowly Ward slid onto Gram's prick. Warm, tight and intense; Ward's body swallowed him.

Ward's eyes went wide. Head thrown back, spine arching, he cried, "Grahm!"

"I got you." He wrapped his arms around the man's chest and middle. "Don't worry." For a time they just rocked sweet and slow. That hungry body sucked on his cock. Whatever Ward might have done in the past with guys, it had never gone this far. Grahm stroked Ward's still half-hard cock. It didn't take much to bring it back to attention. Licking the little beads of sweat running down Ward's chest, he laughed to himself. To be that young again...

Finally, he couldn't stand any more. Grahm stroked and thrust furiously, lifting them up off the bed. Ward met the tempo, ramming himself onto Grahm's body. With another strangled cry, Ward pumped himself over Grahm's fingers. His body bore down on Grahm. Fire burned up and out and through him. It devoured his consciousness. He cradled Ward against his chest and tried to remember how to breathe. Finally, sense resurfaced.

Hand behind him for support, Grahm leaned back and looked into glazed brown eyes. A strange darkness clouded Ward's face. "Are you okay?" Brushing wheat-blond hair away, he asked, "If it wasn't what you expected or wanted, I understand. It's like the first time you ever have sex. You just aren't really prepared for the emotions."

"Maybe, I don't know." Ward attempted a smile. More distress blew across his face. "My mind's just spinning right now ... all confused about things. Things I didn't think I'd be confused about."

"S'okay." Graham pulled that lean, warm man into his chest. Pulled Ward close like he'd wanted out in the field. Comforting him with his body, "Sleep on it. We can talk in the morning."

Morning didn't start with talking. Tentative kisses in all the right places woke Graham. Ward's lips and hands drove frost through his frame. Everything went tight and moaning, replaying the night before. Whatever uncertainty Ward harbored apparently sorted itself out in the darkness. Passion built slow, consumed them by inches and left them shuddering in each other's embrace as the sun crept across the floor.

Five nights of sleeping wrapped around another body. Six mornings of waking up next to someone who wanted him. Ward was always up first, staring at Graham with those deep, brown eyes. Half a dozen days spent working side-by-side, abandoning sorting boxes of junk to make love on the floor. Tools lay forgotten as they ignored the world's existence with the taste of skin on skin. Graham had never felt so wanted. Ward's passion was insatiable. He and Jason had never been like this. There was never any holding back with Ward, no second-guessing, no missed cues. Gentle and slow or desperate, driving want; they knew what the other needed. Even when they just sat on the porch, quiet and listening to the evening, it was right.

They'd worked hard for six days. The house, the farm, everything was coming together. Graham caught Ward out behind the barn. "Come on, Ward, let's knock off today." A small, plastic bucket, the kind kids took to the shore, hung loose in Graham's fingers. "Let's go down to the brambles, get some blackberries. Can't eat 'em if we don't pick 'em today." Ward's eyebrows went up and Graham laughed. "It's Michaelmas. My Ma always said the devil spits on the berries at midnight." Then he snorted. "Da always was always a little more gross with what the Devil did." Walking backward toward the woods and motioning for Ward to follow, he coaxed, "Come on, take a break."

Ward propped his hoe against the weathered side of the barn. "Is this my boss or my lover talking?" Dust flew up as he slapped his hands on his thighs.

Graham loved that question. "Both."

Shush, shush, as they crushed leaves in their path, startled the squirrels. Burnished trees locked branches above them. Copper and caramel leaves floated down, landing on shoulders, catching in blond and brown hair. A lace curtain of loss drifted soft before their feet. False summer, painted red and gold, warmed the breeze. Cascades of blackberry brambles slipped off the bank of the stream. Flotillas of fallen fairy boats swirled around the trailing branches.

Tart, sweet, warm ... autumn blackberries smelled like July. This late in the season, the twisted masses were bundles of cat's claws. Long sleeves and gloves were no barrier. Graham dug deep for the hidden prize, suffering the sacrifice of a little skin. Berry picking ritual; pick three, eat two, save one.

"I don't want to let go of you, Graham." Ward licked his purple stained fingers.

Graham pressed close. Ward smelled like fall. Crisp, heady and slightly musky; he breathed it in. "Then don't." One berry for himself, the other he popped between his lover's lips.

"I'm part of this farm." The berry disappeared in a gush of purple. Juice trickled across Ward's lips and he caught it with his tongue. "This place. It's not your life. I wouldn't exist for you apart from here."

Wrapping his arms around lanky hips, he said, "There's no reason I have to go back ... I mean to live. I could stay here." Ward felt so good, up against him like this. There was no way he was giving it up. "My God, that's what trains are for. I was never the kind of person who needed all that stuff going on."

"Let's go back to the house. Forget the rest of the day in bed. Okay?"

"Okay." It wasn't just okay, it was spectacular. Every sensual pleasure Ward could devise, he offered. They fed each other blackberries, still warm from the sun. Then they shared the taste in each other's mouths. An afternoon of gentle caresses merged into an evening of frantic lovemaking. Ward's tongue drove Graham wild, exploring every inch of skin. Savoring the taste, he licked Graham's shaft, sucked on it, kissed it. Every touch was fire burning in his bones. Tongues tangled. Ward's mouth tasted like berries and Graham.

Pleasure pinched the skin on his back as Graham pushed inside. Legs wrapped hard about Graham's hips pulling him deep. Graham ran his hand over Ward's prick. Their bodies had grown so accustomed to each other ... so hungry for each other. He almost died as Ward moved below him; desperate and needy and demanding. Fingers curling in against Graham's biceps, Ward drove them. The pace was frantic. Again and again Ward slammed against him. Graham's whole body spasmed. Always as good as the first time. Always so intense with Ward. His grip jerked the flesh in his palm. Throat bared, back arched, Ward's body gave into the touch. "I love you, Graham!" He moaned it as he came.

