



# LYNX WOODS

A NOVEL

P. A. BROWN

## LYNX WOODS

...I moved up to sit beside him on the bed.

Charlie grabbed my hand. His grip was punishing. "Oh, no, you don't. You stay right here. Not gonna run out on me."

"You need to go to sleep, Charlie. You're too drunk for this conversation."

Charlie wasn't listening. He forced his eyes to focus on the wall across the room, then shifted to travel down my body, his gaze stopping on my crotch. "You don't look gay, you know that?" He was so damned serious.

"Not everybody does. Most of us don't, in fact."

"You want to give me a blow job?"

"Jesus Christ, Charlie!" I scrambled off the bed and backed away.

"Hey, what's wrong with being curious? I just want to know, is all."

"Know what? You can't be serious."

Charlie sat up in the bed. The gleam in his eyes was no longer that of a vacant drunk. It had a feverish edge to it. "Tell me what it's like, Tyler." He began to rub his cock, which I was alarmed to see, was rapidly filling out the crotch of his Wranglers. "Or better yet, show me. You want to, don't you? I saw you earlier...looking. Don't tell me you don't want to."

"That's hardly the point—"

Why the hell did he seem less drunk now than he had a few moments ago? Had he been faking it, pretending so he had an excuse? An excuse for what? Propositioning me?

What a bizarre idea. I licked my lips at the sight of his bulging crotch. Charlie was right about one thing, I had been looking. Just like I was looking now. Looking and imagining...

ALSO BY P. A. BROWN

*The Bear*  
*Memory Of Darkness*

# LYNX WOODS

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BY

P. A. BROWN

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LYNX WOODS  
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*To my family and all my friends.*

# CHAPTER 1

The whole area looked like it had been ravaged by a dirty bomb. I stood on the running board of my ancient Land Rover and squinted toward the distant line of the river, visible through a screen of beech and Manitoba maple trees. This entire section of what should have been prime Ontario forest was a wasteland. What little grew, looked pathetic even by weed standards.

Make that two bombs. Small nuclear ones.

The ground was mostly hard pack. A few sunken pits and depressions had collected oily puddles of water, and I'd already jarred my teeth on a few driving into the site. I was surrounded by piles of garbage bags, a broken bed frame, and a haphazard pile of tires. This was far worse than I'd expected.

I knew there was a lot more I hadn't seen yet.

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Nearer the river, a few trees struggled to take hold, their thin, bent trunks competing with thick clusters of pig's weed and purple loosestrife. The only decent-looking thing on the entire site was a massive weeping willow tree that stood near the curved banks of the river on the right-hand corner of the fifty-acre lot. How it had managed to survive this long was a total mystery. I was surprised Thurlow's grandfather hadn't whacked it down when he put his first paper mill on the property back in the late 1800s. Of course, it had been a tiny sapling back then. Maybe he'd overlooked it in his zeal to rape the bigger stuff.

I knew I shouldn't have been so cynical. Industry built Canada. Back then, no one had had any real concept of the impact humans made on the planet. Even today, some people seemed to miss the point of global warming. I could hardly fault Bartholomew Thurlow's grandfather for his lack of foresight. Indeed, he had known enough to make his family wealthy for generations to come. Now, that wealth was going to fix what it had screwed up so long ago.

Bringing back this piece of land to its pre-industrial state was going to be a major job...a major job that was now sitting squarely on my not-so-broad shoulders.

From inside my Land Rover came the sound of an impatient throat clearing. "Are you done yet, Tyler? I thought we were going to lunch?"

I glanced at Michael. The angle afforded me a view of my lover's tight, jean-clad crotch and delectable bottom. Normally an arresting site—even a stirring one—today it did nothing for me. In fact, it was fast reaching the point where Michael, himself, did nothing for me. I tried to remember what had moved me to bring the boy along this morning. The desire for company on the ninety-



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minute trip? Whatever had triggered the gesture, I was now regretting my impetuosity.

“Tyler.”

What had I been thinking?

“I heard you the first time, Michael.” I hopped off the running board. Acrid dust puffed up under my Merrell Explorers. “I’ll be back in five.”

I shut the door over Michael’s startled complaints and stomped across a blasted peak of clay and brutalized soil to something I had spotted just before Michael’s initial whine.

A tiny dribble of water confirmed my suspicion. A spring. Weak, and probably from a polluted ground source, but running water all the same. A few waist-high milkweed plants and vetch grew around it. I felt buoyed by the sight of a monarch butterfly sniffing out the milkweed as a potential nursery. A shadow crossed my path, and I looked up to see a Red-tailed Hawk soar over the river, hunting for game.

Feeling remarkably upbeat, I doubled back to the Land Rover and popped open the door. Michael started in even before I got my butt planted on the duct-taped seat covers.

I zoned him out while tapping my fingers on the wheel for several seconds, then cranked on the engine. It growled, and the Land Rover shook and shuddered before it roared to life. Then I spotted the shack. It was tucked out of the way, maybe a hundred yards from the gorgeous willow, hemmed in by a heavy cloak of sumac and a few sickly looking white cedars.

I didn’t remember seeing the structure listed as an asset. And from where it sat, it most definitely was on the property. I’d have to go back and double-check the papers since I did not want to be responsible for tearing down old Aunt Becky’s birthplace by

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mistake. That would be a public relations gaffe I could do without. And if it wasn't listed, I'd have to contact Thurlow to find out what it was.

"Are we going, or what?" Michael was in full I-can-be-such-a-bitch mode. "First I miss my luncheon at Azure, and now it's like you can't tear yourself away from this Godforsaken place. I don't understand what's going on."

"Michael," I said with as much as patience as I could muster, which at this point in time, wasn't much. "Shut up."

"Tyler!" Michael flounced his pretty butt on the worn seat under him. "Well, I never—"

"Man, if I thought that was true, I'd buy you a diamond ring and marry you."

I dropped off a fuming Michael at Domo's on Yorkville in the heart of Toronto, wincing at the thought of the damage he'd inflict on my credit card. I was really going to have to do something about Michael soon. His mercurial temper and gift for spending money—especially my money—were rapidly outweighing his talents in bed.

I drove out to Mississauga and pulled into Thurlow Industries around four. I parked in a spot marked for visitors and approached the towering blue, steel-and-glass structure. A 767, coming in for a landing at Pearson International Airport across the 401, roared overhead, runner lights blinking.

Ears numb, I entered the cool lobby and hooked a right toward the elevators.

The sound of running water worked through my overwrought senses. I paused to study the fountain cascading down the living wall that stretched across the entire north rampart. It soared three stories to where the first of a set of hidden pipes fed a perpetual

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stream. The plants I had personally selected and attached to the wall were growing nicely, several looking like they had tripled in size.

The air was filled with the fresh scent of clean water and the rich oxygen given off by the wall of plants after filtering the crap that the building had produced. This had been my first major success as an ecological engineer, and one I was proud of to this day. Companies still sent representatives from all over the world to study what I had accomplished in the hope of reproducing it. I'd won some fat contracts as a result of those visits.

When Thurlow had first approached me with his "little" problem nearly three years before, I hadn't been sure what the industrialist wanted. He'd told me he had a sick building and was losing hundreds of man-hours each year as employees called in sick. He needed someone to fix the problem immediately. He'd heard about my company, Emerald Biolife, and suspected I could help.

I hadn't had to spend more than half a day in the stale, trapped air of the hermetically sealed box to know what the problem was. It had taken nearly two months of research, working with a top-notch botanist at Toronto's U of T, to come up with a solution. Which had been a real pain in the butt to implement, including a very steep learning curve and even some new technologies picked up on the run. But we had unveiled the project eighteen months before. The living wall, in particular, had been an instant hit.

Bioengineering the interior of a structure is always an ever-evolving process. So the system within Thurlow's building worked even better now than it had when it had gone online. And I envisioned it would grow increasingly more efficient with time.

Thurlow had paid me well for that job, and had helped me

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launch a new phase of my career. Now, he wanted another miracle.

I announced my arrival to Jeannie, Thurlow's long-suffering secretary, then I strolled over to the nearest window and looked out. I couldn't see much. An industrial fog obscured the distant shoreline of Lake Ontario, and several other buildings on the same scale as Thurlow's hid whatever the smog didn't.

Finally, Jeannie told me I could go in.

I passed through the double oak doors into Thurlow's inner sanctum. His office was the size of some middling banana republic country; his desk was as big as the third-floor bedroom I shared with the volatile Michael. In sharp contrast, Thurlow, himself, was a small, rotund man of indeterminate years who occupied a chair two sizes too large for him.

He indicated one of two padded leather chairs facing his desk. "Sit, Tyler. What brings you out here? I thought you had planned to survey the site today."

"Did." I dropped into the chair across from him. "Something came up—"

Only then did I notice the other man in the room.

He stood with his back to the desk, looking out at the view through the polarized glass. His hands were held behind his back, and I noted their size and obvious roughness. This guy was no desk jockey, not with calluses like that. I couldn't see his face, only the pitch black hair that had been drawn into a ponytail and hung past his shoulder blades. He had broad shoulders and a tight ass not quite covered by a black leather bomber jacket.

"Ah, yes," Thurlow said. "I'm actually glad you did come up, Tyler. I'd like you meet someone. He's going to be working on the site, too, but in a different capacity."

The figure by the window turned, and I found myself holding

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my breath. Would this stranger measure up to what I had already seen of his impressive back?

I wouldn't have described the man as drop-dead gorgeous. His face was too unusual for that. It was obvious he had First Nation's blood running through his veins. His high cheekbones looked sculptured in his tight, dark face, and his eyes were two black orbs staring into mine as Thurlow introduced us.

"Tyler, I'd like you to meet Charlie Reid. Charlie, this is Tyler McKay, our ecological engineer."

Charlie Reid. That sounded familiar.

Thurlow continued, "I've commissioned Charlie to create a piece of art commemorating this project and all it will mean for the world."

Thurlow had a pretty high opinion of himself and his place in the scheme of things. I guess when you have the kind of money he had, you could afford to.

I realized why I had heard Reid's name. The man was a rising talent in the art world. His paintings of animals in their natural habitat were giving Robert Bateman a run for his money. I said to him, "I've seen your pieces. I remember one, in particular. Some kind of bird on the deck of a boat in the Arctic?"

"An Arctic Skua on the deck of an oil rig in the North Atlantic, but you're close." Charlie smiled and some of the tension in his dark face dissolved. "That was my first sale."

"It was good. What were you doing in the North Atlantic?"

"Working. I was one of the onboard rig technicians."

"And you spent your spare time painting? Strange hobby for a roughneck."

"I ran out of chewing tobacco, and my guns fell overboard." He shrugged his broad shoulders, and his eyes hardened into ice chips.

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“You stereotype everybody that way?”

I felt heat flood my face. I fingered my goatee and tried to figure out a way to word my apology. “Sorry, bad choice of words. I am puzzled, though. Have you seen the site, yet...where I’m going to be working?”

“Yes, I was up there yesterday. Why?”

“What exactly do you intend to paint?”

If Charlie was taken aback by my words, he didn’t show it. Instead, he rolled his big shoulders in a shrug and said, “I intend to paint what once was and what will be again.”

Oh great, a mystic.

I tried to place his accent, which wasn’t strong, but was definitely present. American South...but where, exactly?

Charlie added, “Unless, of course, you don’t think you can do what you claim you can, and you are unable to restore Lynx Woods.”

“Lynx Woods?” That was a new one. “Is that what your people used to call it?”

“My people? Nah, my great-grandfather was a North Carolina Cherokee. Don’t think he ever got north of Richmond.”

Feeling like I’d been had, I raised one eyebrow at the taller man. “I assure you, I can and will do what I’ve said. This isn’t the first time I’ve reconstructed a damaged wetland site.”

Thurlow choose that moment to interject. “Good, good. Now, I’m sure you both have lots to do.” He stood—all five-foot, four-inches of him—and ushered us toward the door. “Unless there was something else, Tyler? Charlie?”

“As a matter of fact, there was, Mr. Thurlow,” I said. “There’s a building on the property that wasn’t listed in my original specs.”

“A building?”

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“Not much more than a shack, but I need to have formal dispensation to take it down, if that’s your intention. Or we’ll have to put a keep-away order on it so it’s left alone during the work.”

“Could it be used for anything? Storage? Tools? While you’re working there, that is?”

“I didn’t examine it too closely, but from my first impression, I would say no. Do I have your leave to raze it?”

“Yes, by all means. If that’s what you think best.”

Thurlow seemed very distracted now. Busy man. All those billions to occupy the mind. I persisted, though. I didn’t want to have to come back later to take care of this. “I’ll need that in writing.”

I couldn’t help but notice Charlie smirking at the exchange. Did he think I was a sniveling coward trying to cover his ass? Let him. His opinions meant squat to me. The man knew how to fill out a pair of jeans, though. I couldn’t help it, my gaze kept dropping down below Charlie’s waist.

“Fine,” Thurlow said, completely oblivious. “I’ll fax that to you by end of business day today.”

“Very good, sir.”

I followed Charlie to the door. He held it open and swept his arm in a half circle to indicate I should go through first. He sauntered after me.

We waited for the elevator in silence. When it arrived, I couldn’t resist asking, “How’d you hook up with Thurlow, anyway?”

“Mutual acquaintance. Another client.”

“And you think you’ll actually find something to paint out there?”

“I’ll find something. Just don’t know what it is right now.

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That's why I need to spend time at the site."

"Creative juices?"

His face closed. Had I touched a nerve of some kind?

"You might say that. At this point, all I know is that I will be creating a panel of four paintings in acrylic. Probably featuring some concurring theme." He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling loosely under his dark leather jacket. I could see the muscles of his chest flex and wished I could see more. "Maybe that willow."

"You noticed that, too? Quite an impressive tree."

"And strong. It's survived a lot of abuse."

"How so?"

"On that site? How could it not?" Suddenly Charlie seemed bored with the topic. "I'll be heading out first thing in the morning. To catch the early light and see what it inspires. What exactly is involved at your end? Will you be spending a lot of time out there?" He smiled dryly. "I don't believe I've ever met an ecological engineer before."

"That's me. One of a kind." I stroked my goatee while I thought of what to say. "My job is to understand what the land can sustain and try to take it to that place. It involves a lot of complex issues related to hydrology, geology, and the like. First thing I have to do is a detailed study of the entire site."

"All fifty acres? How detailed?" Charlie seemed interested, despite his pretense at boredom.

"My crew and I will be taking core samples from at least a dozen key locations within the site. We'll determine basalt structure and identify the watershed...basically try to figure out how water is going to move within those fifty acres."

"Move. What do you mean? Water moves the same everywhere. It's water. It doesn't suddenly start flowing uphill just



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because the ground underneath it is different.”

“But water on porous, sandy ground moves much differently than water on solid clay or granite. Subtle variations in the way the land, itself, is structured can make a big difference in where the water goes and how fast it gets there. You have to plant accordingly, to get the most out of the terrain. Nature will do it automatically, if given the chance. My role is to give it that chance once more.”

Charlie suddenly laughed. It changed his harsh face completely, leaving me mesmerized. “Okay, you got me. I think I’ll stick to painting. Those kinds of subtleties I can understand.”

I grinned. “It’s less complicated than it sounds.”

“Oh, I doubt that. I doubt that very much.”

The elevator door opened, releasing us into the cool, air-fresh lobby.

Charlie waited until I followed him out, then extended his hand. “Nice to meet you, Tyler. Maybe I’ll see you out there sometime.”

“Pleasure, Charlie. What did you call it? Lynx Woods?” I felt his larger hand swallow up mine, his rough skin caressing mine. His flesh felt warm and dry. “I like it. Encourage Mr. Thurlow to keep the name.”

“It’ll be listed in the catalog with the panel once it’s completed. Does that make it official enough?”

“That ought to do it.”

I reluctantly dropped his hand. Charlie saluted me and sauntered out into the bright sun. Slipping on a pair of Ray Bans, he walked across the patch of lawn that had been given over to benches and a picnic table for employees. He was a vision in black, his narrow hips swinging from side to side.

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I remained mesmerized.

Now the question was: which way did sexy Charlie swing?

Because I very much hoped he might swing my way at least once before the project ended.

An hour later, I picked up Michael at Gabbana's, wincing when I saw the bags and boxes the younger man was carrying. Rather than create a scene, I helped him load them into the back of the Land Rover. We decided to head closer to home for supper. I found parking off the Danforth, and we ate Greek at Omonia's that night.

Michael bubbled over about his purchases and could barely contain his enthusiasm all during dinner. He just knew I would share his zeal once I had seen him model the stuff, so at his urging, we headed back to our place on Broadview, and he dragged me up to the third floor. There, he put on a fashion show to shame Hugo Boss.

Seeing that delightful tush in varying degrees of undress for the next hour did what it always did, and when Michael saw the tent in my khaki cargoes, he squealed and jumped on me.

"Oh, I knew you'd like them." He smothered me with kisses and pulled my swollen cock out of my pants, oohing and ahhhing like he'd never seen anything like it before. "Oh, baby, you're the greatest."

He dove for my prick, and pumped and sucked until I felt ready to explode. But before that happened, he pulled off. "I know what my baby really wants," Michael cooed. When he wagged that hot butt in my face, I knew he was right. It was what I wanted.

But Michael would have been sorely dismayed if he had seen the images that flashed through my head as I slid my seven inches up his delectable back door. I closed my eyes and imagined long

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black hair and brown skin sliding along mine. About strong, calloused fingers grabbing my hand and guiding my fingers around his cock. I blew my load with a grunt and jerked off Michael's prick with my hand, then opened my eyes to watch Michael peel away from me and scamper into the bathroom to clean up. I disposed of the condom and followed him.

Michael met me in the shower and gave me a wet, warm kiss, tickling my goatee with his tongue. "My baby was hot tonight. I'm gonna be so sore, I won't be able to walk tomorrow."

Please. Little Michael got fucked so much there was prime real estate between his legs. He could have taken a horse without batting an eyelash.

I toweled off and threw on a robe. Back in the bedroom, I lay on the king-size bed that dominated the third floor, one leg bent to hold the *Maclean's* news magazine I was reading.

"Glass of wine before bed?" I called.

I was about to repeat the question when Michael exited the bathroom dressed to go out. He wore one of his new acquisitions.

I peered at him over the glossy cover of the magazine. "Going out? Since when?"

"Something came up."

"And here I thought we'd just taken care of that."

"Oh baby, it's not that. It's...Donny. He's having a major crisis. He needs me to hold his hand. You know Donny."

No, frankly I didn't. But that was okay. I'd found out early on that I didn't want to know any of Michael's so-called friends.

I patted Michael's butt when he leaned in for a kiss.

"I won't be late," he said.

"I'm leaving for the project site early in the morning. I'll be gone by four-thirty. Try not to wake me up if you get in before

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that.”

“Sure thing, baby.”

I watched his ass sashay as he walked across the hardwood floor toward the stairs. Then I shook my head and went back to reading about how the leader of the opposition party was again threatening a vote of non-confidence and was being forestalled by the Prime Minister. Great, another federal election coming, practically on the heels of the last one.

“I take it this means you don’t want a glass of wine before bed,” I muttered aloud to the empty room.

The life of a swinging bachelor. Could it get more exciting?

\* \* \*

Michael still hadn’t returned when I left the house at four-twenty-five the next morning. Big surprise.

Total darkness surrounded me as I drove up to Lynx Woods. Only during the last thirty minutes on the back road that led into the agricultural land northwest of Toronto, did the sky lighten. The sun didn’t begin to come up until I’d parked the Land Rover and sat nursing the lukewarm coffee I’d picked up at Timmy’s before leaving the city. As my eyes adjusted to the crepuscular light, I saw a deer pick its careful way over the rough terrain toward the river. I heard the nearby hoot of a great horned owl. Probably using the willow as a launch pad for the last hunt of the night.

I finished the coffee and crushed the cup, dumping it in the recyclable garbage bag I kept in the car for that purpose. Then I popped open the door and stepped out into the surreal landscape.

The deer was long gone, and there was no sign of the owl. Dew held down the dust, and my Merrels were soon damp and coated in

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wet dirt. I retraced my steps to the spring and then moved on toward the shack I had noticed the day before. Up close, it looked worse than I thought it would. There wasn't a straight board in the thing, and the door sagged on its rusty hinges. Something scurried away from the light when I opened the door, and I immediately thought of field mice.

I hesitated in the doorway. Field mice had tested positive for the hanta virus in Ontario, and I had enough health worries with HIV—not that I'd ever let anyone near me without a condom, but nothing was foolproof.

After a few moments, I shrugged and poked my head inside, breathing shallowly.

Whatever the shack had been, it was now empty of everything except more refuse. Dust and animal turds covered the rough wooden floor. I thought I detected the ancient odor of skunk, along with the feral stink of a host of other small animals. Several used condoms littered the floor. Someone had braved the presence of wildlife for a momentary thrill. A pile of leaves in one corner had either been carried in by some nest-building creature or blown in through the numerous cracks along the base of the dump.

A sound penetrated my senses, abruptly breaking my reverie. A motor, but not a car. I backed out of the shack in time to see a silver and black bike roar down the same road I had driven only minutes before. I could see it was a Harley Davidson. It had gold cast wheels, and was long and low to the ground. Not exactly an effective off-road vehicle.

It stopped to the right of my Land Rover, and two leather-clad legs spread out on either side of the low-slung seat to steady the rider. He dragged a black helmet off his head, unleashing a cascading tide of long, shimmering hair. I knew women who

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would kill for hair like that. Personally, I wanted to grab two handfuls of it and shove my aching cock square into the mouth of the man now climbing off the bike.

Setting his helmet on the pillion seat, Charlie shook out his hair and opened the front of his jacket, revealing a black T-shirt that had ridden up out of his jeans, exposing a hairless brown belly to my covetous eyes.

“Morning,” Charlie called. He pulled something out from under the seat of the bike and walked toward me.

I nodded at what I now identified as an artist’s pad tucked under his arm. “You ready for work?”