Collapsing onto Ward's strong chest, Graham savored the feel of their bodies sliding together, slick with sweat and sex. "I love you, too." He toyed with the damp strands of hair framing Ward's face, "I'm going to stay here with you. I promise." Ward buried his face into Graham's shoulder. They held each other until sleep pulled them under.

Graham rolled over, missing Ward's warm body. A breeze slipped against his skin. He opened his eyes to find Ward staring out the window. Knuckles grasped the frame supporting slumping shoulders. Ward's form was thrown in base relief under the light of a

harvest moon. Sliding out of bed, he asked, "What's wrong?" Stroking a brown arm with the back of his hand, he probed more, "Couldn't sleep?"

Ward turned. Loss stared out of his eyes. The wind caught Ward's hair, whipping it across his face. "I'm so sorry, Gram. I don't want it to be like this. I didn't understand it could be like this." He swallowed, "I'm sorry about the dog, too."

"What?" Sleep was still fogging Gram's brain.

"It doesn't matter now. Nothing matters now." Distant, hollow, the church bells rang out the first moments of midnight. "It's time."

"Time for what?"

Bits of straw were teased from Ward's hair. They danced away on the breeze. "Time," Ward's Indian summer voice cracked dry, "for me to leave."

"What are you talking about? I'm not leaving you. You're not leaving me."

"I have to. I have no choice."

Gram drew Ward to him, pressing him against his chest. "What do you mean you have to go?" They'd only just found each other. What was he talking about? How could he say such things? Ward's body felt light, bony, brittle, not all there. It was as if Gram was holding an empty cornhusk in his arms.

Pulling back, denying it, Gram put his palm against his lover's cheek. Ward's face was slack. The only life left was in his eyes. Breathless as the wind in the trees, "I'm so sorry, Gram." His lips barely moved when he spoke. Fragile fingertips brushed against Gram's hand. "So sorry for everything." Bits of mummy dust flaked off with the caress. "Hold me while it happens."

"You can't leave me!" Gram grabbed Ward's wrist. Rotted cloth crumbled and branches snapped under his fingers. He brushed his hand through the tangled blond mass and came away with straw clinging to his palm. "What's happening to you?" Dry, brittle flakes of fabric drifted about their feet. Ward's body sagged against him. Fear cutting into his voice, "Don't leave me!" Ward's maple eyes went dull, flat, the paint peeling from his face. "Come back!" Desperate fingers clung to Ward's chest as they slipped to the floor. Only remnants of straw and cloth remained. Nothing of his lover was left.

Vainly pleading, "Don't go, don't go," he buried his face in the decayed material. A hard, sharp object cut into his palm. Pulling it from the pile, the little tin badge clung to a bit of burlap. Gram pressed it to his lips, begging, "Come back to me. Please come back, Ward."

SUGAR SKULL

El muerto al pozo y el vivo al gozo.

(The dead have graves, the living have lives)

~Mexican proverb

Mama's house smelled of copra. Fermented coconut oil burned in small bowls throughout the rooms. The sweet, almost overwhelming, scent reminded mortals of death. It mixed with the heady perfume of chiles, almonds, and chocolate rising from the dishes of mole to sting Amado's nose. Marigolds and baby's-breath spilled over vases on a small table covered in a red cloth. A trail of them wound through the house and off toward the cemetery. The fragrant path would bring the dead home tonight. Tall candles flickered in their votive jars. The flames sparkled off beaten-tin frames holding pictures of grandparents, aunts and uncles gone for years. Tiny, skeletal children played with miniature toys amidst the flowers. Los Dias de los Muertos ... today was for the dead children, tomorrow would be for adults who'd passed.

Threading his arms through his button-down shirt, Amado wandered into the kitchen. His short, black hair was still damp from the shower. He'd spent all morning scrubbing their family's graves and painting the tombstones blue to ward off evil. His mother, round and happy in a flowered apron, was singing to herself as she put the finishing touches on a tray of alfeñiques. Row after row of foil eyed skulls peered from the trays. Mama and her sister owned una tienda de dulces, it had been in their family for generations. While the regular candies were prepared and sold at the shop, specialty items were often made in small batches at home. That way they could take their time and do it "right."

Although Mexican families bought the tiny meringue and sugar sculptures well in advance, there were still tourists who wanted them for souvenirs. Many of the skulls would not survive the trip. Cocking his hip against the rough wood table, Amado picked at icing drying in a plastic bowl. His mother slapped his hand. "Aye, Geme," she scolded him with his nickname, "you are such a little boy." Waving toward a batch of egg sized skulls behind her, "Los Pequeños are for you. One each." Like always, she'd made one set of twins and scribbled his name, Amado, and that of his twin sister, Amada, on foil tags pasted across the skulls' foreheads. Reaching over the table, he grabbed the one decorated with ribbons of green and yellow frosting. Those were his favorite colors.

As he nibbled a little icing from the skull, Amada bounced into the room. Glitter jeans and a too tight t-shirt stretched across her body. At least she didn't slather make-up on. She was too pretty for that, with full lips and large almond eyes. Her thick black hair was styled around a heart shaped face nearly the mirror of his own. When they were children, the resemblance had been so striking that if they switched clothes their parents could barely tell them apart. Ever since they'd hit puberty, Amado had been hit by friends who just wanted to get to his sister. Amada complained of a similar problem with him. He

guessed it was fair.

"Geme," she squealed, "Just who was looking for."

He already sensed he was about to get hit up for a favor. "No."

Gloss shimmered as she pouted. "I haven't even asked." He hated it when she whined.

"But the answer is no."

Their mother laughed, wiping her hands on her apron, "I need to get boxes for these." She brushed hair from her daughter's forehead and pinched his cheek as she passed them. "Be nice to your sister, Geme."

Madi waited until their mother was out of earshot. Then she hit him with the pleading, "You have to help me. I'm supposed to take those to Tia's, but Juan just called. He wants to go out." Juan was his best friend at work. He hated it when his sister dated his friends because their break-ups were hell on him. No matter how many times he asked, she wouldn't stop using his friends as her date stable. "Please, Geme, for me."

Normally he didn't mind doing favors for his twin sister, but she was supposed to be working today. She helped Mama and Tia in the family shop. It was so irresponsible, just like her. He headed toward the living room. "No!"

"Please!" The whining plea cut through the skin as she followed him.

Exasperated, he turned on her. "It's my day off!" All he wanted to do was sit in front of the TV, watch telenovelas with Abuela for a while and then go grab a beer with some friends. It was one of the few holidays from the factory he'd had. He broke off an icing flower from the skull candy and sucked it to nothing in his mouth.

"Don't make me beg, Geme." Arms folded across her chest, bottom lip stuck out, Madi was pulling the same doe-eyed pout she'd used since they were kids. "Please!"

Amado wanted to tell her to go jump from the church steeple. "Madi!" Something just nibbled at him, down in his gut, and he found himself saying, "Aye, damn, go. I'll do it."

She kissed his cheek. "You know I love you, Geme." Waving as she trotted from the house. "Car keys are on the TV." Completely reckless and out to have fun, sometimes he wondered how they'd grown up so different.

He turned to find Mama staring from the kitchen. "Where is she going?"

"She and Juan are going out." He threw up his hands to stop the avalanche of questions he knew would follow. "I'm taking the dulces to Tia. I don't know anything else, so don't ask." Pushing past into the kitchen, Amado wrapped his little skull in a napkin and began

packing boxes. Behind him, his mother snorted her disgust with his sister. There was no doubt in his mind that Madi was in for a scolding when she got back. Immature, the wild child, she got scolded quite often. Geme was the sensible one of the pair ... they looked alike, but they weren't the same person at all.

Row upon row of tiny skulls were packed snug into the boxes. It might be good going into the city. Maybe he'd call his friends and have them meet him in the Zócalo tonight. They could watch the fireworks, have some drinks and he'd miss the fireworks at home.

His family lived a little ways out of the city of Puebla. The small adobe farmhouse, with brick archways and rough paneled doors was comfortable. They weren't rich, but they didn't count themselves among the poor either. Solid middle class; his mother had her shop; his father was a manager at the same factory where Geme worked as a shift foreman. It was a good life. Boxes crammed under his chin, Amado passed the cistern on the way to his beat up VW. They lived far enough out that there was no city plumbing. Not that they would drink the municipal water anyways. It wasn't half as bad as Mexico City, but it wasn't terribly potable. Not wanting the boxes, or more importantly their contents, to shift too much on the rutted roads into town, Geme shoved them into the small back bench and lashed them down.

As he settled into the sprung driver's seat, his mother handed over his alfeñique. It was still wrapped in the napkin. "When will you be home?"

"Not for dinner." Noting the disapproving look, "I'll eat with Tia." Los Dias were meant to be spent with family. He set the skull on the passenger side as the VW pulled away from the house. Cycling through the numbers on his cell, he tried first one friend and then another. No one answered. It was irritating.

The big bus in front of him was irritating. Slow was fine on the dirt roads, but now, on the main highway, they could go faster. Today he was impatient and irritated. Geme jammed the phone between his shoulder and ear and spun the wheel to pass on the left. The old Bug jerked when he floored it, and then surged forward. Gauging the speed of the bus, he slipped back into the lane with inches to spare.

A silver and black scooter zipped from the opposite side of the bus. He caught a glimpse of two startled riders right in front of his hood. Geme slammed on his brakes. Blaring its horn, the bus swerved to the opposite side of the road. The mini-motorcycle fishtailed, clipping the VW's bumper. It bounced into the ditch and flipped. The riders went flying. The bus disappeared down the highway. Chinga! This was not what he needed today. Unlike the bus driver, Geme wasn't the sort of guy who would just run from an accident. At least not where there were people involved. Yanking the parking brake before jumping out, he headed to the fallen riders.

One was sitting, legs splayed out before him. His companion groaned and rolled onto his back nearby. "Are you okay?" Geme tapped on the visor of the dirt bike helmet the first man wore.

Nodding, the man pulled off the helmet. A mass of short, black curls spilled out. "I think I'm okay. See if Eduardo, Lalo, is all right."

From the ground, "I'm fine." The other rider threw his helmet at Geme's feet as he sat up. "What the hell were you doing?" Lalo's hair was shaved short on the sides with long bangs falling over his round face. Anger filled his deep brown eyes. He tugged on the front of his shirt. A muddy swatch cut across the green and white home jersey of the national football team. "Do you know how much this cost? I had to work weeks for this."

Somebody could have been killed and this idiot was worried about a soccer shirt. "What was I doing?" Geme couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice. "Not cutting around the wrong side of buses like an idiot."

"What?" Soccer boy yelled back, "Are you saying it's my fault?" He was sputtering. "Driving como un loco!"