“Paper and pencils.” He patted his jacket, where I saw several pencils of varying lengths poke out beside his Ray Bans. “Been here long?”

“Not too.” I gestured toward the shack. “Checking this out.”

“Is it what you thought?”

“Derelict. The whole site is. Tragic, really. Local teenagers seem to know about it. That’s about it. They’ll have to find someplace else for their trysts.”

“Trysts?” Charlie grinned. “Now if that isn’t a nice, safe word.”

“What should I call it—their fuck shack? Maybe a shag palace?”

“Whoa, don’t be so defensive. It hardly matters what it’s called. It’s coming down, right?”

“Damn straight. Should burn it.” I told him about the field mice and the hanta virus.

“More nasty stuff, eh? Ever think we passed through the Age Of Reason, and now we’re into the age of viruses? And the viruses are winning?”

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"I prefer to think we're inhabiting Dante's *Inferno*."

"Ah, but which level?"

"You know *The Divine Comedy*?"

"Doesn't everyone who went through college?" Charlie brushed an imaginary speck of dirt off his black-clad leg. "I actually majored in English lit in college, until I smartened up and realized no one hired literate Indians." His grin widened. "Or, I guess I should say, 'Native American,' if I want to be politically correct."

"So you went to work on the oil rig?"

"Nah, first I dropped out. Then I chased fires around the Northwest for a year. After that, I went to work on the oil rig. Add construction work while I was in college, and you've got your all-around Native American redneck."

"And you went from that to this?"

"Too much of stretch? Not enough machismo in painting cute little fur balls?"

I'd seen enough of his paintings to know they were anything but cute. They were powerful, and often angry, glimpses into a feral world few people ever saw firsthand. "Looks to me like you've got enough machismo to furnish a small town." I took advantage of the subject to sweep Charlie's leather-clad form with hungry eyes.

"Think so?" He watched me watch him. His eyes glittered and gave away nothing. "It sure wasn't enough to save my marriage."

"You were married?" I turned to look out toward the distant river, as though the conversation didn't mean anything. Married meant nothing. I knew lots of gay guys who got married before they came out. "How long were you hitched?"

"Several lifetimes." Charlie laughed, but the sound had some

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residual pain. “Nearly five years. High school sweetheart, yet. You ever wonder where that term came from?”

“Probably someone who never had one and thought it sounded romantic.”

I had never put a lot of credence in gaydar. I figured some guys were so “out there” and obvious, no one could mistake them for straight. Others were more subtle, but still gave lots of clues for the properly informed. Then, there were those who just didn’t reveal anything. And, of course, there was that pesky group of ninety percent of the population who the statisticians insisted was straight. Whatever that meant.

Those folks who didn’t give anything away were the hardest to deal with. A guy could get his face broken making the wrong assumption and acting on it. Sometimes a person didn’t even have to be wrong. The most violent reaction came from the guys still buried so deep in the closet, they didn’t admit to themselves they had leanings, let alone admit it to someone else. I always tried to stay away from them. They were dangerous, both to themselves and to me.

The only question in my mind right now was: to which group did Charlie belong, and what risks would I have to take to find out?

I started hauling equipment out of the Land Rover. I had a team coming up later in the day with a long list of tasks to accomplish. This included gathering physical samples, like the water so we could determine the magnitude of groundwater contamination on the site. I also wanted them to run surveys that I would need to make sure our figures matched those provided by the government. In the meantime, I planned to begin assembling a portfolio of “before” photographs, which would be extremely helpful in creating the initial designs .



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These first shots would be used to contrast with “after” pictures. The comparison of the two sets had many uses, not the least of which was to impress clients by providing dramatic proof of how far their vision had taken them. Like I was always telling them, while they ended up with something wonderfully natural, the road to reach that goal was anything but. It took humans to screw up things this badly; it took human intervention to put things right.

I grabbed two cameras. The regular Canon was my old faithful standby. The digital video camera was my newest toy, and was prompting me to think about building a website that would spotlight Emerald Biolife and my achievements....and might even help to bring in new clients.

I headed for the corner of the roughly rectangular lot that included the weeping willow. Close up, it was even more impressive than when I had first seen it. The thing’s girth had to be as big around as the Land Rover was in pure footage. I wasn’t sure Charlie and I could have held hands around it.

The trunk was twisted and gnarled. Whatever life the tree had led, it hadn’t been gentle. This thing had been tormented by the elements. The top of the tree seemed to brush the clouds over twenty feet above my close-cropped head. I could hear birds in the upper corkscrew mess of branches, and I glimpsed tiny, colorful bodies flitting from branch to branch. Long, wispy green whips trailed down to the ground, sweeping over my upturned face when I walked close to it. The base of the tree was littered with discarded willow tree catkins and dead leaves.

Light mottled my face. I touched the rough trunk and looked up.

“How tall do you figure it is?”

I jumped at the sound of Charlie’s voice.

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His laughter sounded softly in my ear as he clapped a heavy hand on my back. "Sorry, man. Didn't mean to startle you."

I shot him a puzzled look. "S'okay." I forced my eyes back to the tree. "How tall? Maybe six meters. Give or take."

"Meters? Ah, yeah, that's metric, right? You Canucks use that now."

I couldn't resist saying, "Yeah...us and the rest of the world. Funny thing, that. For you illiterate Yankees, that's about twenty feet."

"For you illiterate Canadians, a Yankee is someone born north of the Mason-Dixon line. Which ain't me, no sirree bob, y'all." He put on an exaggerated Southern, corn-pone accent.

"Touchy."

"Could say the same about you."

We were standing shoulder to shoulder, and it startled me to realize Charlie was several inches taller than I was. At a whisker over six foot, I don't look up to many men.

He'd tied his hair back in a ponytail once more, accentuating his lean and chiseled face. Again, I noticed his cheekbones....like rough cut stone, all angles and lines beneath eyes that reminded me of two storm-tossed pools. He wasn't handsome in the Hollywood sense, but he radiated a power that was mesmerizing. When he smiled, he showed a slight crookedness in his front teeth that could have been corrected easily for the right amount of money.

He glanced down at me and raised one eyebrow. "I got something in my teeth?"

I flushed and looked away, angry at being caught staring. To cover my gaffe, I tipped my head at the willow again. "How old do you figure it is?"

"Hundred, hundred twenty. Who knows? Old. You don't plan

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on taking it down, do you?"

"No, definitely not. I intend to use it as a focal point for this end of the project site." I walked around the ancient tree, being careful not to trip over twisted roots that snaked across the ground before burrowing into the dark earth. "It's too magnificent to destroy."

Charlie followed me. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I was all too aware of him, could even hear his soft breathing and the faint creak of the leather jacket covering his broad chest as he came up behind me. He stood so close, I could have reached back and touched him.

"How do you get into a field like this? I don't think I've ever heard of an ecological engineer before, and it strikes me there isn't much call for what you do. Maybe I'm wrong."

"It's a niche market." I knelt and picked up a flat stone, which I turned over in my palm, studying the smooth, water-worn surface. "But it's something even governments are recognizing as having some value."

"How so?"

"They finally realize that regions exist that should never be developed. Remember those really bad floods a few years ago where the Mississippi wiped out whole towns, washed away cemeteries?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

"Lots of red-faced people over that. Same thing with Katrina. They've been trying to control waterways for centuries. Building dams, putting in dikes and spillways, clearing out bayous and wetlands...or worse, draining them altogether. Even forcing water into concrete basins. It works, for a while. And people get a false sense of security and power, thinking they've tamed this natural

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force. All those farmers all along the river, farming flood plains, believing they were safe.”

“And it blew up in their faces.”

“Same thing happened out west in Canada. The Red River keeps doing a number on the area it flows through.” I flicked the stone, and it flew out over the river, hit the surface of the water and skipped. Skipped again and yet again. Then sank into the roiling brown water. “Bottom line is we can’t control weather, and we sure as hell can’t control something as elemental as water. But we can do things to minimize the damage.”

Charlie swept his dark gaze over the wasted landscape. “How does turning this back to some supposed pristine state help anyone?”

“Flood plains allow water to flow out so it doesn’t channel up and become a raging river that’s capable of uprooting even trees like this one.” I patted the willow. “Then there’s the added problem of contamination. Too much human activity around water is bad for its health. Waste, fertilizer, pesticides, toxic chemicals, you name it. It all goes in. A place like this, done right, can go a long way to cleaning up water.”

“How?”

“Plants act as filters. Like carbon sponges, they soak up environmental contaminants, lock them away where they can’t do any harm. They also act as deterrents, redirecting flood water.”

I picked up another stone and prepared to throw it, too. Suddenly Charlie’s hand was on my throwing arm, and I froze. The heat from his skin penetrated straight to my groin.

“What—”

Then I saw it. Downstream from where we stood. A Great Blue Heron stood near the water’s edge, its spear-shaped beak poised to

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strike at any unwary creature that came too close.

Beside me, Charlie had eased open his sketch pad and was furiously drawing. The bird uncoiled a long, blue-gray neck with its fringe of feathers, and lifted one foot out of the water. In slow motion, it eased forward, then in a lightning blur of speed its head shot out and grabbed something, which wiggled in its beak before one gulp banished the food to its gullet.

As though belatedly realizing it was being watched, the heron squatted low in the water before launching itself skyward. We watched it disappear down the river.

“Wow,” I murmured.

“Yeah, wow.” Charlie stuffed his pencil back in his pocket, then examined his sketch. “One of my favorite birds. Must be an omen.”

He let me look at his drawing. It was funny, but there wasn’t very much to it...just a few lines, some dark and strong, others fine and wispy. But together, the strokes captured the essence of the bird we had just watched.

“Wow,” I said again.

He smiled.

“Is that going to be one of your panels?”

“Too early to say. I’ll probably do a hundred like this, then go back to my studio and put together the final pieces. That’s when I make those decisions.”

“Where’s your studio?” I tried to be as casual as possible.

“Gatlinburg”—he flipped the sketch pad to a clean page—  
“Tennessee. Borders on the Great Smoky Mountain Park. Incredible place.”

“Do they need any environmental engineering done?” I asked lamely. I barely knew the man and was already regretting his

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departure. I was really losing perspective.

“Who knows?” Charlie laughed, a deep, rich sound without a trace of guile. “Maybe they do. I’ll put in a good word for you.”

A vehicle labored down the road. We both looked up when the full-size van that contained most of my equipment lurched to a stop beside the Land Rover. Three guys and a girl piled out.

I stepped away from Charlie. “Time to get to work for real. There’s my survey team. Bob Dunhill, Larry Kerzinski, Jessie Hurley, and Karl Ruidhome. Except for Karl, they all go to U of T, and Karl is only out because he’s taking a year off. This, folks, is Charlie Reid, world-famous wildlife artist. Be careful, he’s an American, too.”

The four nodded their heads and Karl said, “I’ve seen your stuff. Man, you’re good. You musta been born with tons of talent.”

“Thanks,” Charlie muttered. “Talent’s overrated. It’s sweat that gets you where you want to go.”

Karl looked at me, and I shrugged. Understanding a man like Charlie could be a major undertaking. There was definitely something going on with him. I wondered if finding out what that something was could be a good thing or a dangerous one.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of hard work and the constant chatter of the four college kids. They were an energetic bunch. After working with them for two summers, I’d learned that their youthful vigor could be taxing. This from an old man of thirty-one.

I noticed Jessie trying to strike up a conversation with Charlie a couple of times and getting little more than monosyllabic responses. She was a willowy blonde with a strong will, and I wasn’t surprised when she didn’t give up. I doubted she was used to getting turned down by guys. At least living, straight ones. But

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her charms weren't working on Charlie, which I found very interesting. Finally, Charlie said something to her that made her look disappointed for about ten seconds, then she laughed and went back to labeling biological samples.

Charlie moved back into the bush north of where we had parked the vehicles, and I gathered my cameras and followed him. I caught up with him in a clearing. He was examining a rotten stump of some old, downed giant that had been reduced to a damp mass of spongy wood covered in moss and mushrooms.

He looked up when I entered the clearing and nodded. "Look at this, will you."

Some weird kind of fungus or lichen had sprouted a brilliant red stalk into the air, which had a tiny knot at the end. It reminded me of the eye at the end of an antenna.

"Like something from another planet, isn't it?" Charlie knelt to study it more closely. He propped his sketchpad on his bent leg and began to scribble.

While he did that, I pulled out the digital camera and snapped a few pictures. After a while, I realized Charlie was watching me.

"Digital?" he asked. "I'll have to get you to email me some of those shots. I can use them as material when I start the actual pieces." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a billfold, then paused. "If you don't mind, that is."

"Not at all. I'm surprised you didn't bring a digital camera with you."

He shrugged. "Mine was stolen."

"Sorry. Here?"

"At the airport coming in. Bit of bad luck."

"Well, give me your email, and I'll send you a bunch."

He nodded and handed me a business card. Like Charlie,

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himself, it wasn't what you'd expect from an artist. It consisted of plain black text on a fine, off-white vellum stock listing his name, a phone number with an eight-six-five area code, and an email address.

No home or work address.

"The phone is my business number and it'll take you straight to voice mail hell, but the email address is my personal account. Send me whatever you want, I'll sort through it."

"Sure, no problem." I stuffed the business card into my back pocket and swiped away the sweat on my forehead. The day had gotten hot and stifling. There was no cooling breeze this far from the water.

Charlie swatted at a cloud of hovering gnats.

"There's a cooler in the van," I said. "Why don't we go grab a couple of juices and take a break?"

"Sounds good." He grinned and shut his sketch pad with a snap. "Course a cold beer sounds better. But I notice a real shortage of bars out this way."

It seemed like a natural opening. Not one to waste an opportunity, I jumped in. "If you can wait till we're done here, I know a place back in town that might hit the spot."

"I can do that. Sure. It's a deal."

Later that afternoon, we wrapped up our business. I helped the kids repack the equipment in the van, and Karl climbed into the driver's seat.

"Okay, good job, guys," I told my crew. "Same time tomorrow?"

I turned to Jessie. "I assume you won't have a problem getting those samples boxed and couriered to the lab? I need those results ASAP, so it's imperative they get off tonight."



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“ASAP, boss.” Jessie grinned. Her face was dirty, smudged with grime and sweat. “Consider it done.”

“Good.” I slapped the door of the van and watched them drive away.

Charlie’s Harley was still where he’d left it that morning, but there was no sign of the artist. Then I spotted movement down by the river, near the willow. I found him perched on a stump, working on a more detailed pencil sketch of the old tree. In subtle strokes of various shades of gray, he had managed to capture the full essence of the tree—the rough bark, the twisted limbs, and the gentle fall of the green, creeping fronds that gave the tree its name. They were all on paper. But there was more.

He’d given the damned tree character....made it seem alive and vibrant.

“Jesus,” I muttered.

Charlie looked up with a start. I was sorry I had broken his concentration.

He glanced at his watch. “Is it that late?” He stood and put his hands on the small of his back with a wince. “Damn old bones. Don’t take sitting for long spells like they used to.”

“Oh yeah, you’re ancient.” I laughed. “What, all of twenty-five?”

“Twenty-nine.” He scowled. “And if you must know, thirty in October.”

“Then I beat you by two years. Though I won’t be thirty-two until next June.” Michael had thrown a big bash at his favorite Church Street club. The party had been a success, until one of the regulars had been caught in the back room with an underage twink, a line of coke, and pocketful of Oxys, forcing the bartender to boot everyone out before the cops got there and did it for him. Of course

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I wasn't about to tell Charlie any of that.

Instead, I said, "If you're done, we can head back. Still want that drink?"

"Believe it."

## CHAPTER 2

The ride to Toronto was a typical bumper-to-bumper nightmare once we hit the 401. I led Charlie off the highway as soon as I could, and we traveled surface streets the rest of the way. Charlie stayed on my bumper right up until we reached Colborne Street. We pulled into a parking lot less than a block from the pub.

The Tangerine Dream was a brew pub with a very eclectic clientèle. On any given night, there might be a hirsute drag queen holding court on a bar stool next to a suited accountant and his girlfriend. I had suggested the place out of curiosity to see how Charlie would react to it.

We found seats at a back table.

Charlie hesitated until I ordered a locally brewed wheat ale, then he asked for the same.

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“Good stuff?” he asked, holding up the mug to examine it in the low ambient light. The clatter of a busy kitchen came through the swinging door to our right every time it opened. The smells that followed the noise set my stomach gurgling.

“You tell me.” I sipped my beer.

Charlie did the same and nodded. “What’s good here?” He sniffed the air.

“Their blue cheese filets are to die for. Pastas are very good, too.”

“I’m partial to *souvlaki* myself.”

I watched Charlie’s eyes follow a couple as they made their way to a nearby table. The two men wore business suits and were so wrapped up in each other, they were oblivious to Charlie’s stares or the menus the waiter set in front of them. He watched the two trade kisses, then come up for air long enough to order drinks from the patient waiter.

Charlie’s eyes skated off them, back to me. He had a strange look on his face. “You trying to tell me something here, Tyler? Or is this some kind of joke you’re pulling on the dumb old Yankee?”

“Joke? What do you mean, joke? I come here all the time—”

As though to validate my words, a friend of mine, Kat, choose that exact moment to spot me from the other side of the room. She shrieked and charged toward us as fast as her spiked heels would allow. In another second, she was bending over the table to throw her arms around me. Kat was a six-two dragon in stocking feet. And since she never wore anything less than three-inch heels, that was a lot of bending. Tonight, she was conservatively dressed in a set of thigh-high boots with at least four inches on them and a shimmering gold sheath that barely covered her tucked crotch. She kissed me on the cheek, then turned to eye Charlie appreciatively.

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She waggled her painted eyebrows at the two of us and said to me, “Where’s Michael tonight? Or have you finally come to your senses and dumped that bad boy? And who’s your new friend.”

“This is Charlie. He’s in town on business,” I said. “No doubt Michael is at home checking out eBay for the latest Versace.”

“Oh, that girl knows how to shop. I’ll give her that much.” Kat looked Charlie up and down. “In town long, sugar?”

“No, he’s not, Kat. Now be a good girl and scoot, okay?”

Kat pouted and backed away from the table. “Well, if you decide to have some fun before you leave town, Charlie, come back and see me. I guarantee you’ll remember this business trip.”

We both watched her saunter away.

“This is your usual hangout?” Charlie’s voice seemed devoid of emotion. “With or without Michael?”

“Michael is not a factor.”

“Why not? He’s your lover, isn’t he? Or were you hoping I wouldn’t find that out? Did you bring me here to make a pass at me?”

“If I wanted to make a pass at you, I wouldn’t need to bring you to a place like this.”

“Fine. Then if you do make a pass, I can plant you in the ground?”

I stared at him, open-mouthed. It was several seconds before I realized he was laughing at me. I blinked at him. “Are you always such an asshole?”

“Only for my Canadian friends. It’s part of my Free Trade package.” He picked up his menu again. “Come on, let’s order. I’m starving. Being an asshole is hard work.”

By the time our main courses had arrived—I had ordered steak, Charlie selected the lamb dish—and we’d consumed another round

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of beer, the mood between us had mellowed completely. Charlie started in on a story about his family. His great-grandfather had been full-blooded Cherokee on his father's side. His mother, on the other hand, had been a blonde Welsh-Swedish mix from the Bay area.

"Got a sister, Trish, who's this little blonde thing. No one ever believes we're brother and sister. Funny how that works."

In turn, I talked about my parents—my father, the legal eagle who had made a name for himself in the shady world of corporate law, and my mother, the U of T professor who still lived in a dream world of sixties rebellion and Berkeley angst. It never ceased to amaze me how the two of them, from such disparate worlds, could have formed a union that had lasted over decades. Or that they could have produced such relatively normal, level-headed kids as they had in their three sons.

"Cept you're not so normal, are you?" Charlie muttered.

"Define normal," I challenged.

He waved his arms around. "Like other people. You know, normal."

"Like that guy over there?" I indicated a man at the end of the bar dressed in a three-piece suit and tie...the whole corporate nine yards.

"Yeah, like him."

"I happen to know he pays a pair of high-priced hookers a couple of hundred dollars once a week to tie him up and punish him for his various transgressions. The hookers, now...one of them is going to law school, and the other one has two kids she's supporting. Are they normal enough for you? Or maybe that guy."

This time I pointed out a man who looked like a recruiter for the Hell's Angels, right down to the chains on his belt. The only

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thing missing were the colors on his leather jacket.

“Well, I can tell he’s bad news.”

“Actually he’s married to a sweet lady who teaches kindergarten. They have three kids, all little girls, and his idea of a wild time is taking them to the playground after supper.”

“Okay, so nobody’s completely normal. Does that mean you can break all the rules?”

“Whose rules? Right-wing religious nuts? Left-wing radicals? My grandmother’s sewing circle? I have a set of rules that define my life. I never break them. Want to hear my rules?”

“Sure, why not.” He blinked, as if trying to focus on me. I suspected Charlie was beginning to feel the effects of the beer he’d consumed.

“Don’t lie. Keep your word. Don’t follow arbitrary rules laid down by the ignorant or cruel. When in doubt, fake it.”

Charlie blinked several more times. Then he grinned. “Ah, I get it. A joke.”

“Not really.”

As the evening went on, Charlie got more and more relaxed. He even waved at Kat across the room and grinned when she curtsied to us. As he matched me beer for beer, I realized he was becoming increasingly inebriated and that he probably wasn’t familiar with Canadian beer. I slowed down my own drinking, but even so, I found myself getting woozy by the time we decided we’d had enough of hot and trendy and left the Tangerine Dream to find another place.

As we walked down Yonge toward the Harborfront, we passed four young guys, clearly couples, holding hands as they strolled down the street. Charlie stared and then looked thoughtful. I guess the guy wasn’t used to seeing such open displays of affection

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between men.

The grandiose edifice of the Fairmont Royal York Hotel came into view, and Charlie looked at the massive, twenty-eight-story structure with a bleary eye. “Hey,” he muttered. “I think that’s my hotel. Why don’t we fuck this shit and go there and drink?”

I realized that was a good idea. A bit more to drink and Charlie would be a handful I wasn’t ready to take on. No way I’d ever be able to carry him if he lost it completely and passed out.

We made our way through the lavish hotel lobby and rode the elevator to the sixteenth floor. Charlie fumbled with the door to his room, finally throwing it open with an exaggerated “hah!” and stumbled into the suite. He tottered into the bathroom, where he remained for a few minutes. When he emerged, his hair was damp and he looked slightly more alive. After staggering across the room, he fell back onto the bed.

For one minute, I thought for sure he had passed out. I found a Coke in the bar fridge and popping off the tab, drank half of it in one long gulp. By this time, Charlie was stirring again.

He opened one eye and stared at me. Suddenly, he crooked a finger at me. “You really gay?”

“Yeah. All my life.”

“What’s it like?” Charlie waved his hand around, slurring his words. “I don’t mean sex, but the other—jus’ bein’ different that way? People pointing fingers and callin’ you...things.”

I shrugged. How do you explain a lifetime of hurt and anger and bewilderment to a man who has never experienced it? Then it occurred to me that maybe Charlie *had* experienced it.

“It’s like being a Cherokee in a world that views you as a second-class citizen. Where even the religious people are telling you that their God hates you just for being that way.”



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“Being gay is like being a Cherokee? Hah! What if you were a gay Cherokee?”

“Are you gay, Charlie?”

“Forget it, Tyler. Not gonna happen again. That was all a mistake in the past.”

“You’re not making any sense, Charlie,” I said carefully, wondering what he was referring to. I pulled a chair close to the bed and dropped into it. “What happened in the past?”

“Nothing,” he said too quickly. “Never did it... got married, didn’t I? That proves I ain’t... you know... Cherokee.” Suddenly, he started laughing.

Alarmed, I moved up to sit beside him on the bed.

Charlie grabbed my hand. His grip was punishing. “Oh, no, you don’t. You stay right here. Not gonna run out on me.”

“You need to go to sleep, Charlie. You’re too drunk for this conversation.”

Charlie wasn’t listening. He forced his eyes to focus on the wall across the room, then shifted to travel down my body, his gaze stopping on my crotch. “You don’t look gay, you know that?” He was so damned serious.

“Not everybody does. Most of us don’t, in fact.”

“You want to give me a blow job?”

“Jesus Christ, Charlie!” I scrambled off the bed and backed away.

“Hey, what’s wrong with being curious? I just want to know, is all.”

“Know what? You can’t be serious.”

Charlie sat up in the bed. The gleam in his eyes was no longer that of a vacant drunk. It had a feverish edge to it. “Tell me what it’s like, Tyler.” He began to rub his cock, which I was alarmed to

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see, was rapidly filling out the crotch of his Wranglers. “Or better yet, show me. You want to, don’t you? I saw you earlier...looking. Don’t tell me you don’t want to.”

“That’s hardly the point—”

Why the hell did he seem less drunk now than he had a few moments ago? Had he been faking it, pretending so he had an excuse? An excuse for what? Propositioning me?

What a bizarre idea. I licked my lips at the sight of his bulging crotch. Charlie was right about one thing, I had been looking. Just like I was looking now. Looking and imagining.

“What is the point, Tyler? You want me, I just said I want you. You got an ethics issue here?”

“Are you drunk? Or are you just playing with me?”

“Both. Neither.” Charlie’s grin was wicked. He continued to play with his cock through the fabric of his jeans. “Come on, Tyler. Blow me.”

I groaned. My own erection pressed into the zipper of my jeans. My balls pulsed in anticipation of what was being offered.

“You need me to help you?” Charlie fumbled with the zipper of his jeans. I held my breath as he pulled out a gorgeous six inches of rapidly hardening dick. He stroked it leisurely a couple of times, then met my eyes. His fist gently pulled on the thick head, and drops of glistening pre-cum oozed over his fingers.

I didn’t need more invitation than that. If the guy wanted this, who was I to deny him? That I wanted it, too, was completely immaterial.

I knelt on the edge of the bed and reached out to slide my index finger around the swelling, blood-filled helmet. Another drop of pre-cum oozed out of the piss slit, and I scooped it up and carried it to my mouth. I saw Charlie’s storm-colored eyes darken. His hips

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twitched off the bed in rising lust.

“Tyler...”

I wanted to see all of him. After pushing down his jeans around his ankles, I yanked them off, dumping them on the floor beside the bed. I did the same with his boxers and T-shirt, then pressed my mouth against his brown belly. Muscles writhed under my hot mouth, and I didn’t need any more urging on Charlie’s part to move toward that delectable target rising out of a thin patch of black pubic hair.

“Tyler!”

I buried my nose in the dark pubes and inhaled the pure essence of him. Charlie’s hands clamped over my head, and his fingers dug into my scalp. In response, I scooped one of his balls into my mouth, rolling the tight mass between my tongue and lips. It tasted of sweat and salt, and a flavor that was uniquely Charlie’s. When I took the second testicle inside, his hips jerked off the bed. He whimpered.

I swirled my greedy tongue around the base of the cock, tracing the line of pulsing veins that climbed toward the swollen head. I teased him, touching the tip of his prick with my lips and tongue, then withdrawing, blowing hot air over his wet slit, backing off, only to stroke his shaft again.

Charlie growled, pumping his hips into the air. “Suck it, cocksucker. Suck it!”

I rammed my lips over the fat, swollen dick. Charlie grabbed the thick comforter in his fists and shoved his cock into my mouth to the root. I had a brief sensation of gagging, then I adjusted.

And eagerly got down to business.

Charlie might have been drunk, but it didn’t slow down his response. Pre-cum flowed as he rocked up and down, grinding his

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rigid shaft down my throat. My tongue danced around the penis, sliding around the leaking helmet, and covering every inch of satin-wreathed steel with hot wetness. In and out, I began steadily fucking him with my mouth, the tempo increasing as his breathing grew more hoarse and shallow.

“Baby, oh baby, that feels good.”

Well, at least I had graduated from cocksucker.

Sliding my hand under his thick, wrinkled balls, I worked it into the crack of Charlie’s ass. Charlie raised his legs, opening himself to me completely. I took that as an invitation and slipped one finger into his tight, puckered hole.

“Fuck, yes!” Charlie roared. His cock twitched, and his balls contracted as hot cum exploded from his first spasm of release. I barely had time to pull off him.

I watched the ropey streamers spill onto his brown belly and ripped stomach. After four or five pulses, his body shuddered, and he collapsed back on the bed, his softening cock slipping to the side, where it lay limp across his damp thigh.

When I sat up, Charlie reached for me, and I let him pull me down until we lay side by side on top of the duvet. I ignored the sticky mess smeared across my jeans and T-shirt.

“Fuck, baby,” Charlie murmured against my damp throat. “That was incredible.” His arms tightened when I moved to get off the bed. “You aren’t going anywhere are you?”

“I should—”

“Stay here. You’re too drunk to go anywhere.”

“I think you have me mixed up with someone else.”

“Nah, come on Tyler, stay.”

Suddenly, I didn’t want to leave. I managed to get off my clothes despite Charlie’s clinging, and got us both under the sheets

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before Charlie fell asleep.

I rolled over. He pressed his solid length against my back. The last thing I remembered was the feel of Charlie's semi-hard dick digging between my ass cheeks.

Then I was out like a light switch had been clicked off.

The next morning, I awakened to the same delectable sensation. Only this time was even better. The cock pressed so tightly against my back door was completely hard now.

I'm wasn't normally a bottom. It's just not what I was used to...the surrendering, the invasion...but with Charlie, I had the feeling I could easily slip into that role. At least part of the time.

Suddenly the pressure on my back vanished. Cold air marbled my skin seconds before I heard the bathroom door slam shut.

"What the fuck—"

I bolted out of bed.

"Charlie? What—"

He'd been in such a state, he hadn't locked the door, so I slipped into the bathroom. The shower was on, and I approached it with some trepidation. A horrible suspicion circled around in my head, like a vulture waiting for a free meal. Charlie hadn't been *that* drunk last night. Had he? He'd seemed so sure of what he wanted. Had insisted on it, against all of my objections...

"Charlie?" I said softly, and the shower curtain was wrenched aside. Cold spray misted out, and I backed away from it. "Christ, what is it man?"

"Get out of here, Tyler," he said through clenched teeth. "You had your fun, now go home to Michael."

What the fuck was this? There was a hell of a lot more going on here than next day regrets.

"Talk to me." I ignored the icy spray washing over my still-

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naked body. “Charlie, come on, talk to me.”

Charlie turned off the shower and shoved past me to the bedroom, snatching a towel to wrap around his hips. “Get out of here. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Like hell there isn’t.” I followed him, grabbing his arm and swinging him around. “I didn’t seduce you. You asked for it.”

“I was drunk!”

“Not that drunk.”

We stood there glaring at each other. Two alpha males testing each other’s testosterone level. I was buck-ass naked, and he had a skimpy towel wrapped around his slender hips. The situation would have been ludicrous, if it hadn’t been so charged with fury.

I wanted to bend him over and fuck him right there.

He must have read something in my eyes because he took a step back. Still glaring. Posturing.

“What’s your problem?” I snapped. “If it was a mistake, then fine, we can just put it in the forget-this-ever-happened closet. We’re both adults, we can walk away. No big deal.”

“No big deal?” Charlie’s hands clenched into fists. “You took advantage of me.”

“What?” I found myself bellowing and stepping forward. A bull on the move. I could smell the aggression in the room. And something else, too. “What the fuck are you, some fifteen-year-old virgin? You’re pissed cause you liked it.”

“Oh bullshit—”

“Explain this, then.” I whipped off his towel and exposed his rock-hard cock. It matched the one I was sporting, which jutted out of my dense, black bush. My red, swollen head leaked pre-cum. “Christ, Charlie, at least be man enough to admit you liked it.”

Charlie grabbed back the towel, but made no move to cover

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himself. "Get out of here, Tyler."

"Charlie—"

"Now."

He turned his back on me. Tension riddled the strong muscles of his back and thighs. God, I wanted to run my hands over those muscles and feel them flex under my fingers. My prick throbbed with need.

"Now. Before I do something I'll regret."

"Like what? Beg me to suck your cock again?"

I should have expected it. His fist caught my cheek in a solid upper cut. I stumbled backward. Charlie came after me. His next shot slammed into my shoulder, and I roared. He tried to swing one more time and I caught him, twisting his arm and sending him flying across the unmade bed. He landed on his back, legs splayed, long hair fanning out around his face.

I leaned over him, arms braced on either side of his head. We were both panting. The room smelled of rage...and sex...and testosterone. I wanted to bury my cock up Charlie's ass. Instead, I straightened.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm leaving. You can pretend last night never happened. While you're at it, pretend this didn't happen either."

Leaning over again, I kissed him. Not a gentle, get-to-know-you kiss, or even a regular passion-laden kiss. This was a full-blown assault on his mouth. I was going after some serious tonsil when I shoved my tongue down Charlie's throat. My mouth bruised his, demanding a primal response. Charlie gave it to me. His tongue met and slam-danced with mine. I knew if I kept this up, one of us would be getting shagged, and hard. And nobody, least of all Mr. Charlie-I-didn't-mean-it-Reid, would be doing a

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damned thing to stop it.

Abruptly, I broke away from him and grabbed my clothes, dragging on my jeans over my still-hard dick. Holding my cum-covered T-shirt in my hand, I glared down to where he still lay on the bed. His face was contorted with lust; his eyes were obsidian chips. Hell, he looked more fuckable than he had any right to.

“I don’t know what your problem is, man, but you are in some serious denial. If you ever get your head straight, give me a call.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

I let myself out without bothering to reply. It was still dark when I arrived home.

I don’t know if I was relieved or pissed to discover that Michael was not there. Maybe he’d finally found someone else. Someone with a deeper pocketbook and more tolerance for his wild spending habits.

Was being alone so much worse? Sometimes I wondered why I put up with it.

And what did that say about me?



## CHAPTER 3

I was late getting to the project site later that morning. The team was already there, the equipment unloaded from the van. The kids flocked to the Land Rover.

“Jesus, man, what the hell happened to you?” Karl’s eyes widened as he took in my damaged face. “And what does the other guy look like?”

I glanced in the rearview mirror and winced. My swollen eye was turning a nice shade of eggplant.

“Forget about it. It’s nothing.”

“Right,” Jessie murmured. “You ran into a door.”

I threw her a sharp look. “No.” I forced a grin. “It was definitely a fist. But it still doesn’t matter.”

I swung my sample kit out of the back of the vehicle. Larry

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caught it and passed it off to Jessie. She, in turn, handed me the receipts for the courier she had used the night before. I pocketed them, wincing when I stretched my bruised shoulder.

This was going to be a fun day.

“Lock and load, folks. Even when the boss is late, the job has to get done.”

It was noon when I called a break. The others scattered, grabbing lunch and drinks out of the huge cooler in the van and heading off to find shade. I sat in the Land Rover and nursed a Coke and a cloth filled with ice pressed to my aching head.

When I heard the motorcycle engine, I thought I was imagining things. Surely Charlie wouldn't make an appearance today. Not after last night and this morning. But when the Harley roared down the dirt road, I was already out of my vehicle watching it pull up.

Charlie dragged the helmet off his head and glared at me. Without a word, he pulled his sketch pad out of the storage under the pillion seat and marched toward the river.

“Morning, Charlie.” I spoke to his back. “Good to see you, again. Have a nice day.”

I stomped back to the Land Rover and jammed the ice pack on my eye so hard I winced. “Have a fucking nice day.”

Like that was going to happen now.

The afternoon crawled toward its conclusion. The temperature soared, and soon the nearby trees were alive with the sonorous buzz of cicadas. The sound rose and fell in cadence to some rhythm only the insects knew about, but it seemed to accentuate the pulse-throbbing heat that lay over us all like a wet blanket. Every so often a blue jay would scream. There was no breeze. The willow hung limp and silent.

I spotted Charlie frequently as he tramped through the scrubby

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weeds in search of inspiration. I didn't avoid him, but I made no effort to approach him, either.

Now that I'd been working in Lynx Woods for a time, I was getting a feel for the land. Images were starting to come to me of how this whole area could look, if the work went right. The images were overlays—I could see what was there at the moment, but superimposed on it were the what-might-be's. In the future, I could see a grove of paper birch on a patch of high ground, more willows where the land dipped so that the moisture-loving trees would have plenty of access to the water they craved. Dogwoods there, then the marsh plants—marsh marigolds, skunk cabbage, cattails to hold in the soil and trap the poisons in place.

I didn't fool himself. I was only starting the process. Nature would finish it. The pattern could be laid out like a blue print for a new skyscraper, but unlike an inanimate building, this land would be dynamic. I considered myself successful if I returned to a project site five years after my work was done, and I didn't recognize the place.

I intended to make this place superbly successful.

At one point, I was down by the river, on the opposite end of the property from the willow, when I flushed out a pair of wood ducks and their half-grown progeny. The male, with his brilliant coloring and startling red eyes, joined the drab female to trail after their four, equally drab, offspring. As the family crossed the placid river and began to disappear from sight in the cattails on the other side, sunlight flared off the male's iridescent purple-green and rust-red plumage.

I turned to find Charlie watching me. The look in his eyes made me take a step back.

"Tyler," he said softly.

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“Charlie.”

He circled around, and I kept moving so that I faced him. We squared off, standing on the wasted shoreline while mosquitoes buzzed hungrily around us. I barely noticed them.

My eyes flicked to Charlie’s face, moving over it like I was memorizing what I saw.

“Sorry about your eye,” he said. “I never should have hit you.”

“Forget it. Heat of the moment. Denial’s a rough thing.”

His eyes narrowed. “Just what do you think I’m denying?”

We circled some more, like boxers in a ring.

“Letting some faggot suck my dick hardly makes me a queer.”

“I never said it did.”

He reared back, like I had hit him. “I’m not gay.”

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem here.” I let my gaze wander hungrily over Charlie’s muscular form. He wore a baggy T-shirt and loose chinos pants that concealed his body, but it didn’t matter. I knew what lay under those clothes. “What I think shouldn’t affect you.”

“It doesn’t.”

“What I do shouldn’t either.” My eyes lingered deliberately on his nice, heavy basket. Which had grown noticeably larger. I didn’t point that out. “The fact that I’d like to pull out your fat cock and suck you dry is completely immaterial.”

“Yes,” he said in a thick voice. “It is.”

I laughed. “There then, you have nothing to fear.” I reached for his sketch pad, which he clutched tightly in one hand. “Can I have a look at those?”

Charlie tensed, then stood his ground while I opened the pad and leafed through his sketches. Each was impressive.

The heron was there, and the wood ducks...adults and chicks.

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But there were other images—a pile of stones with a few straggly stalks of bent grass through which I could almost hear the wind rattling, an old fence post tangled in a mesh of morning glories so vibrant, I could see their velvety rich color in the shades of gray pencil. I marveled over the images of milkweed plants and a single, jewel-like monarch butterfly.

Wordlessly, I handed back the sketch pad. Charlie took it and flicked the pages until he got to a blank one, ready for his next brainstorm.

“You have an amazing talent.” Then I couldn’t help adding, “You know, they say there’s a link between artistic talent and homosexuality. Some even say it’s biological.”

He stiffened. His face darkened. For a minute, I thought he was going to hit me again. The moment passed. But the rage didn’t.

“I work at my talent,” Charlie said so low I barely heard him. “I wasn’t born with a dick or a paintbrush in my hand. I paint the way I do because I’ve spent hours every day, for years, perfecting my craft. Not because I’m some pantywaist or flaming faggot. Because I earned it.”

He took a step toward me, and I held my ground.

“I am not gay,” he ground out. “And I wish you would drop the subject.”

I suddenly understood a whole lot more about Mr. Charlie Reid. About his choice of jobs before he had “given in” and pursued his artistic side. Roughneck, roustabout, fire fighter. Chasing the masculine dream. Fleeing the masculine nightmare of waking up and finding out he wasn’t the man he thought he was. That he wasn’t the man anyone thought he was. That maybe, if you defined a man as strictly heterosexual, he wasn’t a man at all. That he was living a lie.

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Poor Charlie. How long would he run? The rest of his life?

I sighed. The choice was his. "Consider the subject dropped."

I reached for my Blackberry and checked for messages. Thurlow had called.

I grabbed a cold drink and slid into the Land Rover's front seat. Hoping I'd get a connection, I dialed the number and hit send. The phone rang. Ah, the wonders of modern technology.

Jeannie answered, "Thurlow Industries."

"Hey, Jeannie, it's Tyler. The big guy called me?"

"I'll put you right through to him, Tyler. He was anxious not to miss your call."

I waited all of ten seconds. He really did want to talk to me.

"Thurlow here. I'm glad I caught you, Tyler."

"Caught me, sir?"

"Before I left. I'm sorry I didn't mention this sooner, but it was only confirmed the other day, and what with one thing and another..."

"Sir?"

"Whitstone Galleries is putting on a small, private showing of Charlie Reid's works this evening. I know it's short notice, but I would really like you to come. You can bring a date, of course."

"Yes, sir." When the boss of a project as big as this one said things like "I'm sorry" and "I'd like you to come," then it was axiomatic to do it. "What time?"

"I believe it begins at eight sharp. Tapas, dim sum, wine, that sort of thing. Can we expect to see you there?"

"Of course, Mr. Thurlow. It would be a pleasure. I'll enjoy seeing more of Mr. Reid's work."

"Quite an impressive young man."

"Yes," I murmured, finding Charlie's figure in the distance and

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following him with a hunger that food wasn't going to assuage. "Very impressive."

I endured a few more pleasantries from the old man, then I managed to terminate the conversation. I checked my watch. Four o'clock. Just enough time to get home, shower, shave, trim the beard, try to dig up something presentable.

Shit, Michael.

I hit speed-dial, and ten rings later a breathless Michael picked up the phone. "Baby, this is a surprise. What's up?"

I told him. I was sure Michael was glowing in response to my news. He loved upscale downtown parties with the moneyed set.

"Oh, what should I wear? What kind of crowd will it be?"

"Blue and bubbly," I said, using our code for the mix of old Toronto wealth and the nouveau riche. "But low key. I don't expect much bling."

Michael sighed dramatically. "And I had just the perfect swag in mind for a real blast. Oh very well, I'll suffer with the Versace again. Even if it is so yesterday."

"That's the crowd, babe. Go with what you got. You'll be the belle of the ball."

"Oh you," Michael simpered. "Who's the artist? Have I heard of him?"

"Doubt it. He's not trashy enough."

"Tyler!"

"Just be ready by seven-thirty, okay? I'll be home in a couple of hours." I disconnected before he could launch into another scene. Michael loved his scenes.

I leaned back in the seat. Damn, I was tired. Too tired for glitzy, phony parties, but I was committed. What's the difference between eggs and ham? The chicken is involved, the pig is

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committed.

I saw Charlie pack his sketch pad back onto his bike and pull his helmet over his head. The bike started up with a defiant growl. Without a backward glance, he sped away. To go and get ready for his own party?

Pulling out of Lynx Woods several minutes later, my head filled with images of an evening of social gab with the sexiest man I'd ever met there to torment me.

I reached home at six-thirty. I could hear Michael banging around on the third floor before I got through the front door. I grabbed a Steam Whistle out of the fridge, then climbed the stairs. I set the beer on the bedside table and approached my prize possession—a two-hundred-and-fifty-gallon Dutch plant tank.

Almost three years before, I had paid a contractor big bucks to add braces, guaranteeing the floor could hold more than two thousand pounds of water plus the other things I had planned to put in the tank. It was finally reaching maturity. A school of over three hundred neon and cardinal tetras wove through masses of spatterdock and echinodorus and waving stalks of aponogetons. A convention of tiny Corydoras Catfish probed through the grass-like, pygmy chain swords that ran down the terraced aquascape to the front of the tank. I quickly inventoried the CO<sup>2</sup> gas injection system, then satisfied everything was all right, I stripped and headed for the bathroom.