"Stop it, Lalo!" The other man stood and limped toward the scooter. Blood or mud or both stained the denim at his knee. "You were driving loco like always." He turned toward Geme. Aztec heritage was stamped strong on his features. "Help me get the Moped up." His voice was deep, mellow and calming. "Lalo's an idiot, he always drives like a crazy man. It wasn't any more your fault than his." With a bright smile held out his hand. "I'm Jesús, but everyone calls me Chuy."

Geme caught the offered hand in his right, grabbing the handlebars with his left, "Amado, everyone calls me Geme though." Jesús' grip was strong and warm. It sent shivers down Amado's arm.

"You're a twin?" Chuy moved to the back of the Moped. "That's why they call you Geme right?"

"Yeah, I have a twin sister."

Grumbling as he walked over, "Does she drive as bad as you?" Eduardo swatted dirt off his shirt. It didn't help. The three of them righted the bike. Broken spokes grabbed the air with spidery fingers. The rear wheel was wrecked. "Look what you did to my Moped."

"Damn, I'm sorry," Why was he apologizing for something that was clearly not his fault? Sometimes Geme didn't even understand himself. What he did know: he couldn't leave them stranded. "Why don't we put the Moped in the trunk and I'll give you a ride into town."

A strange look passed between the men. Then Jesús shrugged in acceptance. With grunts and curses, the three of them manage to wrestle the bike into the front of the Bug. Although they had to tie down the latch with wire, it fit reasonably well. Only a little bit of the back wheel jutted out from under the trunk.

Lalo crawled over the driver's seat and parked himself on the back bench between boxes. Geme slid behind the wheel. Just before Jesús sat down, Eduardo snagged the napkin from the seat. "What's this?" He unwrapped the candy skull. "Oh, wow un alfeñique."

As he moved to take a bite, Chuy grabbed his hand. "Pig, that's not yours." He nodded toward Geme, "I bet it's his. You wouldn't want to have to live his fate for a year, would you? If you eat the skull meant for someone else that's what happens." Taking the dulce from Eduardo's hand, he wrapped it back up and set it on the floor.

Amado had to laugh at that. "Such an exciting fate." He started the Bug and pulled back onto the highway. "Get up, go work at the factory, go home. This is more excitement than I've had in ages."

"Really?" Lalo's arms bridged the gap between the seats as he leaned forward. "What's in the boxes then?"

"More candy skulls. I have to take them to my family's store." He shifted into second and quickly moved to third. Except for the earlier bus, they were the only travelers on the road. By now, most people would be home, getting ready for the evening. It was the quiet time in Mexico, just after lunch, when the shops closed and families were together. "Where were you headed?"

Chuy slid closer, elbow resting on Eduardo's arm. His cologne was spicy and it wrapped around Geme's senses. "We were supposed to be doing a concert. But our singer decided to quit. So we were headed back from trying to convince him to stay."

Shivering as Eduardo's fingers brushed his collar, Geme stuttered out, "What kind of band?"

The man behind him answered, "A rock band." Again, his fingers wandered across Amado's neck. This time he knew it wasn't an accident. Voice low and heavy, "So why is someone as good looking as you working in a factory? You could be a model. Or TV star."

Geme swallowed and kept his eyes on the road. Then he felt a hand skim across his thigh. Warm shocks radiated from the light touch. His body didn't think, just reacted. Two, three heartbeats pumped blood between his thighs. Cock suddenly hard and aching, Geme shifted in his seat. He slid his gaze right. Chuy's tongue traced the bottom of his teeth. A wicked smile followed. "What's the matter, Geme? You seem nervous."

"What are you doing?" Oh hell, how did they know? Nobody knew.

Chuy's touch wasn't light this time. "Having fun." He pushed his palm against Geme's crotch. Instinctively Geme groaned and lifted his hips into Chuy's grip. "Don't you like having fun?"

"What's the matter?" Fires were lighting under his skin as Lalo's fingers worked under his shirt. "Doesn't it feel good?" It felt sinful. It felt wrong. And it felt so good. Eduardo's laugh sounded behind him. One hand reached from behind the seat to trace the edge of his ear. "I bet Chuy can make you feel better." Now Eduardo's warm breath was on Geme's neck. "Think of it as payment for the ride." Then Amado groaned as Eduardo's lips found the skin under his collar.

Another groan as Jesús un-snapped his jeans and worked his hand under the fabric. "What are you going to do?"

Eduardo's laugh caused sparks down his spine. "He's going to suck you so hard." The whisper shredded any last resistance. Geme swallowed as the air hit his prick. One eye on the road, Geme watched as Chuy's tongue snaked out and licked his head. Swirling, teasing, the touch ached. And then Jesús swallowed him down. Geme moaned as he slid inside the man's hot mouth.

His right hand twisted into Chuy's curls. He intended to pull him off. Instead, Geme found himself urging the man on. Lalo's hand covered his own, drawing fire up his arm. This was so wrong. And it felt so wonderful. He certainly wasn't going to try and pass any more buses with this distraction.

Jesús moved on him with abandon, devouring his cock as Eduardo's hands caressed his chest and arms. It was hard to keep pressure on the gas. His thighs screamed from the strain of it. The fingers of his left hand were going white from gripping the wheel. Breath hitching, Geme tried to keep focus on the pavement ahead. Lalo's hands wandered from Chuy's back across Amado's stomach to play where lips were wrapped around his cock. His hips bucked under the onslaught. Chanting, "Aye mio," he lost it. White-hot light burned through him.

And then he could breathe again. "Dios!" Somehow he'd managed not to lose control of the VW. Lingering sparks drifted through him as Jesús licked his lips and sat back.