Michael stepped out as I grabbed a robe from the closet. He stopped dead, holding a pair of onyx cufflinks in one suddenly limp hand. "What the fuck happened to you?"

Shit, I'd forgotten about the eye. I touched my swollen face. The skin still felt hot and tight.

"It's nothing," I muttered. "It's work related. Don't worry



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about it.”

“Oh, right. Thurlow took a swing at you when you told him how many trees he was going to have to buy.” Michael sidled over and cocked his head. “You look like shit.”

“What, no ‘baby’? I think I deserve a ‘baby’ or two for this, don’t you?”

Michael ignored my words, which was damned unusual for him. Leaning forward, he studied my eye critically. Then he straightened and nodded grimly. “Go take your shower. But make it fast. I’m going to need to do some major repair work on you before you can be seen in public.”

“Oh, please, you think I care?”

“I know you don’t,” Michael said flatly. “But I do. And you’ll thank me later.”

He hustled me into the shower and nagged at me while I carefully scraped a day’s growth of hair off my face. Bemused, I let Michael trim the goatee since he had a surer hand on the scissors than I did. Then he set me down in front of the vanity and got to work covering up the damage Charlie had inflicted.

“So, who hit you? Not one of your students, I hope? Did you get in a fight with someone on the highway? Is this some kind of road rage thing? Tell me.”

“Nothing to tell. A stupid misunderstanding.”

“You and stupid don’t usually go together.” Michael studied what he had done so far. He pursed his lips. “Did you have a lover’s quarrel already?”

I stared at him in the mirror.

“Don’t give me that look. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve been distracted. Or not home at all. Oh yes, I know you didn’t come home last night. You thought I was gone all night, I’m

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sure, but I wasn't."

"Michael —"

"Don't be a priss and start making excuses. I know it's over, sugar. You just haven't been able to figure out a way to say it out loud. So now I'm saying it for you." Michael patted my cheek. "Don't think it hasn't been sweet. But it's finito. I'm moving in with Donny this weekend."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, sugar." Michael stroked my face, then kissed my mouth. "Just like that. Come on." He tugged at my hand. "Let's go and make our entrance."

"You're not such an empty-headed twink after all, are you?"

"Oh sugar, it's always been just an act. Don't you know that yet?"

"Guess I do now." Feeling chastised, I finished dressing, and we headed down to pick up Michael's Mazda, since Michael said no one could make a proper entrance in my old diesel beater.

He told me to drive. "And hold the door for me. I'm going out in style tonight."

I held the door, and later his arm, as we entered the Whitstone Gallery in the trendy Harborfront area. A broad-hipped woman of uncertain vintage immediately wafted toward us, trailing a cloud of Joy in her wake.

"Darling, and you must be...?"

"Mr. Tyler McKay and Michael Cartwright."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Thurlow specifically mentioned you, Mr. McKay. So pleased to meet you. I'm Birdy Straughn, the gallery manager." She extended a hand dripping in rings, and I kissed it, feeling the cool ice against my heated skin. Michael did the same, and Birdy simpered.

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“Please, follow me.” She led us through the front of the gallery into a series of rooms, each one of which held two or three of Charlie’s works. Birdy kept us moving, though I would have liked to have stopped for a better look at the pieces. “We’re just waiting for the guest of honor to make an appearance. You know how temperamental artists are. Never on time.”

I smiled to show I knew exactly what she meant. Michael was hanging onto my arm like a limpet, taking in everything with avid eyes.

“Who is the artist, anyway?” Michael whispered when Birdy got distracted by another diamond-covered matron.

“Charlie Reid. From Tennessee.”

“As in cracker?”

“I thought that was Georgia.”

Michael dismissed my concern for linguistic purity with a wave of his manicured hand. “Georgia, Tennessee. Whatever. Is he?”

“He’s Cherokee Indian.”

“Oh, you know what they say about Indians.”

“Can’t say that I do,” I muttered. “What do they say?”

“They’re hung like—oh, that must be him now. Look at that hair. Couldn’t you just die? Too bad it came out of a bottle.”

At first, I thought Michael meant Charlie’s hair. Then I realized he meant the woman on Charlie’s arm. Her hair was the fattest thing about her. It was thick and silvery blonde, and hung to the small of her back.

She wore a simple sheath of black silk, shot through with jade threads that clung to her model-thin figure and clearly showed she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. She had one arm wrapped securely around Charlie, while the other one moved freely over his body. Her fire-red fingernails looked like they could qualify as

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deadly weapons. She seemed to be talking nonstop, and with every word she touched him. I found her adoring look nauseating. Charlie seemed to eat it up.

Like me, Charlie had dressed with care for this shindig. He wore a western-style suit with a string tie and hand-tooled, snakeskin cowboy boots. On most men, the off-white outfit would have looked cartoonish. On Charlie, they set off his bronze skin and jet black hair, and showed just enough of his body to make it clear he had one worth flaunting.

I was very glad I had let Michael pick my wardrobe for the evening. I wore my best Hugo Boss. I was also glad Michael had fixed my face so I didn't look like a refugee from a boxing ring. I knew I looked hot. And for some reason, that was suddenly very important.

Charlie and his date ended up near Michael and me at the tapas table. Charlie caught my eye, and I saw him stiffen slightly, dislodging the blonde's arm. She looked confused, then grabbed him again, digging her dagger-like nails into his arm to hang on.

Charlie nodded to me.

"Tyler."

"Charlie."

His gaze skittered over Michael, then back to me. Then he glanced at the blonde. "I'd like you to meet Sonya Richards. Sonya, dear, this is Tyler McKay and...I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"This is Michael Cartwright," I said. "Michael, Charlie Reid."

Michael's gaze moved briefly over Charlie's form, then settled on me. "I'd like a glass of wine, sweetheart," he said pointedly. "Could you get me one?"

"Sure thing. Red or white?"

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“Surprise me,” Michael said flatly, and he flashed me a quick look.

I came back with two glasses of Riesling. Michael took a sip and pronounced it perfect. I leaned over and put my mouth next to Michael’s ear. “I’m going to look at paintings.”

I slipped through the growing throng. The gallery viewing rooms were designed to accommodate small groups. It appeared that most of the party had stayed in the main room with the tapas, and that suited me just fine.

While I had been impressed by Charlie’s pencil sketches, I’d forgotten how amazing his paintings were. It wasn’t just their detail, though that was stunning, it was another quality...one I couldn’t put my finger on. It was as though he captured an essence of the thing he painted. He didn’t just reproduce an image, he showed its hidden spirit.

I found a room full of paintings that had clearly been inspired by his period on the North Sea. The Arctic Skua was there—a squat, ugly, dirt-colored bird sitting on a steel rail that glittered with a coating of ice so vivid, I felt the chill walk up my spine. In the background, an angry gray sea left me cold and bleak, even though Charlie had made it look beautiful.

Another painting portrayed an exquisite, multi-colored iceberg on which several walruses had taken refuge. A lone polar bear graced a third canvas.

In another room, I warmed to a series of tropical paintings. Small, colorful birds sipped nectar from brilliant flowers, and a trim-looking ocelot shared a tree branch with a delicate arboreal orchid.

The man’s work was remarkable. I glanced at the discreetly displayed price tags and did a double take. He was more popular

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than I had imagined. Painting pretty pictures was lucrative.

“Very nice.”

I turned to find Michael standing in front of the ocelot, hands poised behind his back in his butch pose. The effect was incongruous, given the effeminate look of his jewel-clad ears and his lean, delicate face.

“Sleek,” he went on. “Rather like the artist. So.” Michael raised one eyebrow and touched his finger to his lips. “What’s he like in bed?”

“What—”

“Can the denials, Tyler McKay. I have eyes. You were both dancing around like it’s a mambo contest. Give me a break.”

“It’s not like you think.”

“Maybe not. But it’s not like you think, either.” Michael linked his arm with mine. “Is he a keeper, Ty?”

“This guy isn’t interested. You see what he’s got out there.”

Michael dismissed my words with a flip of his hand. He studied an image of a golden snake wrapped within a hanging epiphyte. The thing looked ready to leap out at us and sink its deadly bite into our skin.

“He’s got talented eyes,” Michael said. “And fingers. Is he good for you, Tyler?”

I rolled my gaze heavenward. “He’s not even there for me, Michael. He says he’s not gay.”

“Ahh,” was Michael’s only response. He twined his fingers through mine. “Come on, lover boy. Let’s make the rounds. Maybe we can find some more pretty paintings to admire. Maybe we can find a pretty artist to do the same with. Not gay....ha! Even my old rusty gaydar can see past that one.”

Holding hands, we moved through the viewing rooms. We

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found lots of paintings to ooh and ahh over, but no Charlie. I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed. As for Michael, it looked like he saw more than I'd ever given him credit for...on many levels.

Still holding hands, we moved back toward the bar. I got two more glasses of wines, which we sipped as we cruised. This time, I did spot Charlie, surrounded by admiring fans and the clinging female magnet.

Michael eyed her cattily, his claws fully exposed. "If he can fuck that, then I know he's ready for boyville. She's got less hip than I do, and you know how svelte moi is."

I patted his decidedly cute tush, and Michael purred. He purred louder when I fed him dim sum from the huge spread laid out near the bar.

"You know," he murmured around something hot and spicy. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when you two get horizontal. That will be one hell of a cock fight...two tops in a pissing contest to see who rules the bed."

"Michael, you can be so crude."

"Yes, but admired by all."

"And desired by many."

"Well, I should fucking hope so."

I laughed, and we moved off to look at yet more paintings. It was as though, having decided to call it quits after two years, we were finally becoming friends. In front of a painting depicting two bull moose vying for the attentions of a distant, bored-looking female, I hugged Michael, who melted into me.

"Maybe we should have done this years ago," I whispered into his upturned face before I kissed him.

Normally, I wasn't into public displays of affection. It had

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nothing to do with gay-straight issues, I'm just a private person. But Michael had surprised me and made me realize I was going to miss him when he left. Kissing him seemed the most natural thing in the world right then.

The sound of someone clearing his throat broke us apart, though I didn't let go of Michael. I looked up to find Charlie and his date watching us with a mixture of emotions.

Pure loathing and disgust turned the blonde's features ugly. Lust waged war with fury on Charlie's saturnine face. His eyes blazed when they met mine. He clutched the poster girl for bulimia so hard, his knuckles were white. She didn't even seem to notice.

"That is just so disgusting," Sonya said loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear. "How can they let people like that in here?"

"Through the front door, sugar. Like everyone else." Michael maintained a level voice, though I could hear anger growing in his tones. "And I wouldn't talk. You look more like a boy than most of the boys I know. Maybe you ought to wonder why the fashion queens put you on their runways. They get to fantasize there's a dick between those skinny ass hips of yours and jack off while you're wearing their clothes."

"Claws in, Michael," I said. "Let's not get bitchy."

"Bitchy," Sonya said in a shrill voice. "This little cocksucker couldn't lick my boots. Sniveling, dreary little queen—"

"Enough." This time Charlie stepped in. "Let's go back and get that champagne you wanted, babe." When she started to protest, he grabbed her arm. "Now, Sonya."

They left.

Michael looked at me, and we broke out laughing. "'Dreary little queen?'" He smoothed the material of his gray Versace suit.



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“Jesus, Tyler, did you see the look he gave you? The guy had a boner for you, and princess vomit didn’t even catch it.”

My grin faded. I suddenly felt weary. “And he’s still denying it, so what difference does it make? I’m hardly going to out the guy just so I can get a piece of ass.”

“Or give a piece,” Michael said slyly. “Funny, I can see you with those luscious legs of yours wrapped around his sweaty hips doing the two-backed beast.”

The image had the effect Michael had been after. He discreetly touched my swollen cock through the material of my pants. “Want to go home, sugar?” he whispered. “It’s our last night. Let’s make it one to remember.”

“That sounds like the best idea I’ve heard all night.”

We met Thurlow on the way out, and had to endure twenty minutes of boss-employee dancing masquerading as comradery.

Thurlow greeted Michael with a cool nod and a “Pleased to meet you, Michael.” Michael, for his part, was discretion itself, as he always had been around my various clients.

Finally, we got away and sped home. I was so hard by the time I inserted the key in the front door lock, I began stripping in the front foyer. We never made it past the first floor.

Michael was naked first, and dropped to his knees on the hardwood floor in front of the marble fireplace. He sucked me eagerly while I shed the rest of my clothes, then we switched places. After I slurped him like a salty lollipop for a few minutes, Michael pulled away and fetched lube and condoms.

I heard him return as I sat on the loveseat, slowly stroking myself, head thrown back and eyes closed. He eased between my legs and wrapped his lips around my prick again, and I groaned. I groaned louder when he slid a stiff finger into my puckered hole.

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I pushed him onto the floor and came down on top of him. We paused only long enough to unroll the condom over my leaking cock and slather the latex with lube. Then I pushed two lube-coated fingers into his open hole.

Michael rocked against my hand and squeezed with his ass muscles. "Fuck me, baby. Bury that cock in me and ride me hard."

He wrapped his hips around mine, and I had an instant image of Charlie and me doing the same thing. I instantly got harder and slammed my mouth on Michael's, stifling his moans.

I moved slowly only as long as it took to ease into his tight channel, then I stopped being gentle, ramming into him. He met me, thrust for thrust.

Our grunts filled the room, and the slap of flesh on flesh was the only other sound. I could feel his ass tightening around my shaft, and his balls pulled tight as he got ready to explode. I reached between us and circled his pre-cum-soaked erection with my fist. I pumped him hard, and he cried out, thrashing on the floor as he came, shooting streams of liquid heat all over his belly, chest and face.

My own cock contracted and throbbed. My thrusts grew wilder, less controlled, and I gripped Michael's hips with an iron hand, throwing back my head. I shouted his name as I came, filling the thin latex shield with hot seed.

We collapsed together on the floor until the non-giving nature of the hard wood and bony knees and elbow made it too uncomfortable. Then we scrambled to our feet and I disposed of the condom.

"Let's go to bed," I whispered against his mouth.

"Thought you'd never ask," came his sleepy reply. I took his hand and led him up three flights of stairs.

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We made love again, a long, dreamy sequence of thrust and counter thrust that grew slowly in heated intensity and left us totally drained and sated when we finally exploded. Eventually we slept, waking before dawn to come together one more time. I got up to shower and shave, and Michael got ready to go to Donny's.

Then he left.

I looked at my display tank full of green wonder and darting jewels. "Just you and me now." Fish aren't much for conversation.

I got dressed and prepared to go to work.

## CHAPTER 4

The next few weeks passed in a blur of sameness. I don't know if I would have described myself as lonely, since I didn't let myself think enough to be cognizant that I was alone. I operated in a daze. I couldn't even say what I ate, or where. I was sure my cholesterol count rose several points following Michael's departure because I grabbed a lot of fast food.

I went to the site, making excellent progress in determining how the transformation I envisioned was going to take place in Lynx Woods. Funny how that name stuck, even though it was known officially as Thurlow Site 1629, Project 23...and probably had an even more official name in the government books.

The project entered its second phase. The trucks and their crews moved in and, at first, they seemed to leave the site in even

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worse shape. The ground was torn up, and what few plants and scrubby trees had managed to eke out a living in the hard-pack clay, were ripped up. Only the willow was carefully skirted. The work that had to be done near it would be performed with hand tools and grunt work.

Not that it wasn't all grunt work. Twelve-hour days became the norm, and I came home each night exhausted. I was grateful for the need to do little more than fall into bed and sleep six hours before waking up to start the grind all over.

I continued to add to my picture gallery. When I heard that Charlie had gone back to Tennessee, I spent one Saturday going over digital images and selecting several I thought he might find useful. I emailed them to him and got back a terse, "Thanks. They'll come in handy."

I sent a reply saying, "No problem. I have more if you want them." Then I asked how the four panels were coming along. Charlie was noncommittal. He was still working out the exact design and subject. He'd let me know.

I arrived at the site one morning to find a heavy fog blanketing the area. I wandered down to where the willow tree lapped at the shores of the muddy brown river and startled another heron. Or the same one, who could tell? Fringes of mist curled around the base of the willow, moving silently through the soft, weeping fronds. I pulled out the digital camera and began to capture images. I examined each one, deleted some, made hardware adjustments, and took some more.

After sending a dozen of them to Charlie, I received an enthusiastic reply. Fantastic shots. Could I try for more?

I began scouring the weather channel for changing temperatures that might trigger an early morning fog. And got

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lucky. This time when I drove into the site, the air was so murky, it seemed to encase the Land Rover in wet cotton.

I crept out of the vehicle and moving as silently as I could, headed toward the willow. The site was so preternaturally quiet, I could hear the river gurgling along the stony shore on its sluggish way downstream. A blue jay screamed nearby, and received an answer from a distance.

Movement near the tree caused me to freeze, camera ready.

Three deer—a young, two-prong buck and two does—stepped out of the roiling mist and passed within two meters of me like golden-brown ghosts. They circled the willow, and the buck paused briefly to taste the rough bark before following the does. They vanished into the mist as silently as they had come. If it hadn't been for a steaming pile of deer droppings one of them left behind, it would have seemed like a dream.

That night, I enthusiastically wrote a long email to Charlie about my work at the site, the deer, the fog...and added as an afterthought, "Michael's gone. I'm alone now."

He wrote back thanking me for all the images. He said he was sorry about Michael. That he was alone, too. It was a bitch sometimes, but that was the way of it.

I took the digital camera upstairs with me. I shot a few pictures of the fish tank—I was keeping an online record of growth and changes in it—then lay back on the bed and dumped the camera beside me.

I began leafing through a stroke magazine and almost idly pulled out my semi-hard dick. I fondled myself lazily until I grew to full hardness, then I flipped the page and found myself staring at a bronze-skinned hunk with sultry eyes and a luscious-looking brown cock that reminded me painfully of Charlie's. I began to

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stroke and pull at my cock in earnest. Then my eyes snapped to the digital camera.

Without thinking about it, I started shooting pictures. My erection grew stronger as I captured stroke after stroke. My chest started heaving, and I sighed when I shot my load onto my stomach. Once I had cleaned up, I began skimming through the shots I had taken.

Some of them looked downright silly. Others were hot.

The idea came out of the blue. I picked two that showed my upper body and loaded them onto my laptop. There I cropped them carefully, removing all traces of my actual erection, but leaving my chest shining with sweat and the expression on my face in the shot, making it clear what I was doing with my hand off camera.

Then before I could chicken out and change my mind, I emailed them to Charlie with the simple words, "I miss you."

And got back a very thunderous silence.

*What the hell did you expect? I castigated myself. That he'd wallpaper his studio with them? That he'd realize the mistake he made and come rushing back to me?*

I returned my attention to Lynx Woods. The project workload increased. Two dozen mature paper birches and larch trees were planted on the site. Next spring, crews would return to add a hundred more saplings. For now, the mature trees would help anchor the newly laid-down soil and lock it in place, safe from further erosion. Other plants would be brought to the site to facilitate that, as well. Ground-hugging ivy and fast-growing native grasses would tie down the soil and keep it from washing away.

The spring I had discovered was carefully cleaned, and native bog plants were placed around it. Cattails now swayed in the early morning breezes all the way down to the river, and I began to hear

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the familiar konk-la-reee cry of returning red-wing blackbirds.

No more foggy mornings greeted me, which was just as well. I wasn't sure I'd photograph them, or, if I did, send the images to Charlie. I hadn't heard squat from him since my admittedly silly and impetuous act, and by now I didn't expect I would. Charlie would be back for the unveiling of the site, which would coincide with the completion of his panel pieces. I wasn't sure if I looked forward to seeing him then, or not.

Thurlow kept me informed about the progress of Charlie's paintings. He positively glowed whenever he spoke of the artist and his work. I nodded and smiled at every word, aching a little each time Charlie's name was mentioned, but giving nothing away to anybody. Not even to Michael, when he called occasionally to see how I was doing.

The honeymoon phase was still going strong between Michael and Donny, and sometimes it stung to hear the warm passion in Michael's voice whenever he mentioned his lover. I hated to admit it, but I missed the little queen.

One week, in particular, had been especially grueling at the site and I was glad when Friday night finally arrived. A truck had damaged a newly planted paper birch, and I'd had a hell of a time sorting out what had happened. The trees were insured, but the paperwork was a bitch. It was nearly six by the time I finished with that and crawled into the Land Rover for the ninety-minute drive back to Broadview.

Traffic had backed up, so I didn't pull in to my leased parking space until nearly nine o'clock. I trudged through the dark for home.

My heart dove into my throat when a shadow detached itself from the front step and came out to meet me. Christ, mugged at my



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own front door...I could see the Goddamned headlines now.

Then the shadow stepped into the light, and I saw who it was. My heart danced a different tune.

“Charlie?”

“Can I come in?”

“What? Oh...sure.” I slid the key into the deadbolt and sprung it. After shoving open the door, I waved Charlie to precede me, then locked the door behind us. Leading him into the living room, I took off my jacket and regretted it instantly. I had spent the day sweating over a ruined tree and insurance forms. I stank. I had to do something about that before anything else.

“Want a beer? I’ve got Steam Whistle or Algonquin.”

“I’ll...Steam Whistle, I guess. Thanks.” Charlie took the beer and cradled it in his work-roughened hands. I watched him peel back one corner of the label, never meeting my eyes. “Listen, Tyler, we need to talk—”

I held up my hand. “Can you hold that thought for five minutes? I’ve been out at Lynx Woods almost twelve hours. I’m overripe, if you get my drift. Just let me grab a quick shower, and I’ll be right with you, I swear.”

“Sure, okay.” Charlie sank back into the overstuffed love seat that faced the empty fireplace.

“Want some peanuts or chips or something while you’re waiting?”

“Nah,” he said. “That’s okay. I had a snack on the plane.”

“No bike?”

Charlie flushed and looked at the wall over the fireplace. It sported a huge Andy Warhol print of Mick Jagger, a gift from the lover before Michael. “I was in a hurry.”

With that ambiguous statement ringing in my head, I hurried

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upstairs to take my shower. I returned to the first floor fifteen minutes later wearing tan cargo khakis and a purple La Costa T-shirt.

Now that I had time to study him, I noticed that Charlie appeared...rumpled was the best word. He'd never stuck me as being a fancy dresser, nor did he seem the type to fuss about his clothes once they were on. But he was always neat. Hell, he'd be delicious in damned near anything he wore.

Now, he looked like he had slept in what he was wearing. Maybe it had been a bad flight.

"You want to go for supper?" I said softly. Whatever he wanted to talk about seemed to be stressing him out. Maybe a calming-down period would help.

"What did you have in mind?"

"We could walk up to the Danforth. It's not far. There's some great Greek places there. Or Tex-Mex, or Irish."

"Greek sounds good. Love *moussaka*."

The weather had turned chilly after the sun had gone down. I grabbed a jacket and when I realized Charlie didn't have one, found an old bomber jacket I hadn't worn in years. It fit him well enough that he wouldn't freeze to death.

He tucked his hands into his jean pockets, and we headed south. Traffic on the Danforth, both auto and foot, was heavy. It usually was on Friday night. We found an inside table at my favorite Greek place and studied the menus with more attention than they deserved. Charlie's desire to talk seemed to have waned.

I got a beer. Charlie ordered a coffee. "Too much alcohol would knock me out right now," he said.

I nodded and waited.

Finally, Charlie scrubbed his face with his hand and met my

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eyes. "First off, I'm sorry I never replied to your email. I meant to, but... I didn't know what to say."

I shrugged. "It was a stupid thing to do. I had no right to embarrass you like that. I'm the one who should be sorry."

"If you knew..." Charlie surprised me by smiling. "When I opened that first picture of you, I admit my temptation was to hit the delete button. But I didn't, and the next thing I knew, the second one pops up, and it was even hotter. You have no idea. The mess those two images made of me..."

He had called the pictures hot. Did that mean—?

"The next day, I called this woman I know. She's a shrink...a crisis counselor. I've known her for a few years. I asked to see her. I've been meeting with her three days a week for the past four weeks now. She's helped me a lot."

"Helped you how, Charlie?"

"Helped me see who I am. Learn to understand why I do what I do. Turns out, I'm a pretty fucked-up guy. Like you said, in denial."

"I had no business jumping on you like that. It's not my place to tell anyone who they should sleep with or what their nature is."

"Yeah, I know," Charlie said. "On the other hand, I was pretending things weren't true when they were."

"Like what?"

"Like admitting I'm gay." He winced and stared down at his big hand holding his mug "That's hard. I still don't want to think...I still can't see it. Can hardly even say it."

"Why did you come here, then?"

"To see you. Those pictures, they made me think of things. I remember that night in the hotel room. At first I tried to pretend it...we...hadn't happened. What I had asked you to do. Hell,

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begged you. I wanted you so bad, but I had to get drunk to make it happen. Then I tried to convince myself that I had been too drunk to be responsible, so it was okay. But that's bullshit. I'm a hundred percent responsible for my actions. That's one of the things Carol—she's the counselor—was really adamant about. Take responsibility. I can't use alcohol as a crutch to let me get away with doing things I wanted to do subconsciously."

I ordered *saganaki* as an appetizer and poured a second beer into my stein. I leaned over and touched Charlie's hand. "What happened in your past, Charlie? Back at the hotel room, you mentioned something that wouldn't happen again. What was it?"

Charlie grimaced. "Oh, yeah. That was lots of fun to unload. God, I hate thinking about that even now."

"Sorry," I said. "Forget I said anything."

"No, it's actually okay now. I got through it with Carol. With her it was hard, now it's just...aggravating."

I thought at first he still wasn't going to talk. Then he set his coffee back on the table and folded his hands in front of him.

"I was a freshman in college...little dinky place down in North Carolina. My student advisor was this older guy, maybe in his forties. Everyone loved him. He was the kind of guy you could take any problem to, and he'd talk about it. Didn't judge, just let you talk and work through things yourself." Charlie paused, then continued in such soft tones, I had to strain to hear him. "I got along with him great. He even used to drop in on me sometimes in the evening, see how I was doing. I think he knew I was having a hard time adjusting to college life. I was younger than most of the other students. Graduated high school at sixteen and got a scholarship to this place. I was big for my age, so that helped, but I was so damned naïve."

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He shook his dark head, his ponytail flipping forward on his chest. “The first time he touched me, I thought it was an accident. His hand just...brushed me. I was startled, but admitted it felt good. I’d been looking around at the other students, and it seemed to me the most interesting one were the guys. The girls just never seemed to catch my eye.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” I murmured. “Scary, but exciting at the same time.”

Charlie nodded fiercely. “Exactly. So when he touched me again, I didn’t object. It felt good, I liked the guy. Maybe intellectually, I knew he shouldn’t be doing it, but I didn’t let that stop me.”

“What happened then?”

“We became lovers. That’s when I found out the guy was married, and that the whole thing was going to have to be very hush hush. He told me that if his wife found out, she’d kill him. If the ethics committee caught on, they’d can him. It didn’t seem to matter to him. He said he had to have me. He was obsessed.”

I had no trouble understanding the guy’s feelings. The more I saw Charlie, the more I could easily fall for him. But that’s not what he wanted to hear right now. The *saganaki* arrived, and we both paused to watch the waiter set fire to the brandy-soaked cheese before setting down the platter in front of us.

I urged Charlie to dive in. I adore the strong Greek cheese, but tonight it was more fun to watch Charlie eat it with gusto. I like a man with a big appetite. It augured well for his appetite in other areas.

“What happened then, Charlie?” I resumed our conversation when the appetizer was gone and the plates cleared away along with our empties.

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“We got caught. It was almost inevitable, if you think of it...small college, everybody knew everybody. And they all loved this guy.”

I thought I knew where this was going now. I cursed under my breath, feeling Charlie’s remembered pain.

Charlie went on, oblivious. “So when this guy walked in on us in the locker room one night after lights out...”

“He spread the word and everyone blamed you,” I said flatly. “Here’s this good guy, married to a wonderful woman, loved by his students and the faculty. Shit, what else do you do? You blame the fucking pouf who tempted him.”

“Oh, it was something,” Charlie said. “Yeah, they blamed me. He had to leave town, and I guess his wife dumped him. As for me...I was the whore of Babylon who had led the man to his doom.”

“How long before you dropped out and started working all those he-man jobs?”

“Oh shit, you noticed that? Carol finally got me to see the pattern there. I just figured I was taking no-brainer work. But there was more to it than that.”

“You wanted to become what they had told you that you weren’t. A man.”

“I could beat the crap out of anyone who looked sideways at me. I did it, too. Often enough to get a reputation for being a mean Indian to stay away from. Someone you didn’t mess with. I lived with that for longer than I care to remember.”

“What about the art? Where did that figure in?”

“I was always good. In college, I had some small shows, strictly local, but it was big news down there. So when the scandal broke, they latched onto it as a ‘sign.’ I’d been a deviant from day

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one. The art proved it.”

“So you dropped the art.”

“Faster than you can say faggot.”

“Charlie...” I wasn’t sure how to ask, so I bit my lip and just said it. “Have you ever been with a guy...since then, I mean?”

“Not since...no. And most of what I did with him, I managed to block out of my head. Easier to pretend none of it ever happened. Kind of like with you and the hotel.” He laughed, a rough, unhappy sound. “Then, of course, I got married. So none of it could have been true, right? I mean, faggots don’t get married. Ergo, I wasn’t a faggot.”

He traced a calloused finger through a ring of condensation on the table. “Poor Tracy. She didn’t deserve what she got marrying me. I took so many jobs out of state—hell, out of the country—that she was lucky to see me three, four months a year. I sent her money, made sure she didn’t want for anything material. But she fantasized about kids, a white picket fence, the whole suburban nightmare. I couldn’t do that. Not in this lifetime. I think she was actually relieved when I said I wanted a divorce. I gave her everything and went up to the North Sea for six months. Even kept sending her money afterward, though she was working a good job, and there was no alimony order. Carol would tell you it was more of my guilt. Trying to make amends for the messes I left behind.”

“When did you start painting again?”

“Right about then, actually—”

Our main courses arrived—Charlie’s *moussaka* and my favorite roast lamb. We eschewed wine in favor of another coffee for him and a third beer for me.

The waiter left, and Charlie picked up his fork. “Looks good.” He took a mouthful of *moussaka*. “It is good.”

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We ate in companionable silence for a while, then Charlie grunted and tapped his fork on the plate, grinning. "In retrospect, I'm not sure it was a good idea to sign on for six months to an isolated hunk of steel floating in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a bunch of hard-muscled roughnecks for company. I started having crazy dreams. Some of them got pretty raunchy. Thank God I couldn't remember most of them the next day. But I did a lot of laundry on that tour. Anyway, I started doodling during my off hours, and the sketching let me sit by myself. And forced my mind to concentrate on details other than the fact there were six guys bunking with me who made me look like a pantywaist."

I laughed. "Michael's all-time favorite wet dream. He would have been in twink heaven."

"Whatever happened to Michael? You guys seemed pretty tight the night I saw you."

"You mean the night you and Sonya saw us?"

"Ouch. Okay, I had my agent find her," Charlie said. "Thurlow told me he'd invited you, and no way I wanted to face you alone. Put a broad on my arm, I told my agent, or I'm not going."

"So they found Sonya."

"Michael was a real bitch that night."

I shrugged. "Michael's always a real bitch. It's part of his charm. Truth is though, we were breaking up that night. He had someone else, and I had no reason to try to hang on to him."

"Why?" Charlie asked quietly.

"Because I'd already found someone else I wanted more."

Charlie flushed and his eyes darkened. He looked down at his plate.

"Do you want to come back to my place, Charlie?" I asked.

"Yes," he whispered. "I do. More than anything. But—" He



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looked miserable. “I—”

I reached out to grab his hand where it lay on the table beside his empty plate. “Whatever happens, will happen only because you want it, Charlie. Not for any other reason.”

“You mean that?”

“Cross my heart.” I grinned, squeezing Charlie’s hand. Then I released it.

His smile was heartbreaking.

Abruptly, I stood. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

We found our waiter, settled our bill, then headed back to Broadview. I didn’t try to take his hand or touch him again while we were in public. Charlie had a long way to go before he’d be comfortable with his sexuality. He didn’t need to be inflicted with unwanted stares.

At the front door, just before I unlocked it, I paused and faced him, saying in a soft voice, “Only what you want. I promise.”

I didn’t know what Charlie expected once we got inside. Maybe he figured I was going to jump his bones the minute the door closed behind us. I would have done so with any other man. I’d had one taste of him, and I wanted a whole lot more. But this was Charlie. I didn’t just want to fuck this guy. I wanted this to be the start of something. That meant slow and easy. Let him set the pace.

I closed the door behind us and immediately noticed that Charlie was antsy. He couldn’t sit still. I offered him a beer that he turned down. My offer to make coffee met similar resistance. Finally, I suggested we go to the third floor. I had a big screen TV there, and I thought he might find the aquarium interesting.

And my bed was there.

I was right—Charlie fell in love with the tank. Like most

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people, he'd never seen anything that big outside of a public aquarium. Charlie watched for awhile, then turned glowing eyes on me and asked all the usual questions. How big was it? How many fish did I have? How hard was it to clean?

"Two hundred and fifty gallons. About four or five hundred fish altogether, most of them tetras. Not hard at all. Big tanks are easier to maintain than small ones, and this one is meant to be self-maintaining."

"Two hundred and fifty—" Charlie suddenly grinned. "Is that real gallons or some weird Canuck measurement?"

I laughed. "That's American gallons."

We spent the next half hour in front of the glass wall while I pointed out various things in the tank. The cory cats, who spent their lives rooting around in the gravel with their tiny bewhiskered snouts, charmed him nearly as much as they did me. He loved the stately angels with their beautiful tones of silver and black, and seemed to enjoy learning that they had a habit of eating the tetras, thus keeping the slower fish on their toes, so to speak.

Even the bizarre-looking Farlowella twig catfish, who resembled dried sticks stuck to the bottom of the leafy plants where they munched on any algae that grew, appealed to him.

I made a point to stand as close to him as I could without actually pressing against him. Our shoulders touched occasionally, and more than once, my hand brushed some part of his body...an arm, a thigh, his ass.

With each touch he grew less jumpy, and finally he turned those storm-colored eyes on me and murmured, "Would you kiss me, Tyler?"

"My pleasure," I said in a husky voice.

We turned so that we faced each other. I leaned toward him and

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let our lips touch. Charlie's breath was warm on my face. When he opened his mouth, I slipped my tongue inside. His hand came up and touched my cheek. I increased the intensity of the kiss, going deeper and demanding a little more tongue, reaching for his tonsils. Charlie's tongue came out to grapple with mine. I leaned against the full length of him. The heat from his body pooled in my groin. I gently rubbed my hands over him, and Charlie groaned as he twitched his hips.

After slipping my arms around him, I drew him closer and cupped his ass. The bulge between his legs nestled perfectly against my stomach. I began a slow grind, and my hands on his ass moved with the rhythm, encouraging him.

I wanted bare skin.

I eased a hand under the T-shirt, then slid up his back. The muscles writhed under my fingers as I danced along Charlie's spine. I glided to the rim of his jeans until I was caressing the top of his butt.

Again his hips jerked, and I felt an answering twitch in my own cock.

"Take that off," I murmured, tugging at the ends of his T-shirt.

Charlie complied without hesitation. I lowered my head and pressed my mouth to his left nipple, over his heart, which jumped under my lips and started pounding in triple time. He groaned when I began worrying the hard button of flesh with my teeth. Then I backed up and blew hot air on the rigid nubbin. Charlie shivered.

"Cold?"

"No," he said in a strangled voice, pressing my head against his chest. "Don't stop. Whatever you do. Don't. Stop."

I had no intention of stopping. I worked around to the right

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nipple and got it as hard as the first one. Then I moved back up to his face. He attacked my mouth with a ferocity that told me exactly how the evening was going to end. This time, Charlie didn't wait for me to take the initiative. He assaulted my mouth, his tongue tangling and untangling with mine, and our heated moans mingled.

I reached behind his head and removed the tie that held his hair. Free, the black mass cascaded down around both of us.

His hands began grappling with my T-shirt. I helped him, and when I was bare-chested, Charlie leaned back without breaking contact and looked at me. "You are hot, aren't you?"

I looked over the hairless bronze skin molded atop hard muscle and swallowed. "You're pretty damned steamy, yourself."

He laughed and bent over to take one of my nipples in his wet mouth. I held his head while he sucked and nibbled it into throbbing erectness. Then he attacked the other one, using his teeth and tongue to play with the light scattering of dark chest hair. I groaned and pushed the nipple deeper into his mouth.

"I never knew a man's nipples could be so sensitive."

"That's only the beginning," I murmured and blew warm air into his pits. I followed that by nuzzling the fine silken hair I found there. "I promise."

"Teach me," he said and jammed his mouth down on mine again.

"Let's lie down."

We sidled toward the bed, reluctant to break contact. When we were less than a yard away, we bailed out and landed on the dusky rose duvet in a tangle of arms and legs.

One of my legs found its way between Charlie's thighs, and I snuggled against the heat of his crotch. I rocked against it, and my hands pressed his ass, pulling him closer to me. After burying my

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face in the crook of his shoulder, I nibbled on the skin above his carotid artery. I needed to taste him. To savor his essence.

Finally, I settled on the button of his jeans. I unfastened it and eased down the zipper. My fingers stole inside, and I extracted his marble-hard cock.

Lightly tracing the outline of his helmet, smearing droplets of pre-cum around the hot velvety skin, I lubricated his prick. My fingers worked their way farther, shoving aside the cotton briefs he wore to slide under his wrinkled balls.

Charlie groaned and lifted his legs, opening them wider. But he was caught by his jeans, which were tangled around his hips.

I grabbed the offending denim material and yanked it down his legs, tossing the garment off the side of the bed. His briefs followed. Now he lay naked before my hungry gaze.

Before I could move, Charlie tugged at my zipper. “Get that off, Tyler. I want to be skin to skin. I want your cock in my hand.”

I slipped out of my clothes in less time than it took to draw a breath. Then I rolled into Charlie’s arms and pressed our naked bodies together. Our pricks rubbed along their full length, lubricated by each other’s pre-cum. Our mouths connected, and the kiss was the most intense, yet. Meanwhile, his hand snaked down my stomach and slid through the nest of pubic hair before closing around my swollen shaft.

I had been so ready for this for so long, I was on the edge instantly, my balls climbing up my scrotum, tightening, ready to release their load. “Oh, fuck, baby,” I whimpered. “I’m not gonna last much longer. Oh God—”

Charlie scrambled to wrap his mouth around my straining shaft. My stomach clenched, and I grabbed handfuls of long black hair...the same hair that wrapped around my pulsating cock and

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slid over my supersensitive balls. I came off the bed with a shout, and my orgasm rocketed through me.

He barely pulled off me in time. My erection pulsed and throbbed, and shot ropey streamers across my chest and Charlie's throat. Each spasm sent a fresh explosion of thick cum between us.

My heart still pounded in my chest when Charlie slid back up, his lips stopping occasionally to taste my hot, sweaty skin. "I had to know... That's the first thing I wanted to do when I saw those pictures you sent me. Oh baby... I never knew..."

His hard-on pressed against my thigh.

I reached down to stroke him.

"That's only part of it." I captured his mouth with mine. My hand tightened on his cock. I thought of Charlie inside me, invading me, filling my tight hole. I shuddered.

"What is it, Tyler?"

I kissed him again, drilling my tongue into his mouth until he groaned. "Do you want to fuck me, Charlie? Do you want to bury yourself inside me until you explode?"

"Jesus, Tyler..." His cock jerking in my fist and oozing more pre-cum gave me the answer.

I shifted until I was on my knees, displaying my ass, opening my legs so he could see my hole. I rocked in silent invitation. He gave a strangled cry and reared up behind me. Tentatively he took my hips in both hands. His dick brushed my crack, and I thrust back to encourage him.

"Fuck me, Charlie."

"I've never—"

"I'll help you." Eagerly, I threw myself over toward the night stand where I kept lube and condoms. I ripped open the pack and rolled a skin down Charlie's dick with shaking hands. The lube

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squirted out, cold and gelatinous. I smeared it over the condom, then handed the tube to Charlie.

“Put some inside me. Use your fingers.” I rolled back onto my stomach and presented my ass to him, clutching the bed sheets under me in anticipation.

When his first finger slipped into me, I bit my lip to keep from crying out. The second brought a sharp pain that quickly faded as my sphincter muscles relaxed. By the time he inserted the third finger, I was rocking into it, fucking his hand. My mind blazed with the new sensations. I didn’t want him to stop. I wanted him to replace those fingers with his fat cock. I opened my legs wider in invitation.

“Fuck me, Charlie. Shove it in me and fuck me.”

I was beyond reason.

Charlie gripped me feverishly. His body shook as he finally got the idea. He raised my ass higher, clasped me harder, and positioned his cock to invade me.

The head met resistance. He pushed gently and eased past the ring of muscle until he popped inside. He stopped. We remained still for several heartbeats, then he moved again, easing himself all the way until his pelvis rested against my ass.

There was no more resistance. I pressed back to meet his pounding, my cock hard again as each of his thrusts stroked my prostate. Pleasure pulsed through me, growing with each caress of his rigid dick. I grabbed the blanket with both fists and bit down on the pillow to stifle my screams.

He bent to kiss the back of my neck, his tongue skimming the top of my spine. Then he bit the side of my throat, nuzzling my earlobe until I whimpered in need. I rotated my hips, writhing under him, my sphincter muscles clamping down on his cock.

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Charlie lost control. He rammed into me, flesh slapping flesh as he mindlessly fucked me. The only sounds now were our ragged breathing, breathless grunts, and wordless cries that rose to a crescendo and burst.

I gasped, then arched against him. My dick shot load after load across the bed clothing under me.

I felt Charlie's orgasm then. He grabbed my hips and thrust wildly, once, twice, then freezing, muscles rigid as he exploded into the condom. He groaned, a long, drawn-out sound that ended only when he buried his face in my neck and collapsed on top of me, pushing me down onto the bed.

We lay like that for the longest time. The room filled with our soft breathing, the whisper of air being pumped into the aquarium, the soporific sound of running water. My grow lamps illuminated the tank, revealing green shimmers and darting movement. Outside the window, a streetcar rumbled down Broadview.

I thought Charlie had fallen asleep and was tempted to join him. Then he stirred on top of me. I turned my head to look at him.

With a warm sigh, he planted a kiss on my open mouth. "Why didn't you tell me it was this good when I first met you?"

I laughed. "Oh right, like you would have listened. You probably would have beat the crap out of me. Big, tough Cherokee, remember?"

He rolled off, taking me with him so that we still lay skin to skin. After reaching down to removed the condom, he wrapped it in a tissue, then turned on his side and threw his leg over my hip to hold me still. Like I was going away. His mouth tickled my face with light kisses, rubbing his nose in my goatee.

"Oh yeah," he said, between kisses. "The big, tough Cherokee."



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“Yeah...that.”

He stroked my goatee with his thumb. “I love this. A man with a beard. When you sucked me off, it was such a turn on. I should have realized then...”

I shivered at the memory. My arms tightened around him.

He shifted to bring his body closer to mine. We completely ignored the wet spot under us.

“How long are you staying?” I asked.

“Not long.” His voice was full of regret. “Still have to finish the panels.”

“You decided on the subjects? Can you tell me?”

He shook his head. “Confidential. No one gets to see them until Thurlow does. The fate of nations and all that.”

“Oh, I’m in bed with James Bond.”

We both laughed. I played with the skin on his back, stroking him, tickling him with my fingernails. Running my fingers through tangles in his long hair.

“When is your plane?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. Four. We got all night.”

“Good. That might be enough time.”

“For what?”

“This. For starters.”