Languid eyes stared at him from the passenger side. Jesús leaned against the door. His softening cock was out and his hand ran over the slick and shiny head. Geme hadn't even realized Chuy was playing with himself while he fucked the man's mouth. From behind came, "Damn, damn!" and then Lalo's gasp. The scent of come thickened in the small space. Geme hoped he hadn't gotten any on the boxes.

Then Amado laughed, hard and loud. What a thought. Thinking about the boxes, how stupid. He'd just been blown in his car by another guy. And he'd liked it. A lot. Spattered cartons were the least of his problems.

Chuy was laughing with him. "What's the matter, Geme?"

"Nothing's the matter." Zipping his jeans and driving was difficult, but Geme managed

it. He shook his head. "I've never, ah, done anything like that."

Eduardo's teeth grazed the skin near his collar, making Geme twitch. "Maybe it was time you did things you're not used to."

"Maybe," Geme's smile was met by a devious twin. He didn't want to talk about that. Changing the subject, "When we get to Puebla, you can help me take the dulces to my Tia's shop. Then we'll find someplace to fix your bike."

"And after that?" It was Chuy's turn to chuckle, "What should we do after you've been the good boy?"

As non-committal as possible, "We'll see."

Ahead of them, four guardian volcanoes cradled a fairytale European city in their arms. The mountain that touched the stars, Citlaltépetl, lounged along one side of the town. The smoking peak of Popocatepetl and his dormant bride Iztaccíhuatl sat side by side. La Malinche, where the rain goddess dwelled, scowled over the golden tile domes Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios built high atop a buried Aztec pyramid. Whether the volcano was named for Cortez's mistress or the other way around was long lost in memory. Buildings fronted in mosaics and patterned terracotta tiles sparkled in the sun. Facades styled as Moorish palaces dominated the city center. French houses painted gold, orange, pink, and blue lined the streets. A beautiful city of mosaic fronted buildings, domes and spires. It was like driving in a town of wedding cakes.

Geme threaded the VW through late afternoon congestion. Rather than fight to find a space, he parked at his Tia's house. Jesús jumped out to open the gate and followed them under the arch into the center courtyard. Like most homes in the city, Tia's was multi-storied and built in a square around a central court. With three sets of hands to carry the load, the four-block walk to the tourist corridor was easy. The shop sign still said closed, but Geme knew his Tia never locked it if she was there. The bell jangled as Amado pushed the door open with his knee.

"Hola, Madi!" Came from the back room in response.

He set his boxes on the counter. "No, Tia, it's Geme!" Jesús and Eduardo set their boxes down, as well.

"Oh." A woman who looked very much like his mother came through a back arch. She wore a black apron with skeletal mariachis and dancers cavorting in bright colors. "I thought Madi was bringing them."

"She was, but her boyfriend called, so you get me." He kissed her cheek in greeting. "This is Chuy and Eduardo. I ran into their Moped. We're going to take it to the shop later. My auto is parked at your house."

Tia bustled about, switching the sign to Open and inspecting the candy. "Good. Is everyone all right?" When they nodded, she asked, "Are you boys local?" This time the shakes were negative. "What are you in town for then?"

Jesús answered, "We have a band and we're supposed to play this week. But our singer just quit." He took the camote she offered him. Biting into the sweet-potato candy, he said, "You wouldn't know anyone who needs a job singing?"

"Geme ... well, he doesn't need a job." Her voice was full of pride for both things. "But he sings at church every Sunday. And in school, he would win prizes. He sang in Mexico City his last year."

Trust his Tia to bring those things up. "That was a long time ago."

"Not that long."

"Okay, it feels like a long time ago." He stretched to hide his embarrassment from Jesús and Eduardo. "Do you need me today? If so, I need find a mechanic first." Deep inside he hoped she needed him. He was still bothered by what happened in the car ... what might happen if he stayed with these men.

"No." Her smile almost killed him. Geme half wanted an excuse to get away. The napkin with his skull sat atop one of the boxes. Tia picked it up and stared confused. Offering it out to him, "Yours?" Geme took it from her, scraping his teeth absently across the crown, before tucking it in his shirt pocket. Lalo or Chuy must have brought it from the car. "Marta is home. She can come help me today." Shooing them out the door, "Go find a place to fix the bike. Dinner is at nine if you want to come by!"

It took sometime to find a man who thought he could fix the bike at a price they were willing to pay. Chuy convinced Lalo and Geme to split the cost. Then the three of them joined the evening crowds drifting toward the center of town. Confirmation dresses, layers upon layers of damask and lace, hung from stalls. Carts selling fruit blocked the sidewalks. Vendors jammed spears of melon and jicama into cups and sprinkled it with chili powder. Stores laid their wares out on tables for casual inspection. The city was thronged with people carrying garlands of marigolds.

On a side street, they stopped at a rolling cart where a pork leg roasted on a vertical spit. The smell of rich fat reminded their stomachs that they hadn't eaten. A woman all in blue—flowered skirt, blouse and apron—cooked pan arabe. The gas fired tripod with the huge, round griddle, radiated heat into the night. The legs were shaped like roosters standing on their heads wings overlapping across the fire, feet splayed out to support the grill. Her husband hacked meat from the spit with a machete. Pineapple, cilantro and onion were tossed in with the pork and wrapped in hot, thick tortillas. Jesús stole bites from Geme's as they walked. Eduardo had downed both of his in two mouthfuls.

La China Poblana watched over the city from her pedestal. The un-official patron saint

of Puebla, she was a slave girl brought from India and adopted by a sea captain. Little girls honored her memory, braiding dark hair with dozens of ribbons. Twin clusters of bows bounced on their backs as they ran through the crowds writing with the light from sparklers. Simple cotton blouses topped elaborate skirts styled like saris and decorated in sequins of red, gold, green and white. Boys in traditional Charro attire or dressed as demons and skeletons begged for coins in the streets. Angels stared bemused from the rooftops, watching the gargoyles holding lanterns in their jaws. They flickered in the darkness.

Water sprayed from the Baroque fountain at the center of the Zócalo. Puebla's central plaza was hedged by stately palms, willows, and purple flowering jacaranda. Stilt walkers in gold and blue stole hats from passers by. Clowns cut capers among the throngs of people. Toy sellers, their balloons trailing as high as the trees, were followed by armies of children. Stylized public Ofrendas, with their elaborate cut paper mats and ritual objects artfully arranged, were hemmed with ropes of marigolds. Firework frames were set here and there ready to be lit. The rockets would drive the movements of pinwheels, whirligigs and fantastic carousels after dark. Mariachis strolled the plaza, voices as good as any heard in Garibaldi. The lyrics tended toward lost loves and broken hearts this time of year.

Wandering, they came to the alley de los sapos. Songs drifted through the night from the various cantinas. Chuy wrapped his arm around Geme's shoulders, "Come on, we'll have a drink." The weight of the embrace was electric. It felt wicked. It felt wild. It felt like Amado belonged with him like this.

Scared of the overwhelming feelings, he pulled away. "No," he said, shaking his head, "it's late, I should go home."

Lalo stepped up. The back of his hand popped Geme's chest, missing crushing the candy in his pocket by a breath. "That's what you should do," he teased, his eyes bright with the question, "but, Geme, what do you want to do?"

For a moment, he vacillated. Then Amado smiled. "I want to get a drink."

Shouts and laughter drifted from numerous doorways. Eduardo ducked into one at random. A dimly lit room, painted burnt orange, opened off a short hall. On the low stage, a couple sang leftist songs. At first Geme thought the woman was just homely. Then he realized it was a guy. Lalo slid on to a bench against the wall. Jesús pushed Amado into a chair and then dropped into another, backward. Lacing his arms over the back, he held up three fingers toward the waitress. God only knew what he just ordered.

Geme pulled the alfeñique from his pocket as the woman set a bottle and three shot glasses before them. The icing had melted some, staining the napkin in splotches of green and yellow. One of the foil eyes dangled on its cheek. He tipped an ashtray and set the decayed looking offering on the clear pedestal. "There, our master of ceremonies tonight." People at their table and those nearby joined in saluting the skull with drinks.

The singers were passable; more adept at fervor than vocals. Still, as liquor loosened inhibitions, they soon had the crowd singing with them. Finally, his companions goaded Geme into joining. When his voice broke, it was clear, strong and rich. After the song ended, he realized Eduardo and Chuy were staring.

Slowly the flush crawled up his neck. Geme slammed back his drink to cover the embarrassment.

"Aye, Geme," Eduardo marveled, leaning over the red draped table, "your Tia wasn't kidding when she said you could sing."

Brooding, Geme looked at his empty glass. "Well, it doesn't matter." Jesús refilled it from their bottle and Geme watched the liquid swirl in the glass. The skull alternatively glared and laughed at him. Sighing, he lifted it and knocked the drink down. "Now I just sing because it makes me happy. It's something I enjoyed a lot."

"Would you say..." Chuy rested his chin on his hands. A shot-glass of golden liquor dangled from his fingers. With his strong nose and almond eyes, he looked like Tezcatl Ipoca, god of what is and what will be, considering a sacrifice. "That your life now was worth giving that up?"

Laughing at the image, "I'm not sure."

"You should be sure." Eduardo used his empty glass as a shaky pointer.

Geme stood. "I'm sure I've had enough to drink." Unsteady, he started to walk away.

Jesús grabbed his sleeve. "We'll go too. Come with us, you shouldn't drive."

"Come on, friend," Lalo came from around the table. "Stay with us. Our hotel's not far."

What would happen if he went with them chilled his gut. That he might want it to happen scared Geme more than anything. "I shouldn't," he said, taking another step away. The skull stared up from the table, chiding him for his fear. Chuy picked it up and held it out. Geme looked first to him and then at Eduardo. He licked his lips. Then he took the skull. Heavier than it should be, the weight of it crashed into Geme's palm. Its presence filtered the thoughts, shaking them out through the layers of his mind. "Okay, I'll go with you." Both his new friends smiled.

Chuy slung his arm over Geme's shoulders, hand dangling loose against his chest. "Good, three is safer than one at night." Laughing, the trio strolled into the still crowded streets. Sounds of firecrackers and revelry drifted from the Zócalo. They threaded through the mob, cutting across the central plaza and then down another side street. "There," Chuy said, waving his hand by lifting it off Geme's chest, "that's it." A white and blue neon sign hung over the alley a little ways down.

The Hotel Romero was no more than a gated doorway set in a wall. A wizened gnome at the desk looked up to make sure they had a key before waving them down the narrow hall. The hotel was built around a three-story atrium. Metal stairs and balconies jutted into the space above. Counting the worn sets of French doors, they came to their room. A short hall opened onto a tiny area with a metal-frame bed and a tile floor. One tiny door was offset in the wall. It opened on a private bath tiled floor to ceiling in red, yellow, and blue. The bath had a sink and a toilet and a showerhead in the ceiling.