I rolled away and pulled his legs apart. He watched, a bit uncertain, as I knelt between his legs.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered. “You’re gonna love this. If you want me to stop, you only have to tell me.”

Then I raised Charlie’s legs over my shoulders and shoved my face into his ass. My tongue darted into his puckered hole, and I heard a startled gasp from Charlie. It was immediately followed by a groan as I worked my stiff tongue up into his back door. He lifted

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his hips, opening himself to give me more access. I obliged by sucking and biting at the skin around his ass. My goatee slid over hot skin, and my wet mouth worked him into a writhing frenzy.

By the time I slipped my finger into his grasping hole, Charlie rose to meet my first tentative thrust. Ready and eager for more. “Oh, fuck,” he cried out as I ran my tongue over the soft skin behind his balls. Then I dove back into his ass.

Charlie twisted, trying to expose himself, wanting more. Holding nothing back.

After dribbling some warm spit onto his crack, I worked in a second finger and suddenly found him fucking my hand, bucking like a horse gone berserk. His cock was hard again, bouncing off the solid muscle of his belly, leaking pearls of pre-cum that smeared his stomach.

I moved up his cock with my mouth, tracing the outline of veins that ran along the rigid shaft. I slid my tongue around the glistening helmet while my fingers flexed and stroked the inside of his hole.

Charlie’s balls contracted in readiness to explode. His prick grew even thicker as he rammed it into me, jack-hammering my mouth with the force of his thrusts. His hands cradled my head, rocking with the fierce rhythm.

I wrapped my fist around his dick, jerking him off. Charlie gave a strangled shout and lunged up, spewing goblets of hot cum over my fist. Finally he jerked away, his cock too tender for more.

I released him, and lay back alongside him. My arms cradled him, and we kissed tiredly.

“Oh, man, you’re incredible,” Charlie whispered. “I am so glad you didn’t let my attitude blow you off.”

I snuggled into him. “I just kept hoping. Always the eternal

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optimist, that's me."

Arms still tightly clinging, Charlie drifted into sleep. I lay there a while studying him in the soothing light from the aquarium. He looked younger in repose, more boyish. I found it hard to see the roughneck he had tried to be for so long. Now, he looked like someone who could have inspired Michelangelo.

I didn't know where this relationship was going. I sensed Charlie still had some serious personal issues to deal with before he was comfortable being himself. But if he wanted, I was going to be there for him.

I curled into him and went to sleep.

## CHAPTER 5

Saturday was tank maintenance day. The aquarium was a self-contained environment, for the most part, and I fed the fish only once or twice a week. But everyone needs something special now and then, so I thawed some bloodworms. Even the corys got excited as the thin, red worms spiraled down into the water. The surface thrashed briefly as if a miniature shark feeding frenzy was going on. I left them to eat. I'd return to clean the tank later.

Now it was time for the human component. Down in my newly renovated kitchen, I put on the coffee pot and brewed a rich, African blend I had picked up in the market a few days before. After filling a tray with the coffee carafe, two mugs, cream, and sugar, I headed back to the third floor.

Charlie still sprawled under the covers, and I set down the tray

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on the glass-topped coffee table in front of the aquarium. I dumped my robe at the end of the bed and slid under the covers. Immediately, Charlie rolled over and took me in his arms.

"I wondered where you got to." He kissed me and trailed his hand down my ass, squeezing my still-tender buns. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Oh, yes," I murmured, layering a trail of kisses along his jaw line, down to his bronze, hairless chest. I inhaled his scent—warm and sexy, and totally masculine. I mouthed one of his dark, puckering nipples.

"God, that smells good. Hmm, coffee."

I rolled over onto my back, staring balefully at the off-white ceiling. "Thrown over for a lousy pot of coffee. I don't believe it."

Charlie sat up, exaggerating as he sniffed the air. He flung his legs over the side of the bed and looked back at me, his eyes dancing with mirth. "What can I tell you." Grinning, he grabbed the recently discarded robe and pulled it on. "Coffee and me got a long history together."

On him, my robe didn't even extend past his knobby knees. I watched the sexy sway of his ass in the silken material and the play of muscles in his legs as he padded over to the coffee table. He poured a mug, added cream only, then instead of heading back to bed, he sat in one of the two recliners stationed in front of the aquarium.

Reluctantly, I hauled ass out of bed, put on a pair of boxers and a plain white wife-beater that I knew showed off my buff body, and joined him. We watched the mesmerizing activity in the huge tank for several companionable minutes while we drank our morning coffee.

"I've always thought about doing some underwater painting,"

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Charlie said. "It would work in great with my current portfolio. And my agent keeps telling me how hot it is right now."

"Yeah? How do you keep the paints from running?"

Charlie looked at me in mock disgust.

I finished my first mug of coffee and went for a refill. Charlie was already on his third.

After I'd finished my drink, I dragged a pair of jeans out of my closet and threw them on over my boxers. I tossed Charlie his clothes. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Puzzled, he got dressed and followed me downstairs, through the kitchen and out onto the back deck.

"I started this last year. It's not done yet, but let me know what you think." I led him down stone steps.

In between jobs, I had spent much of the previous summer bringing in truckloads of fill and landscaping stones, which I had arranged in a miniature stony escarpment. I had stuffed the upper and lower terraces with as many native plants and shrubs as I could locate in local nurseries, driving as far as Chatham to find them. The result was a perfectly natural, native Canadian sanctuary I was immensely proud of.

Water flowed over a series of steps until it ran into a pool that was over ten feet long and less than two feet wide. I kept a few minnows in it to take care of mosquitoes, but otherwise, all the animal life that resided there came in on its own.

At the end of the yard, a terrace of stone backed up to a neighbor's fence. Ivy cascaded down the granite face and spread along the ground at its base. The largest tree on my property, a sugar maple, stood ten feet tall. Several smaller ones, as well as a few poplars, made up my miniature forest.

A gas barbecue sitting on the deck saw a lot of use in the

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summer. In fact, company was coming over the next evening—Michael and Donny were dropping by for steaks and brews. I wished Charlie could have joined us. I said as much.

“I wish.” He stood staring off into the distance. Then he grinned. “Hold on a sec. Don’t let that thought go anywhere.”

He fished around in his pocket until he came up with a cell phone. He keyed in a number, and spoke rapidly to whomever answered.

“Hey, Hal? Charlie. I need a favor... No, nothing like that. I just need you to reschedule that lawyer thing to Tuesday... Yes, it’s important. Would I ask if it wasn’t...? Yeah, it might be. I’ll let you know. Thanks, Hal. Oh, and when you’re done that, can you call the airline and get me on a Monday flight, afternoon or evening, if possible...? Yeah, you, too. Say hi to Evelyn for me.”

He put the cell back in his pocket. His grin widened. “Well, if you really mean it, I’m all yours tonight.”

I put my arms around him. “Oh, I mean it all right.” But when I leaned in to kiss him, he backed away. He looked sheepish, as though to say sorry, but he kept his distance. The message was clear: no kissing in public. I didn’t push it. His issues. His to work out. Instead, I gestured at the backyard.

“What do you think?”

“I’m impressed. If you ever decide to spend some time in Gatlinburg, you can transform my property any time.”

“Just name the day,” I said. “You hungry? I could rustle up some breakfast, or we could walk up to the Danforth for something.”

“Let’s stay in,” he said quickly. “What have you got? I make a pretty mean omelet, if I say so myself.”

I told him where the eggs were and directed him to the stock of

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fresh herbs I grew in pots on the patio. He chopped up chives and mushrooms, added grated cheese to the mixture, and dropped sourdough bread into the toaster. I carried two plates filled with all the fixings for a wonderful breakfast out to the deck and with my first bite, realized I was starving.

Breakfast finished and dishes rinsed and stacked in the dishwasher, we wandered back up to the third floor. A shower together led to a very satisfying orgasm, then we got dressed, and I posed the question, “If you’re going to be here for supper, what did you have in mind? Eat out again? Or we could go down to St. Lawrence Market and pick up some stuff.”

The market won, and we drove downtown. At the busy market, we picked up swordfish steaks, fresh salad fixings, and local corn on the cob. We strolled around, passing stalls with every imaginable food product, both local and international. I bought a paper sack filled with freshly roasted peanuts, and we left a trail of peanut shells as we walked from booth to booth. Charlie found the corner stall that sold coffees from all over the world and picked up a bag of Kona beans. His storm-colored eyes held mine when he said, “For tomorrow morning.”

I sensed he wanted to kiss me, but the moment passed, and we moved on. I had to ignore sudden urges to grab his hand or slip my arm around his shoulder. Toronto was a pretty tolerant town, and usually there were no more than a few double-takes at such displays of affection, but I knew it didn’t matter to Charlie. He just wasn’t ready to admit to the world that he was with another man. Not in that way. I had to respect that.

Back on Broadview, we put away the groceries. I made another pot of coffee, which we consumed in the backyard while we watched birds flit overhead and the neighbor’s cat stalk a fallen



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leaf. Then we went back inside. I took his hand and led him upstairs, where we undressed and made love all afternoon.

I cooked the swordfish on the barbecue, and Charlie tossed salad while the corn steamed away on the stove. We ate on the patio and this time, the cat stalked us until we fed her bits of swordfish. She deigned to wind her sinuous form around our legs and take our offerings.

Darkness fell, and the third floor beckoned. We ended the day back in bed, making love until we were sated and fell asleep in each other's arms.

It was the most incredible day I had ever spent in my life.

The next afternoon, Michael and Donny arrived at five sharp. I kissed Michael on the lips, shook Donny's hand, and led them into the front room where I took drink orders. A smile played over my face while I waited for Charlie to make his appearance. I hadn't had a chance to say anything to Michael about Charlie, and I was dying to see the look on my ex-lover's face when he realized who was with me.

I heard Charlie's tread on the stairs from the third floor and looked up in anticipation. Michael had known something was going on, and he avidly followed my gaze. His jaw dropped when he saw the figure on the stairs.

His wasn't the only open mouth. I stared, too.

Charlie had gone out earlier, saying he had some shopping to do. Upon his return, he had gone straight upstairs, taking with him a half dozen shopping bags from several trendy stores. He had clearly gone all out on his spree and had gotten some good advice for his money.

He wore a pair of dark gray dress pants that sharply defined his basket, and a rich turquoise shirt that hugged his muscled chest and

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showed off flawless bronze skin. He had a single earring in his left ear, a gold and turquoise thing that swayed when he moved his head. His hair had been freshly washed and combed back in its ubiquitous ponytail, but this time, held in place by more turquoise.

The sight of him made my cock jump in my boxers. I saw Donny reach over and shut his lover's mouth with one finger, then grin and shrug when he saw me looking.

Michael turned to me. "You bastard," he said softly. "You never told me. How could you not tell me? All this time..."

Charlie came over to stand beside me. This time, he let me take his hand. I squeezed his fingers, and he squeezed back. His gaze was warm and promising. Now I had to wonder if I was going to get through this evening in one piece, emotionally and physically.

"It came as a bit of a surprise to me, too." I raised adoring eyes to Charlie's. "He came back just the other day."

Michael took both of our hands in his. "I'm really happy for you, Tyler. And you." He turned a mock glare on Charlie. "It's about time."

"Thanks, Michael," Charlie said dryly. "I'm glad you approve."

Michael blushed and cocked his head to one side. "Love the jewelry." He brushed the single gold stud in his ear. "I feel woefully underdressed."

I studied Michael's flamboyant, purple and mauve ensemble and nearly choked on my beer.

Donny was quick to reassure him. "Nobody could stand out over you, honey. You look divine. Doesn't he, Tyler?"

"Yes he does. Divine. Do we want to take this outside? I've got the steaks marinating and the crab salad's on ice."

We trooped to the kitchen, where we all grabbed something to take outside. I carried a tray of sliced cheese and fruit to the patio,

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then went back to cut pita bread into triangles to serve with the *hummus* and *baba ganoush*.

Charlie trailed after me. "Anything I can do?"

My mouth curved up in a lascivious smile.

He saw it and grinned. "Down here," he amended sternly.

I gave him a long-suffering sigh and pointed at the kitchen floor by the pantry. "Well, in that case, grab that cooler and take it outside. Then get the tray of nachos, the salsa, and avocado dip. I'll leave the steaks in the marinade another half hour."

Michael and Donny sat across from each other on my wicker patio furniture with Michael's feet in Donny's lap. Michael raised his drink in salute and wiggled his bare toes.

"I spent absolutely all day on my feet. I didn't know you could get blisters on blisters. Ah, yes, sugar, that feels divine."

"Shopping marathon?" I asked, grinning at Donny's discomfort. Michael's feet might be hurting, but probably nowhere near as much as Donny's wallet did. "So many designers, so little time."

"You're making fun of me." Michael pouted. Then he sighed and grew serious. "Actually, I was at the center most of the afternoon. Robby came in today," he said softly. "You remember Robby, Tyler. Robby van Gruen? He used to be such a wonderful man. Remember how big he was? You'd hardly recognize him now. He's down to about ninety pounds. None of the retro-virals are working for him anymore. God, I hate this world sometimes."

The center was a nonprofit AIDS hospice. The first time I had heard Michael talk about volunteering there once a week, I had thought he was joking. Michael, volunteer at a place where sadness and death had such a powerful hold? That was the day I had first learned there was a hell of a lot more to Michael Cartwright than

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he let on.

Even after that, I had still underestimated him. Face it, I hadn't cared enough to know the first thing about Michael. Now, I realized Michael made it a point to appear like a silly twink so that no one would take him seriously. As though being a caring human being would be taken as a sign of weakness, and he didn't want anyone to see him as fallible...even as he acted like the most outrageous queen.

"I'm sorry, Michael," I said. "I know how much Robby meant to you."

"I hate that place. I don't know why I go back."

Donny reached over and captured his hand. "Because you've got a big heart, sweetie. That's why I love you."

Michael swiped at a tear, then grimaced. "Look at me, crying on everyone's pita bread. Why don't you get those steaks on, Tyler. I'm gonna have another beer."

I looked at the near-empty bottle in Charlie's hand just as he said, "Get me one, too."

I grabbed us all beers, then went to get the steaks. The barbecue was sizzling hot, and soon the delicious smells of searing meat filled my tiny haven. The evening passed in a friendly blur of good food, ribald jokes, and an easy comradery. I found I enjoyed being part of a couple again. Enjoyed, hell...be honest, I loved it. I realized I wasn't cut out for this solitary bachelor shit. And Charlie, being warm and funny and sexy as hell, was exactly what I wanted in couple material.

As the evening wound to a close, I wanted the others to leave. I was impatient to be alone with Charlie.

Maybe Michael caught my impatience, or maybe he was still in the honeymoon phase of his relationship and wanted to get home,

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too. Whatever it was, he interrupted some lame joke Donny was telling and planted a big, wet kiss on his mouth.

“Let’s go home, sugar. I think we’ve taken up enough time here.”

“What—” Donny seemed confused, then he looked from Michael, to me, to Charlie, and his eyes went big. “Oh, right. It is getting late, isn’t it?”

“Late, yes,” Michael said, then pointedly looked at the drink in Donny’s hand. “Besides, you have more of those and you won’t be any good to me at all tonight. Baby has needs, you know.”

I knew all about Michael’s needs and grinned at Donny. “He’s right. You’re a lucky man, Donny.”

Charlie choose that moment to possessively slip his arm around my shoulder and pull me against him. The look he seemed to be giving Michael had a “keep off” quality that Michael found hilarious.

“Oh baby, he’s marked you good.” Michael slapped his leg. “I think I know who won that pissing contest. Is it good for you, sugar?”

I smiled back and captured Charlie’s hand in mine. “The best, Michael.” I raised Charlie’s hand to my mouth. “Better than the best.”

“I’d envy you, but I got my own best of.” Michael gave Donny an adoring look. “Come on, lover, let’s go home.”

Charlie and I followed them to the front door and watched them leave. Charlie stood slightly behind me, not touching me now that the door was open to the real world and we were exposed to traffic moving down Broadview.

When I swung the door shut and made sure it was locked, I turned to find Charlie watching me. Without a word, I went into

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his arms and Charlie lowered his mouth to mine. He broke away from the very satisfying kiss and leaned back far enough to look into my upturned face. “What did he mean about a pissing contest?”

I opted for full disclosure. No sense keeping secrets. “He means we had to figure out how we were going to fuck, assuming we wanted to.”

Charlie just looked confused.

I leaned in to nuzzle his chest through the bright fabric of his shirt. “You and I are both tops—we both want to be the fucker and not a fuckee.”

His confusion faded, to be replaced by a blush. I loved his innocence. It aroused me more than I would have thought. “You want to fuck me?” he whispered.

“Oh, man.” I sighed, my cock throbbing against Charlie’s thigh. “I would love to. But I know you’re not ready to face that.” I almost added, “yet,” but didn’t want to scare him with presumptions. “And I’ve got no problem with the way things are. I love it when you fuck me. I never knew I could love it so much.”

“I don’t know...” As if it had a mind of its own, Charlie’s rigid prick rubbed against my stomach. He might not be sure, but his body was.

I didn’t point that out to him. Instead, I said, “I don’t expect you to jump into that or anything that makes you uncomfortable. Being a bottom is a big step. It’s invasive, and there’s a real surrender of yourself involved. It can take a lot of getting used to.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“Bother me? Fuck, are you kidding?” I grabbed his hand and pressed it into my erection. “This is what you do to me. Right now, I want you to fuck me so bad, I’m ready to come in my pants just

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thinking about it.”

“Tyler—”

“Right here, right now. Oh, baby.” I fumbled with the zipper on his new pants and skinned them down his legs. I did the same with his jockeys and took his hot tool in my hand. “Right here.”

I dropped to my knees and wrapped my mouth around Charlie’s swollen dick. He rocked his hips, pushing his hard-on all the way down my throat.

“Baby,” he moaned, hands at the back of my head. “Ohhh, yesss.”

I backed off and looked up at him. “Do you want to fuck me, Charlie?”

“Yes!”

I stood and pointed to the nearest recliner. “Sit,” I ordered. Then I went into the downstairs bathroom and got the lube and a handful of condoms. When I came back, I found Charlie had removed his shirt as well, and sat on the edge of the chair, his dick pointing straight up at the ceiling. I stripped off my own clothes and slid between his legs. He spread them slightly as I bent to take him into my eager mouth again. I sucked him for a while, until Charlie began to mindlessly fuck my face. I felt his balls tighten in their velvet sacks.

Backing off, I tore open a plastic package and withdrew the latex condom, unrolling it carefully over Charlie’s stone-hard flesh. Then I applied liberal amounts of lube to him and slid my hand between my own legs to poke a gel-covered finger up my puckered hole.

I straddled him. His face contorted with lust as I sank down, impaling myself. As I eased onto him slowly, I paused to give my tight sphincter muscles time to relax at the invasion, then I sat on

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his lap, his dick stuffed into my dark channel.

I stared into Charlie's dark eyes and leaned over to rub my goatee against his cheek before capturing his full lips. "I love you, Charlie," I murmured as I began to move, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

He grabbed my hips and pulled me even tighter against him. His neck muscles stood out in sharp relief as he arched his head back and drove himself into me again and again. Then he reached between us and took my cock in his big, rough hands, stroking me hard.

Cum boiled out of me. My prick jerked in his hand, and my balls slammed up into my scrotum as I spewed ropes of fluid across his bronze stomach and chest. I shuddered as spasm after spasm rocked me, and my ass muscles tightened around his plunging staff.

Charlie cried out and grasped my hips so hard, he left white marks in my skin. His cock contracted and swelled and shot its load into the latex shield.

I sagged against him, feeling our sweat-slicked skin slide together and become one. My arms circled his shoulders, and I held him tight. My bearded face rubbed against his cheek. "Love you," I said again.

His arms tightened and his lips brushed against my ear. "Baby," was all he said.

I was disappointed, but didn't say anything. Saying he loved a man was a big step for Charlie Reid. It had to be enough, for now, that he was here with me. That he had come all this way just for me.

I kissed his mouth, letting the tip of my tongue slip between his lips. "Let's go to bed."



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Charlie discarded the condom and we grabbed our discarded clothes before climbing to the third floor. There, we made love again and afterward took a shower. Later, I changed the sheets on the bed, and we crawled under them to fall asleep holding each other.

The next day, I drove him to the airport and reluctantly let him go with nothing more than a handshake and a meaningful look. I didn't speak of love again, or try to touch him once we left the house.

I was already missing him terribly by the time I aimed the Land Rover north on 427. It was time to check on the progress at Lynx Woods.

Work is a wonderful panacea for missing someone. Even so, I had more than one person ask me if I was all right as the long day progressed. I wasn't looking forward to an evening alone, and kept finding things to occupy my time and prolong my stay on the project site. But finally, I couldn't delay the inevitable anymore, and climbed into my vehicle for the interminable ride back into town.

When I let myself into the house, the phone was ringing. I sprinted for the kitchen and snatched the handset off the cradle, barking, "Yes?"

"Tyler, hi. I just wanted to let you know I got back okay."

Charlie's voice on the phone made my knees go weak, and I leaned against the wall separating the kitchen from the seldom-used dining room. "Charlie."

"Yeah, babe, it's me," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just miss you like crazy. I can't believe it's only been, what...eight hours?"

"Know what you mean."

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Did that mean he missed me, too? His next words made my heart soar.

“Too bad you couldn’t get free and come down here for a few days. I’d love to show you my neck of the woods.”

“You mean that?” For Charlie to suggest I come down there, to be seen with him by his friends and neighbors, made me ache with love. “Right now?”

“Yesterday,” Charlie murmured, his voice shaky. “Does that mean you can?”

I gripped the phone so hard, my knuckles were white. “Yes,” I said in a strangled voice. “I can...and will.”

“When?”

“Let me set up things tomorrow. Make sure the team knows what to do... Oh, God, babe. I can’t wait.”

“Me neither. Hurry.” He gave me his address and directions, and I wrote in a daze.

“I’ll find it,” I said. “Believe it.”