Amado set the package with his skull on a small table. Folding himself onto a wooden chair, the last piece of furniture in the room, he palmed his face. Chagrined, he grumbled, "I shouldn't have let you talk me into drinking so much." The room was spinning just a little.

"You're..." Lalo's voice was muffled by his shirt. Jerking it over his head, he tossed it on the floor. "Always talking about what you should or should not do. What about what you want to do?" With a laugh, he fell back on the bed.

Jesús knelt before him. "Really," he said, elbows on Geme's thighs, fingers plucking at his shirt. "What do you want?" His dark eyes were earnest in their question.

"I don't know what I should do."

"There you go with that word again." Another laugh came from the direction of the bed. "Just let go. Have fun. Follow your desires." A dark hand ran across the bulge between his legs. It was obvious what Eduardo desired. "I think you've sold yourself on what everyone else wants of you."

Geme licked the sugar stuck to his fingers. "And you don't want something of me?" Gaze drifting from one man to the other, he searched their eyes for the answer.

Hungry, Chuy watched Amado's tongue run across his skin. "I would be lying if I said I didn't."

Already Lalo was down to his shorts. "Only if you want to my friend." He stretched languid and easy. Muscles rippled just under the skin. By the looks of his calves and his thighs, Eduardo was as much a soccer player as a fan. "Otherwise we'll all just pile in. You can face the wall, Chuy and I will play." The bright grin teased as much as his words.

Pulling off his own shirt, Jesús drifted to the bed. Climbing on the bed to straddle Eduardo's legs, he teased back, "I don't think he wants to leave his ass exposed to you, Lalo." Both laughed. Then they were kissing, hard, needy. Eduardo's fingers fumbled with Chuy's jeans. Jesús pushed against his hands. And then he was out with Eduardo stroking the other man's cock.

Geme groaned. They were beautiful together like that. Todos los toros sempática. Lean, hard and sexy Lalo worked the stiff prick in his hand. Jesús was more solid, compact but no less sensual. Nothing like these two had ever happened to Amado. So hot, his body was so hot. Blood pounded in his ears and his cock. Fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt as he stood.

Lazy, Eduardo's arm fell across the bed. Half-lidded eyes stared out hot. "Come on, tío bueno." His finger's wiggled, calling Geme. "You want it. We want it. Play with us."

"Sí." Chuy's voice was almost lost on Eduardo's skin. "Join us."

Amado dropped onto the edge of the bed. Frost bloomed beneath his skin, and he hissed under the joint assault of Chuy's hand running down his leg and Eduardo's running up his chest. "What do I do?" Dreams were one thing. Reality another. Vague notions of the where and the how of it were all Geme had. No one had ever offered Geme what he really wanted. All the years of thinking about it and never doing anything and here were two handsome men willing to show him all of it.

"What," Chuy said as his hand slid around to stroke just under the edge of Geme's jeans, "do you want to do?"

Warm lips drifting across his ribs made Geme tremble. Between Chuy's hand and mouth, Geme was dying. Then Lalo found the sweet spot just above his collar bone, and Amado moaned. "Everything." He sighed under the sweet, terrible heat.

As he pushed the shirt off Geme's shoulders, Eduardo whispered, "Then let's get you undressed."

Jesús popped the snap on his jeans, following the zipper down with his tongue. Lalo pulled him into a kiss as the other man turned Amado to his knees, pulling his pants and shorts from his frame. Who was more frantic, Jesús, Lalo or Geme, was anyone's guess. Denim sliding off his legs shot fire into Amado's belly. Eduardo's tongue pushed into his mouth. Chuy's tongue pushed against his hole and Geme's eyes went wide with shock. Caught between them, all he could do was shiver with the exquisite sensations drilling into his bones.

Cautious, his fingers sought Eduardo out. Amado's palm tingled as he traced the slick head trapped under Eduardo's briefs. It was so hard, straining under the fabric. How long he'd wanted to touch another man like this. Now he had two and it was amazing. The man growled and lifted his hips. "You want that, do you?"

"Aye!" He almost died as Chuy's finger slipped in with his tongue. There was a burning as he was spread. Such a good burn. Then he jerked as something cool and slick ran down his ass. Chuy's fingers worked it into his hole. Lalo pulled away, wriggling out of his shorts as he went. Body quivering, Geme watched as Eduardo rolled a condom over his throbbing cock. His own prick screamed for attention and he found himself stroking it

hard. "How," he could barely get the words out, "what should I do?"

With a laugh, Jesús nipped his cheek. "Turn around. Sit on Lalo's aparto, let your body do the work and I'll suck on you." His fingers slid up Geme's spine, drawing fire with them. "It will be easier for you that way."

Eduardo laughed, pulling and turning him into position. He almost lost his will as Lalo's thick head pushed against his entrance, but Chuy's tongue was teasing his nipples and his hand was stroking Geme's aching cock. There was nothing to do but follow their lead. Lalo pulled. Jesús pushed. Geme slid onto the stiff prick. He threw his head back and moaned. Sensations of heat and pressure almost split his joints. Amado's legs splayed over Eduardo's thighs while his hand clawed back, pulling at dark brown hair. Chuy licked his head, purring as he worked Geme's cock, tongue sliding over every inch before he opened and swallowed Geme down to the root. Geme bucked.

"Aye mio!" Eduardo groaned as Amado rode him. Teeth running across Amado's neck, Lalo wrapped one arm across his chest. With the other hand, he urged Jesús to suck harder on Geme's prick.

Pleasure assaulted Amado. His whole body was consumed. All his wanting answered in the touch of two men. It was all he could do to ride the waves screaming through him. Geme's cock twitched as Chuy's tongue tickled the base. "No," Amado whined as Jesús pulled away, "Don't stop."

"Don't worry, Geme," Jesús kissed him, drawing his lips open with his tongue. Heady musk rolled between their mouths. Amado had never tasted himself. While their tongues fought, Chuy's left hand toyed with Geme's prick. His right was involved in rolling a condom over his own throbbing cock. Finally, Jesús pulled away. "Lean him back, Lalo," he breathed, "I want to share."

One hand pressed against Chuy's hard chest. "What do you mean share?" He couldn't be thinking that. There was no way.

"I want to be in you too." Dios, he was thinking that.

"That's not possible." It was hard to breathe. Concentration was impossible. Geme's head was still fuzzy from the drinks.

A strong arm wound across his chest. "It is very possible." The whispers from Eduardo's lips sent chills down Geme's spine. "Especially with you so relaxed. Being a little drunk doesn't hurt." Slowly, Eduardo laid them down. Sweat slicked their skin. Amado's body was pushed up and displayed for Chuy's greedy stare. Cock aching, Geme whined. From beneath, Lalo kept the rhythm he'd started, rocking them both.

Cool lube slid across his balls and pooled where Eduardo's cock stretched him. Geme trembled as the head of Chuy's prick brushed between his balls and his hole. "Aye, no..."

A deep aching burn, and then Eduardo shifted, and he shifted, and both were inside. “Oh, Dios mio!” It was all Geme could do to just lie there, trembling between the two men. Jesús chuckled and leaned in to kiss him. Both cocks moved within and Geme moaned low and hard.

“It's good, yes?” Thick and needy, the words throbbed on his skin.

Good wasn't the half of it. Geme had never felt anything so intense. Nothing had ever consumed him body, mind and soul like this. “Sí, so good.” He hissed.

Lalo's hips moved them all as his lips slid down the side of Geme's neck. Chuy's tongue drove into his mouth as hard as his cock drove between his legs. Everything was burning, throbbing. Geme shivered, biting his own lip to bring it back down. This *needed* to go on forever.

Thought was gone. Edges blurred as two sets of hands, two sets of burning kisses, two incredible cocks worked over every inch of him. He had no idea who he was kissing. His fingers moved in random patterns against hot skin. Someone was stroking his cock. Whether it was his hand, or one of the other men, didn't matter. Inside, outside Geme couldn't tell the difference. Everything ached. Geme's hips were beyond his control. The whole world centered between his legs.

Lalo pounded him from behind. Jesús pounded him from above. He shook. He pleaded. And then he was coming. Torn apart by the feelings, he thought he screamed. His orgasm ripped through them all. Chuy covered his mouth to bury their sounds. Three more hard thrusts and Eduardo jerked beneath him. Jesús joined them only seconds after, his fingers clawing into Geme's arms.

Jesús groaned and rolled off onto the bed. Body trembling, Amado could do nothing more than lay where he was. Waves of heat still washed through him. Never had he come so hard. Intense wasn't the half of it. Then it hit him, he'd just been fucked by two men. Hands clutching his skull, Geme scrambled off the bed. Why did he do this? Why did he give in? Shaking, his fingers gripped the sides of the small table. He'd promised himself he'd never let “it” happen and yet it had.

Below him, the ruined alfeñique watched him and judged him. He picked up the tiny sugar skull. Remnants of icing flowers flaked off in his fingers. Bright foil eyes had long since come unglued. Even the name banner was rolled up on itself. Amado's thumb pushed it back into place. His breath caught. Scrawled in his mother's familiar script *Amada*, his sisters name. He'd picked up the wrong skull. The bits and pieces Geme tasted were not his to have. This wasn't meant for him.

Outside, the gunshot bangs of fireworks entertained the living and the dead. Mariachi music drifted in under the door. A throng of souls who knew who they were and why they existed. All those things had come undone for Geme today. Lalo shifted, already sleep, mumbling in his dreams. Amado turned and stared at the pair tangled together,

barely covered by the thin blanket. Geme could get dressed, walk into the Zócalo and lose himself in the crowd. Tomorrow he could go back to his life, his future. He could stay Amado Maria Ventura Cidro, factory foreman, a good son. All of this would just be a strange memory.

Chuy propped himself on his elbows. Voice thick with a mixture of desire and fatigue, he whispered, "You're thinking too much, Geme. I see it in your face." Gentle, easy, his hand drifted through his bedmate's hair. "Don't think so much, come back to bed with us."

The tiny alfeñique was heavy in Amado's hand. It wasn't his. This wasn't meant to be for him. Geme swallowed. He chewed on his lip. Then he ripped the foil from the skull's forehead and shoved it in his mouth. Two steps brought him to the bed. He knelt on the mattress. As he crunched the hard candy to nothing between his teeth, Amado crawled over Chuy's lean form. With a deep sigh, he swallowed. Fate burned his throat.

Strong hands pulled his face down. Warm lips brushed his cheeks, his nose, his chin, before settling into a deep kiss. Chuy pulled back, his tongue licking bits of sugar from Geme's skin. "You taste sweet."

Geme leaned in and pushed his mouth hard onto Chuy's. Mumbling into the kiss, he agreed, "So do you."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Buchanan: I grew up in a Southwestern border town where I learned how to ride horses and shoot guns. While I was never very accurate with a rifle, I broke my first horse at 13. After receiving a BA in English from the state university, I moved from the sleepiness of economic depression to the insanity of Southern California. Three years working for County Mental Health sent me screaming into Law School. I have now been practicing law for nine years. Someday I hope to get it right.

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