I hung up and stood there, leaning into the wall for support. Then I felt a massive smile break out on my face and a lightness fill me. *He wanted me!!* He’d left and found he couldn’t stand the separation. That had to mean something, didn’t it?

I snatched the phone and called airline companies until I found one that could book me onto a flight for the next evening heading to the Gatlinburg-Pigeon Forge Airport in some place called Sevierville. I followed that with a call to a national car rental place, booking a midsize sedan for the drive to Gatlinburg.

I would be at Charlie’s place by midnight. I couldn’t wait.

## CHAPTER 6

The next day was extremely busy, thank God. My time filled with scheduling and making sure Karl, Jessie and the others understood what I expected them to do while I was gone. Fortunately, the project had entered that phase where the next step was obvious, and everyone knew their job. In fact, I often left project sites at this point in the process to work on other issues, so the trip wasn't unusual for my staff.

But Karl and the others suspected something was up. Jessie kept giving me looks that held a lot of questions and not a little speculation. They all knew I was gay. It was no big deal to them—or hadn't ever seemed to be. They'd met Michael while we were lovers, and had managed to take him in stride, which spoke volumes for their tolerance.

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"I know it's none of my business." Jessie finally got up the nerve to approach me during one of our liquid breaks. "But this thing isn't business-related, is it?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"Normally, no. But this time.. yeah, it's all over your face."

I felt heat scald my cheeks.

She shook her head. "Don't, Tyler. Hell, you look happy. I envy you. I always thought you were a good guy and deserved better—" She broke off, and this time she flushed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to diss Michael. He just wasn't...right for you."

I laughed. "Well keep your fingers crossed that this one is, Jess."

"Hey, boss." She grinned. "Fingers and toes."

The last hour crawled by as I tied up loose ends. I gave them Charlie's number—though not his name—with the admonition that they were only to call in a "flat out, absolute, earth-shattering disaster that has galactic implications, otherwise it can damned well wait." I was pleased to see Jessie tuck the paper into the pocket of her jeans, trusting her to be more levelheaded in defining a disaster than any of the guys. If she called, I knew there was trouble.

I had packed a bag before leaving the house that morning. All I had to do at home was take a quick shower and check messages for any last-minute problems, then I was back on the freeway and cabbng toward the airport.

It took forever to clear customs and check in, but finally I stashed my bag in the overhead and slid into my assigned window seat. I propped a Rick Reed horror book onto my lap to discourage talk from my seatmate, a harried-looking woman in her twenties who barely glanced at me.

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The book managed to hold my interest during takeoff and the first hour of the flight. Then I closed it and lay my head back, pretending to doze while thoughts of Charlie flashed through my overheated imagination. I was glad I'd chosen to wear loose khakis and a jacket that covered my lap since, as the plane descended, I came out of my self-imposed daze with a raging hard-on. I hastily picked up the book again and tried to get back into it, if only to lure my mind away from lascivious images.

It worked, barely. At least I was able to disembark and pass through the crowds without getting any particularly horrified looks.

I picked up the car, a white Intrepid, and after reviewing directions with the girl behind the counter, I set out for Gatlinburg.

I made good time, only once taking a wrong turn, and it was barely one-thirty when I pulled into the gravel driveway leading to Charlie's house. Lights blazed inside the house.

The front door flew open before I could even plant my feet on the ground and Charlie strode onto a wide, wraparound veranda carrying a rag and couple of paintbrushes. He was shirtless and wore ragged jeans cut off at the knees.

"Tyler. I'm glad you came." He took my bag from me and lightly touched my elbow with his free hand. "How was the flight down?"

"Good. No problems. So, this your place." I barely took my eyes off his face to look around. "I like it."

It wasn't big, and it had the rustic look of an old cabin that lent it a certain charm. But then it could have been a crumbling barn and I wouldn't have cared. Not if Charlie was in it.

Charlie hadn't been exaggerating when he said he backed up to the wilderness. Massive, ghostly trees hovered on either side of his

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property line, which was marked by nothing more than a frail-looking, moss-covered cedar fence still wrapped with Christmas lights.

I noticed little landscaping. A few bushes and perennials crowded around the sides of the veranda, and flower boxes haphazardly filled with annuals sat on window sills and beside the front door.

“Let me show you the house,” Charlie said. He took the veranda steps two at a time and waited at the top for me.

The veranda was draped in shadows. From its ceiling hung an old-fashioned biplane that looked hand-carved. The only furniture I could see was a gliding swing that would have held three in a pinch, but would have been just perfect for a leisurely afternoon drinking mint juleps with the man of your dreams. Then I faltered. Did they drink mint juleps in Tennessee? Or was this Jack Daniels country? What the hell was a mint julep, anyway? Was it anything like a mojito?

Charlie held the screen door open for me, then set my bag on the floor at the bottom of a set of ancient-looking stairs that led to the second floor. The interior had that peculiar smell unique to old houses. Through it, I thought I detected a familiar scent. My nose perked up. “Is that coffee?”

“I threw on a pot a few minutes ago. Figured you might be tired after your trip.”

“I’m too wired.” Then I looked up to meet his gaze full on. “Don’t I get a hello kiss?”

Charlie cupped my face in his strong hands and brushed his thumb over my cheeks. I opened my mouth, and he took advantage, bending to caress me with his lips.

I sighed and opened my mouth all the way. He slid in his

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tongue, then withdrew and straightened, brushing an errant strand of hair off my forehead.

“Before this goes too far, let’s grab a coffee, and I’ll give you a tour.”

It turned out to be a sprawling place that was bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside, full of unexpected turns and rooms that weren’t quite square. Charlie explained, “It was built in the middle of the nineteenth century, before the Civil War, by a real eccentric old character who had a reputation for running moonshine in the woods and hiding slaves bound for the underground railway to Canada. They caught him eventually, and hung him right out in the front yard from one of his own trees.”

“Don’t tell me, his ghost still haunts the place after all these years.”

“Nah,” Charlie said. “His ghost is more interested in tracking down the stills he left out in those woods. When the wind’s right, you can still smell the sour mash and hear him cursing out the government men.”

I laughed. “So, where’s your studio?”

He led the way to a large room at the back of the house. Here, the far wall was lined with more modern windows designed to let in lots of natural light. There were no curtains on any of them, and I felt strangely exposed. It didn’t surprise me that Charlie made no attempt to touch me while we wandered around his work site.

The studio was filled with at least a dozen works in various stages of completion. Several easels lay shrouded in cloth, and I remembered his admonition that no one see the four panels Thurlow had commissioned until they were delivered to Toronto for the unveiling. I spotted works that I knew had come from Charlie’s time in Lynx Woods, but there were others that drew

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their inspiration from somewhere else. I paused in front of an easel bearing a half-finished study of a horse and rider in what looked like a show ring.

“Oh, that’s a special request,” he said when he saw where I was looking. “My sister’s girl, Katrina, is crazy about horses and competes in the local show circuit. Her dad just bought her this horse and now she’s winning ribbons, so Trish asked me if I could paint the two of them as a favor. Katrina won a blue ribbon at that particular show.”

I studied the painting, seeing a young girl on the edge of puberty who had fine golden hair and the translucent skin only the very young ever possess. “Your niece, huh?”

“Told you my sister was a blonde, blue-eyed Viking. We don’t even look like we come from the same forest let alone the same family tree.”

“Does anyone in your family know... I mean...”

“That I’m gay?” He shook his head. “The college scandal never got this far, and I didn’t have the heart. Then when I got married, it seemed a moot point. It still did, until lately.”

I held my breath as I studied the painting in front of us.

He touched the surface, brushing a thick brown finger over his niece’s rendering. “Now I’m thinking, why not tell them? I’m tired of keeping secrets and this thing with you.” He looked up to find me staring at him, mesmerized. “If this is going to be something meaningful, then I want them to know. To be happy for me.”

He suddenly looked scared, as though it had just occurred to him that maybe they wouldn’t be happy. That maybe he would lose them over this. I took his hand, despite the open windows behind us.

“I don’t want to live my life in secret, Tyler,” he said in a voice



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full of anguish. "I don't deserve that. We don't deserve that."

I pulled him into my embrace, and for a brief minute, he stiffened. I thought he was going to push me away, then he clung to me. I stroked his broad back and told him how much I loved him, and I was sure his family loved him too.

Finally he drew back, collecting himself. "Sorry," he muttered. "How was it with you? When you came out?"

I shrugged. "Uncertainty. Fear. This was long after AIDS was endemic, of course, so all they could focus on was that it meant exposure. I tried to tell them it didn't have to be that way, but it took a while before they could really listen. My dad still has trouble dealing with the whole gay thing. He's okay with it most of the time, then either he hears something, or I say something, and he pulls back again. My mother's always been more accepting. But then I guess her background mandates she be more tolerant. They'd come and take her Haight-Ashbury posters away if she weren't."

"But they're there for you if you need them, right?"

"Hundred percent. I'm sure yours would be, too."

He didn't answer, and I didn't offer any more platitudes.

"Come on," he finally said. "Let me show you where the shower is. Maybe you feel like washing up. Are you hungry?"

"Not really. I had a snack on the plane." I followed him out of the studio and up the rickety stairs that creaked ominously under our feet. He showed me a surprisingly modern bathroom with a large shower cubicle. It also contained a bathtub, which sat in the middle of the floor on clawed feet. It looked big enough for two people, and my imagination went off again.

Then he led me down the hall.

"My room," he said simply, throwing open the door. He had

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filled the space with beautiful old furniture. The four-poster bed was covered with a deep teal and burgundy comforter. Along one wall was a fireplace that looked like it was well used, and an old grandfather clock that ticked away somnolently in the silent room. A Victorian loveseat and matching chair graced the space opposite the bed, and a bedside table held a bookmarked science fiction novel along with the two pictures I had so impulsively sent to him such a short time before. He had printed out the photos on quality paper, and it was obvious they had been handled quite a bit since then.

Charlie saw the direction my eyes took. “I was looking at them last night before I called you. It’s the main reason I contacted you.”

“Well, I’m glad you did call.”

“And I’m glad you sent them.”

I moved to stand in front of him. I could feel the heat from his bare chest. His eyes darkened and burned into mine when I lifted my hand and lightly stroked the skin around his nipples. He shivered under my touch.

We stood like that for several rapid heartbeats, then he stepped closer and brushed his crotch against my stomach. His flesh was tattooed with goose bumps, and he leaned over to plant his lips on the skin above my ribs. I felt the savage drumbeat from my heart, and his heat suffused me with desire.

My hands skimmed up his bare arms and back down his spine, settling on his hips above the waistband of his cutoffs. When our mouths finally met, it was like an explosion of pure lust. I had meant only to kiss him gently, then suggest we go to bed. But one touch of his lips, and I lost myself. He had the power to drive me to mindless distraction.

I clung to him as he walked me backward to the bed and

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undressed me. Then he eased me back and knelt between my legs. I groaned when his mouth covered my swollen cock. He circled the fat head with his warm tongue, and his hands gently moved between my ass cheeks, spreading them. When his mouth left my cock and moved down past my balls, I held my breath, only to let it out in a deep guttural groan when he planted his mouth squarely on my puckered hole.

His tongue danced over my ass, flicking back and forth, stiffening to work its way inside, then darting back to lick and suck at the super sensitive skin behind my balls. My hole opened to him like it was begging for what it knew was coming. Amazing how I had gone from being such a dedicated top to yearning for Charlie's dick up my ass with such complete abandon.

I heard the zipper of his cutoffs slide open.

Cool air hit my pulsing hole as Charlie reached over to the bedside table and opened a drawer. He shifted his weight as he returned to my side and sheathed his prick with a condom. Seconds later, his lube-covered finger slid inside me and I rocketed up from the bed. At last his cock head broached the opening. He slid in easily, gently working past the ring of muscle guarding my ass. Before long, he came to rest with his balls almost touching my tail bone. He braced his hands on either side of my hips and began to thrust into me...at first with slow, measured strokes, then faster as our lust consumed us. I wrapped my legs around Charlie's lower back, angling to draw him in deeper. He leaned over to jam his mouth over mine, catching my cries and shoving his tongue down my throat.

Charlie growled against my neck. "Baby, you are so fucking hot. You were meant for this, born to have my cock up your ass. Oh, fuck. Yes!"

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He started slamming into me so hard the bed under us began to bounce on the floor. His face was a rictus of pure lust, and his cock began to pulse and throb. Head thrown back, he bowed his back and drove himself so far into me, I swore he hit my stomach. His orgasm shattered him, exploding and draining him completely. Almost simultaneously, my own prick shot its load across my stomach, chest, and face.

Charlie sagged into me, smearing us both with semen. His shallow, gasping breath was hot on my sweat-soaked skin. It was a long time before he raised his head off my shoulder and blinked down at me. His smile was shaky. "Wow," he whispered.

"Wow, yourself."

He pulled out from between my legs and carefully disposed of his condom. Then he drew me to my feet and covered my mouth with the softest of butterfly kisses. "Let's go take a shower."

We slipped into bed after the shower, and Charlie pressed into my back, his arms tight around me and his breath warm in my ear. "Thank you for coming, Tyler. Thank you for everything."

We drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, we enjoyed breakfast on the veranda. Blue jays screamed at us from the trees overhead, and I saw a flash of black and white as a pileated woodpecker crossed the back woodlot.

Tennessee was hot that time of year. Even early in the morning, the breeze was stifling on our sweat-sheened skin. The weather promised to get only warmer. I wore my lightest T-shirt, but I hadn't thought to pack shorts, and none of Charlie's would fit. I sat and sweltered, envying Charlie, who only wore his cutoffs.

"I usually go into the studio in the late morning for a few hours. Can you entertain yourself for a while until this afternoon?"

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“Sure,” I said. “I’ll go into town. If you like, I’ll pick up something for supper and take care of the cooking.”

“Wow. I got married when I wasn’t looking. Do you wash windows, too?”

“For you, babe? Anything.”

Charlie kissed me, then slapped my butt. “Careful what you say. I might decide to take advantage of it. Who knows what perverse depths I might drag you to? First windows, then dishes, then before you know it, you’re scrubbing toilets.”

“Ew.”

“See, what’d I tell you?”

Around eleven o’clock, Charlie disappeared into his studio. I grabbed the rental keys and drove in to see what Gatlinburg, population thirty-eight hundred, had to offer.

Actually, I knew exactly what it had: the Ripley’s Aquarium. I spent the afternoon with the other tourists as we ogled massive tanks full of sharks and rays and brilliantly colored tropical reef fish. I had lunch in front of a wall of glass and watched the leisurely flow of aquatic animal life beyond the wall while I nibbled on a salad and drank ice tea.

Before I headed back, I found a casual clothing store and picked up a pair of trunks I could wear around the house and that would also serve as a bathing suit if I went swimming. I didn’t think Gatlinburg was ready for Tyler McKay in his Speedos. I wondered if Charlie owned a pair. That thought was enough to give me a boner in the middle of a crowded sidewalk. God, what this guy did to me.

I found a market and stopped in to grab boneless chicken and half a watermelon. I hoped like hell Charlie had a barbecue. I didn’t look forward to cooking supper in the house, even with the

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air conditioning.

Back at Charlie's, I found the barbecue tucked away on the veranda and was marinating the chicken in a bath of garlic, olive oil, and fresh chopped tarragon when Charlie appeared, looking damp from a recent shower. I kissed him on the lips and left him to chop veggies for a salad, deciding to take a shower, too. Afterward, I put on the new trunks and returned outside to find that Charlie had cranked up the barbecue and it was smoking nicely, ready to cook.

We ate on the veranda before moving inside to enjoy the cool air conditioning. We watched a really bad movie about aliens on a feeding frenzy among an unusually stupid human population. Then we redeemed ourselves by watching *Casablanca* and squeezing out a few tears for the star-crossed lovers before Charlie took my hand and led me upstairs. Again, he blew my mind with the power of his lovemaking. We slept the night through, wrapped in each other's arms.

The next day was a repeat of the first. Only this time, since I had the proper clothes, I decided to walk into town. It was a pleasant, forty-minute stroll, past forests teeming with birds and fields of green crops and grazing cattle. I felt relaxed, more so than I had in years. Again, I paid my way into the Aquarium and spent part of the day ogling tank after tank of natural beauty.

I stuck around the Aquarium afterward and cruised through that part of town, window shopping. I spotted a gorgeous burgundy shirt in one window that I just knew would look stunning on Charlie. I decided to buy it, guessing at his size.

Noticing a Walgreens drug store on one corner, I stopped in to buy more condoms and lube. I wasn't going to risk running out...not with the way Charlie made me feel. I made a mental note

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to talk to him about getting tested. If we could verify we were both clean, we could eschew protection. I knew I wasn't interested in bedding anyone else, and I thought Charlie might share my sentiments.

Continuing my tour of the store, I couldn't resist browsing the magazine section. To my surprise, I found a copy of *Men* tucked into the back of the display rack. What was this little Southern town doing with a popular gay magazine selling in one of its stores? Then again, Walgreens was part of a national chain that probably mandated what the local stores put on their shelves. On impulse, I decided to buy it. As I carried it to the cash register, my overactive imagination envisioned Charlie and I browsing its hot images and letting our inevitable arousal lead us to all sorts of fun. I ignored the looks I got from the pimply faced teen behind the cash register as I paid for my purchases.

Later that afternoon, I was walking down the road leading to Charlie's with a serious boner in my brand new shorts as I thought about what it would be like to fuck Charlie without protection. Suddenly, a vehicle came up behind me, forcing me to move off the road to let it pass. Loud music rumbled out of the car speakers...some kind of heavy, butt-kicking rock. Nothing recognizable, just a snarl of screams and wailing instruments. The tires crackled and spat on the gravel road.

Was it my imagination or was the car slowing down?

I glanced over my shoulder and saw a rusted-out Chevy pickup with its pockmarked nose almost on the shoulder of the road, close on my heels. Something flew out of the cab and shattered on the ground, spraying gravel and warm liquid over my bare leg. It had been a beer bottle filled with something I suspected wasn't beer. "What the—"

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I jumped to avoid the flying glass and equally warm liquid from a second bottle, and heard raucous laughter from inside the truck. This time the smell of urine was obvious. I stopped to let them pass, but to my dismay they slowed even more.

“Hey, fudge-packer, whatcha doin’ down here? Dontcha know your type ain’t welcome?”

A third bottle, this one bigger than the other two, shattered at my feet. It had been empty. I stepped off the road as far as I could without stumbling into the weed-filled ditch, wishing I’d taken the rental into town that morning. Wishing someone would come along before these Neanderthals decided to get out of the truck and have some real fun.

They cruised by, and I could make out three guys in the front seat. One of them was the pimply faced kid from the drug store. The truck sped up and showered me with gravel as the trio shouted expletives. I raised my hands to protect my face from the stones and grit, and did my best not to hear what they called me.

My insides froze. The kid had to have targeted me, put out the word about me after I bought the gay magazine in his store. I had been watched and followed. How else could they have found me on the road?

Only when they were out of sight did I hurry on, wanting to get to Charlie’s before they came back. Inside the house, I slammed the door behind me and leaned against it for several minutes while I collected myself. Hoping Charlie wouldn’t come out of his studio immediately, I scrambled upstairs and stood in the shower for nearly fifteen minutes while I tried to stop shaking.

What if they’d had guns? What if they’d continued to follow me?

I wondered if Charlie owned guns. After all, this was the



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States, not Canada. You could walk into a corner variety store and pick up a piece for the price of a loaf of bread. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration. But I was suddenly afraid. For myself. For Charlie.

When Charlie left his studio and found me in the kitchen forty-five minutes later, he must have sensed something was wrong. He took me in his arms and made me sit on his lap. When I told him what had happened, I had a brief glimpse of the rage-filled man he had once been, then Charlie grew calm and cuddled me for a while. “Don’t let them get to you, Tyler. They’re just backwoods goons with too much time and booze on their hands.”

I almost suggested calling the police, then thought of what that would mean. They would immediately know that I was staying with Charlie. It wouldn’t take a Rhodes scholar to figure out what that meant. Charlie would be outed, and we might not get any help for our troubles, anyway. How serious would the local law be about protecting a couple of admitted deviants from the town’s good old boys?

Eventually, I crawled off Charlie’s lap and said I was okay. I doubted Charlie believed me, but he let it go. He probably had the same realization about reporting the incident as I’d had.

Dinner that night was a frozen pizza I loaded with extra mushrooms, olives, and cheese, then cooked on a tile on the barbecue. We ate in the TV room, letting the local news channel fill us in on the hot spots all over the world, then switched to watching sitcoms.

“You getting bored?” Charlie asked out of the blue during a commercial break. He smiled down at me as I lay on the couch beside him, head on his lap.

I tilted my head up to look at his face, and his thumb rubbed

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across my silken goatee and traced a path over my lips. He was wearing the new shirt I had bought, and it looked as stunning on him as I had known it would.

"No," I murmured, trying to capture Charlie's thumb in my mouth. "Not a bit."

"If you were, I was thinking we could take a trip to Pigeon Forge. See those sights." A smile played around Charlie's sensual mouth. "It's not far from here."

Pigeon Forge. That sounded familiar somehow.

"Dollywood," Charlie said, no longer able to keep a straight face. "We could go see Dollywood, if you want. Maybe even get lucky and run into the lady, herself."

I swatted his arm, and he burst out laughing. "You should see the look on your face."

"It would serve you right if I said sure, let's go. *Dollywood*. You are one sick puppy, you know that?" I grinned and caught his hand, holding it against my chest. "How's the painting coming? Will you be finished with the panels soon?"

"I've fleshed out the basic structure of them. It's the details that will take the longest. How's the work at your end?"

"We're on schedule, last time I checked in."

Charlie gave a satisfied nod. "Me, too. There shouldn't be any problems with the unveiling coinciding with the opening, just as Thurlow wants."

I raised Charlie's hand to my mouth and caressed the palm with my beard and tongue. I saw his eyes darken and his lips open. A sheen of sweat dappled his forehead. Largely ignored, the TV droned in the background.

"Tyler," he said softly.

"Yes, Charlie."

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"I've been thinking about what you said. About you fucking me. Do you still want to?"

"Jesus, Charlie. Are you serious? Have you really thought about it?"

"Yes, I have. I want to..."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

I sat up, turning to look at him.

His eyes blazed with desire, and he reached out to cup my face in his strong hands. "You want to know the truth, I haven't been able to think of much else. I want to know...I need to know what it's like."

My heart raced in my chest. I'd never had a virgin before. All the guys I'd been with had known exactly what they were getting into. I wasn't sure Charlie did. But oh, I wanted him so badly. Just the thought of it made my dick dribble in my boxers.

Charlie stood and took my hands, drawing me up with him. He held me against him, rubbing his hands down my suddenly tense back. "I'm sure, Tyler."

I knew how scary the first time could be. The sense of surrender and loss of control was hardest to take for a natural alpha, and I'd never met a more alpha male than Charlie. I resolved to handle the coupling such that I would be able to leave him with a sense of power, knowing that would make it a lot easier for him to adjust to the situation.

Once in the bedroom, I undressed him slowly, working over his skin with my lips and teeth one delicate inch at a time. By the time he was naked, he was shaking with desire, beyond thinking about anything. I stripped off my own clothes and lay on the bed, drawing Charlie down with me. One of his legs straddled mine,

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pushing his hard cock against my thigh.

Grabbing a condom, I unrolled it over my cock and slathered it with a generous coating of lube. "Get up on your knees next to me," I murmured.

He complied, and I rolled onto my side as I fondled him gently, massaging the length of his dick with slow, measured strokes. With my other hand, I teased apart his cheeks, playing with his balls and the sensitive space right behind them. He stiffened, then relaxed as passion overrode caution. I carefully inserted the first finger into his puckered hole, probing for the spongy mass of his prostate.

He tensed again, and I soothed him, rubbing his thigh with my other hand. "You're doing great, Charlie," I whispered. "Just take it easy. Any time you want me to stop, just say so. I won't go further than you want me to."

"Don't stop."

I slid in my finger past the knuckle. Charlie rocked against my hand, and the rigidity now was that of rising desire. I pushed in all the way, rotating the digit to massage him thoroughly, rubbing against that knot of flesh that was every man's G spot. Charlie groaned, and his hips undulated against my hand.

When I gently inserted the second finger, he winced and I stopped, waiting for his ring of muscle to loosen and open. When it did, I rotated my hand, stretching his hole. Preparing him for something much bigger.

We were both breathing hard by then. His cock dribbled a steady stream of pre-cum, and I used it to lubricate his pole and slide my clenched fist around it. He bucked against the dual touch, rising into my hand and pushing against the fingers in his butt. His eyes screwed shut; his face filled with rising lust.

"Tyler," he whimpered. "Oh, Tyler, baby."

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“Do you want me, Charlie? Tell me you want me.”

“Yes! Now. Fuck me, Tyler.”

“Straddle me.” I lay on my back, guiding his hips over me with both hands. Once he was in position, my hard-on pressed against his moist hole. I shifted slightly until the head just touched the puckered flesh behind Charlie’s balls. “Ease down,” I told him. “You set the pace. You’re in charge.”

My cock entered his dark channel. The sensation was fucking incredible. It was all I could do not to plunge into him. But this was Charlie’s game. He had to take the initiative and set the pace.

His thighs shook as he lowered himself onto my fleshy spear. Beads of sweat broke out on his bronze forehead, and the muscles of his neck were rigid tendons.

“God, I feel full.”

“You are full.” I groaned. “Full of me. Oh, Charlie...”

He rocked, sliding down, then coming off me. He winced once or twice, and I knew he was feeling pain as the invasion assaulted his senses. Then the expression on his face showed pleasure, and I realized his discomfort was fading.

As he forced me deeper, I began to stroke his prostate repeatedly, and when that happened, his breathing grew harsher and more guttural. I reached for his cock and massaged it. In response, he threw back his head and rocked faster. Riding me now, he was fully impaled. He bounced up and down on me, and we matched our rhythm with hard thrusts. I could see the telltale hitching in his chest and felt his balls begin to pull up and tighten in preparation. His dick jerked in my hand, and I increased the pressure, stroking him harder and harder. He groaned and spewed a stream of pearly cum all over my chest and belly.

We both felt the explosion as his ass clamped down on me and

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his hips flexed. I grunted, tunneling into him as far as I could go. My cock spasmed and spilled seed into the condom.

We held our rigid positions for several heartbeats.

Eventually, my softening cock slipped out. I reached down to rescue the condom and dispose of it.

Charlie slid off and into my arms. "Sweet," he said. And fell asleep.

I drew the thin sheet up around us, shifting so that we were spooning. Then I slipped into deeply satisfying slumber.

\* \* \*

A noise awakened us. I came swimming out of a deep sleep to find Charlie's leg thrown over mine and his arms still around me.

I heard it again.

Breaking glass.

"Shit."

Charlie was off the bed in a heartbeat. He yanked on his shorts and tossed me my clothes before heading for the door, a T-shirt clutched in his big hand.

"Charlie," I whispered hoarsely, not wanting him to go charging downstairs before we had a chance to check out things.

He waved me into silence, then held his finger to his lips.

The sound came again. Definitely glass shattering.

"My studio!"

And he was gone. I heard his bare feet slap on the wooden stairs, and I ran after him, only a couple of strides behind him. Before he got to the studio, he made a sudden right, skidding into the hall. I heard a door open and slam shut and he returned, carrying a rifle. Fear surged through me as I followed him to the

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studio, where he threw himself inside, rifle held in both hands.

Something flickered and glowed in one corner of the big room, and I smelled the stench of burning gasoline. Charlie charged past me.

I remembered seeing a fire extinguisher in the kitchen, and I raced into the room and grabbed it.

I heard Charlie yelp and I ran back into the studio and began spraying the flames, the hiss of expanding CO<sup>2</sup> filling the room. The small fire sputtered and vanished under clouds of cold fumes.

Outside lights suddenly flared on, and we heard the roar of a heavy truck engine. I thought I also heard the sound of wild laughter, then silence fell as the vehicle sped away into the night. But not before we heard, “Faggot! Go back where you came from!”

So, the kid from Walgreens and his buddies had found me at Charlie’s, after all. I groped for the wall switch and blinked away tears as the studio exploded with light. Dark panes of glass reflected back our disheveled images except in two windows, where the glass had been shattered and lay in fragmented pools on the studio floor.

Charlie limped toward me, still clutching the rifle in his hands. He set it down against an easel and sagged into an old wooden chair, letting his face fall into his hands.

“Charlie?” As I reached out to touch his rigid shoulder, I saw blood on the floor. “Jesus, Charlie!”

I knelt and cradled his foot. A slice of glass wedged into his heel, and we both winced when I grabbed the piece between two fingers and eased it out. A fresh flow of blood poured down his foot, dripping onto the wooden floor.

I released his foot carefully and stood. “Keep your foot

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elevated. I'm going to get something to clean that gash. I'll call the cops while I'm out there—"

"No." Charlie sat bolt upright. "No cops. Don't call them, Tyler."

"Charlie, this isn't the same as some punks harassing me on the road. This was attempted murder."

"Murder? I doubt it. They just want to scare us."

"Yeah? Well they succeeded. You can't let them get away with it, Charlie."

"No cops, Tyler."

I knew better than to argue with that voice. I let my hand drop onto his stiff shoulder, then I withdrew it. At least for the time being, I would do as he wanted. "Fine, no cops. I'm still going to get some disinfectant."

Charlie tiredly gripped my hand, then let me go. I returned minutes later with Betadine and an antibiotic cream to find him sitting in the chair with the rifle in his lap. He had it jacked open, and when he saw me, he slammed it shut and set it back down. He winced as I treated the wound.

Slapping a gauze bandage over his heel, I said, "Try not to put too much weight on it. You got a broom?"

"Broom? For what?" He looked slightly dazed now. Was he going into shock?

"To sweep up the glass before you get cut again. Then we can survey the damage."

He told me where I could find a broom and dustpan, as well as a Shop Vac to suck up the tiny shards. I grabbed a large trash basket to hold the broken glass and soon had thoroughly cleaned the area.

Charlie and I inspected the room, making sure none of his



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paintings had been damaged. Then I suggested we delay talking about what had happened until the next morning when our heads would be clearer. Charlie offered no further argument. But he insisted on taking the rifle into the bedroom.

I led him back upstairs and gathered the thin sheet around his shoulders. This time, I tucked myself against his back and held him. Sleep was a lot longer coming to us than it had been earlier that night. Every so often, I would glance over at the rifle leaning against the nightstand beside the bed, looking menacing in the low moonlight that seeped through the windows. I wasn't sure if it scared me more than the punks did, or made me feel safer.

The space beside me in bed was empty when I awakened the next morning. I hurriedly dressed and ran downstairs, where I found Charlie in the studio surveying the damage. No sign of the rifle.

I could still smell the acrid stink of gasoline and scorched wood where the fire had burned. A flash of reflected light drew my attention to the brimming trash basket into which I'd swept the mess the night before. Sitting on top was the empty, shattered remnants of a Jack Daniels bottle I hadn't noticed in the chaos immediately after the fire. I held it up and met Charlie's troubled gaze.

"So, it was a badly designed Molotov cocktail that caused all this. If they'd had a single clue about what they were doing, this place would have been an inferno." I tossed the bottle back into the trash.

"Yeah, well, but they didn't have a clue, did they?"

"And maybe they're capable of learning."

He nodded tiredly and briefly met my eyes before letting them skate away again. "You're right. Which is why I think you should

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leave, Tyler. They'll crawl back into the woodwork if they think you're gone."

"Leave?" I growled. "Leave you alone here? I don't think so."

"Yes, leave. Today."

"No—"

"Tyler."

"Why would my leaving stop them? What if they decide you make a better target, all alone out here. What then?"

"I'll only call the cops if you go."

"You won't call them if I'm here, but if I promise to leave, you will?" I couldn't believe what he was saying. "That's blackmail."

"Actually, I think it's extortion," he said in a weary voice. "Please, Tyler."

Charlie refused to change his mind. In the end, I was forced to agree. I would catch the afternoon flight back to Toronto. I didn't have to like it, but at least I knew Charlie would be bringing in the police to deal with the attempted arson. He was on the phone with them when I left to pack.

As I drove back toward the highway that would take me to the airport, I passed a sheriff's cruiser heading in the direction of Charlie's place. I couldn't be sure, but I swore the cop inside the patrol car watched me with cold eyes as I passed him.

I arrived in Toronto to find a message from Charlie. Instead of calling the Blackberry to make sure he reached me, he had called my home phone. Coward.

"The police will be watching the place. I gave them the description of the kid in the drug store, and they'll look into him and his friends. Everything is fine, Tyler."

"Liar," I muttered as I deleted the message. I climbed to the third floor and checked on the aquarium. All was well with my

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fishy roommates. I thawed some bloodworms for them, then tried to decide if I was hungry, too.

I wasn't. Instead, I cracked open a Steam Whistle, thinking maybe the alcohol would help relax me, but it only seemed to make me antsy. I turned on the TV and tried to lose myself in a reality program, but couldn't concentrate.

When the phone rang, I snatched it up and barked, "Yes?"

Michael's startled voice on the other end deflated my anxiety. "Tyler? What the devil is going on? Where have you been?"

I rubbed the bridge of my nose tiredly while I told him everything, feeling some relief at being able to unload.

"I'll be right over."

When I tried to protest, he told me to shut up. I did. Michael in this mood was not something I was used to.

He showed up thirty minutes later with Donny in tow. After hugging me, he made me sit at the kitchen table while he poured me another beer and had me go over what had happened in Gatlinburg one more time.

"And you're sure he called the police like he said?"

"I saw them arriving. But whether they'll do anything is another story."

"It always is, isn't it?" Michael said grimly.

"Absolutely," Donny chimed in.

"You know, there is growing sensitivity to violence targeting gays, especially after the Matthew Shepard case," Michael added. "Cops don't want to be accused of looking the other way, even when they want to."

"That's true." I thought back to the tragic incident in which the young gay man was beaten and left to die in rural Wyoming. Two days later, he did die, drawing national attention to the

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consequences of hate crimes against gays. Similar things happened in Canada, too.

Michael went on, "If it was anybody but Charlie, I'd call the damned media, see if I could get them interested in a hate crime piece. Local rednecks harass well-known artist."

"You can't do that," I said, aghast. "How would Charlie react if reporters started coming around asking him about his gayness? He'd freak."

"That's what I mean about anybody but Charlie." Michael sighed. "So we just wait to see if anything happens."

"You're fucking cheery, aren't you?" I snapped. Then I bit my lip. "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

"We're here for you, Tyler. Aren't we, Donny?"

"All the way, man."

"Thanks, guys. That means a lot." I slumped in my chair, my beer bottle cradled in both hands. I raised it to my mouth and drank half.

"Do you want us to stay?" Donny asked, trading looks with Michael. "Tyler?"

"No, that's okay. Charlie's probably right, the assholes that did this will crawl back into their holes. Charlie's a local boy. And famous. It won't look good for them to hassle someone from their neck of the woods who made good."

"Yeah, it'd bring too much heat down on them." Michael stood. "Well, if you're sure..."

"I am. Thanks, Michael. Donny."

"Call us if anything else happens. I mean it, Tyler."

"I will."

I saw them out and made my way back to the third floor, where I crawled into bed, knowing it was going to be a long time before I

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got to sleep.

The next day, I forced myself to go back to the project site. My crew acted like they'd been expecting me, and we all fell right back into the routine.

Excellent progress had been made, and when I charted it out, we were still bang on schedule. The shack had been razed and was now home to a planted patch of dogwood. The area by the willow had been carefully cleaned by hand, and several wild native ferns looked to be taking root nicely around the broad, shadowy base where not much else would grow.

I oversaw the planting of several trilliums, the provincial flower and a protected species. I also made sure that nearly a dozen yellow lady-slippers, another rare native plant, were placed where they would flourish. In one of the farthest corners of the fifty-acre lot, a bulldozer cleared a site for the mature trees that were being brought in the next week.

All in all, it was a very productive day. So why did I feel like shit when I climbed out of the Land Rover and trudged into the house?

Simple. Because Charlie wasn't there.

And I didn't know if he ever would be again.

## CHAPTER 7

I knew Charlie was going through some heavy shit. It couldn't be easy—gay in a small town where people looked at anyone “different” with suspicion. His fame no doubt helped him. People tolerated a lot more from famous people. Look at Michael Jackson. Elvis. Howard Hughes.

I would be the first to admit I had no idea what it was like being from a small town. I grew up in Mississauga, the industrial city adjacent to Toronto, and later moved to Toronto, itself, a hub of Canadian culture. Over the years, I'd spent extended amounts of time in Halifax and Vancouver...even hung out in West Hollywood for six months. All were big cities supporting thriving gay communities that had a certain degree of political clout.

Like Charlie, Michael had also come from a hick town...

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somewhere in the prairies. According to him, folks there hadn't had a clue how to deal with him. In the end, they hadn't had to since he'd packed up and left at fourteen. I had never gotten a clear report from him of what he had done for the next few years, but I had the feeling it hadn't been pretty. He wouldn't talk about his past, and I'd never had the balls to press him. About the only thing he ever did confide was that he had never seen his family since the day he'd left home.

Charlie hadn't had to hustle on the streets to survive, like I suspect Michael had, but he had been taken advantage of by a trusted figure—his college advisor. In my book, that was abuse, even if the victim hadn't been underage. And to this day, he was vulnerable. After all, he had had no support from family or friends because he hadn't been able to come out to them. Nobody had been there for Charlie Reid.

Until now.

I loved him. And his happiness meant more to me than my own. But his decision to keep his sexuality secret wasn't going to make him or anyone else—least of all, me—happy.

I would keep his secret. But I also knew I couldn't live easily with that kind of lie. I didn't want to sneak around, skulking at back doors so no one would see me or suspect what I was doing. If I loved someone, I wanted him with me. By my side. My partner. Openly.

Charlie and I were at a stalemate.

I hoped he would keep seeing his counselor. She'd helped him a lot, as far as I could tell. Maybe she could help him with this. If he let her. But if he opted to crawl back into his hole because it was safer, would he ever make it out again?

The next few weeks passed in an uneasy blur. I got a lot of

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work done, throwing myself into it with a cold zeal that fooled most people. More than one report from Thurlow indicated how impressed he was with our progress and my dedicated professionalism. That and a five-spot bought a coffee at Starbucks.

Maybe I needed to take a vacation after the project was over. If the work met its deadline and stayed within budget, both of which were looking good, I was due the large bonus Thurlow had negotiated as the incentive part of our contract. With the money, I could take that trip to Great Britain I'd been thinking about for years. I wanted to visit famous English gardens and maybe look up some Irish relatives on a side trip to the Emerald Isle, if I could swing it. Anything would be better than sitting around at home alone, moping over lost chances.

Back in my callow youth, I probably would have gone out and found some young twink to power fuck, just to prove the problem wasn't mine. The thought didn't appeal to me at all. Instead, I drove to the clinic and got a full-spectrum STD test. Hooray for the age of enlightenment.

When the tests came back negative, I filed away the knowledge in my box of things to show Charlie, whenever he came back. I refused to think, *if ever he came back*. I simply couldn't see a life that never included Charlie again, so I kept telling myself, "Well, wait until I show him this." Or I'd think, "Wait until he sees that." From callow youth to middle-age fool. Maturity sucks.

Summer ended; fall kicked in. I started seeing blurs of red and gold in the masses of green I passed every day on the drive out to Lynx Woods. The evenings grew chilly, and just as I did every year around this time, I thought of having the fireplace cleaned and readied for use. It would be fun to sit in front of a blazing fire and drink brandy. Jesus, what a picture. Next thing, I'd be buying a



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smoking jacket and a hunting dog to sit by my side.

I wondered what Tennessee was like this time of year.

I called. Several times. Sometimes he answered, sometimes he didn't. Even when he did, he wasn't really there for me. He'd tell me he was fine. The paintings were nearly done. Thurlow would be pleased.

"Fuck Thurlow," I told him once. "I want to know about you, Charlie. How are you? Talk to me."

Fine, was all he ever said. He was doing just fine.

Bullshit.

The rain arrived that we hadn't had all summer, coming down like a pile driver. Roads flooded, and storm drains refused to handle the overload. Up in Lynx Woods, the first test of my design came earlier than I'd hoped. Would the newly applied soil hold? Would the plants that were in place to help prevent floods and washouts do their job, or would everything wash away in a ruinous cloud of silt?

After a storm had raged all night, I drove the Land Rover through the battering winds and rain to see firsthand if my career was going to tank, along with all that expensive landscaping. I plowed through a road transformed overnight into viscous mud, bouncing and sending sheets of slime hurtling up over the vehicle's once-white exterior. I couldn't see more than a few yards in front of me, so when I rounded the last bend that took me into Lynx Woods, I couldn't tell if anything still stood. Maybe the whole area was nothing but a desolate, moon-surface wasteland.

Then I caught a break in the driving rain. The first thing I saw was the willow, its golden fronds whipping in the gale force winds, its top bent in supplication. Lightning flared overhead, and shortly afterward, I heard the crack of thunder. Then I caught a glimpse of

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the river, its normally placid surface whipped into wild turbulence. It sucked at the riverbank and tried to drag the land into its watery embrace.

But not only had the ground endured the full frontal assault, but everywhere I looked, the trees and other plantings that had been selected and planted so painstakingly were still there, withstanding the worst the weather gods could throw at them. Vindicated, I threw the Land Rover into reverse and bumped my way back out onto the road. I had known my design was sound, but it was always nice to be proven right.

I roared back down the rough gravel road between swaying trees, humming something tuneless to the musical thunder of rain on the roof. The windshield wipers clacked, sweeping away torrents of water, only to be inundated again. I was glad this road saw almost zero traffic. I would hate to be competing with other vehicles, with the visibility as bad as it was. Lightning flared flashbulb bright, followed closely by a thunderous roar so loud I was instantly deafened. I barely heard the crack of wood, but never saw the tree that came down in my path.

The Land Rover slammed into it head-on, slewed sideways, and crashed into it again. My head connected with the wheel, then with the side window. Light and pain jolted simultaneously through me, followed instantly by a welcoming numbness. Darkness offered relief, and I embraced it, sliding down into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Pain.

Okay, pain was good. Pain was nature's way of saying, "I'm

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hurt, but I'm alive, now get me the hell out of here." Nature, on the other hand, could be a royal bitch.

I couldn't move.

Panic flared, and I tried to shout. Nothing emerged. More panic. My heart rammed my chest so hard, I could barely breathe. My lungs screamed in agony.

Something warm and wet trickled down my forehead. I licked my lips and tasted blood. My adrenaline rush faded, leaving me dizzy and feeling slow and mentally sluggish. I tried to move in small increments.

Arms first. I shifted my right arm and brushed my thighs, then touched my chest. So far, so good. But the left arm wasn't responding at all. When I tried to mobilize it, I felt like I was sending a message into a void. Then I realized it was pinned between my body and the door.

Okay, I needed to free my arm.

My legs responded sluggishly, but they did move. Thank God. So far it didn't look like anything was broken. I managed to brace my legs against the floorboard and inched my bruised body into a more or less upright position. There was still no feeling in my left arm.

I hadn't been traveling fast when I'd been ambushed by the tree, which was probably why I was still among the living. And I'd been wearing my seat belt. But the ancient vehicle had no concept of air bags in its lineage, which explained why my body was fast awakening into one, massive, all-over ache.

Each part of me clamored for attention. But my fuzzy brain interpreted it all the same way: pain. Throbbing, mind-numbing pain.

As I became more conscious, I grew aware of external sounds.

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Rain still pounded on the roof. Thunder still rumbled, but now it seemed distant, as though the storm had done what it had come to do and could move on.

Feeling started coming back into my left arm. I immediately began to regret it. I also suspected I was wrong about not breaking anything. I was very much afraid that limb was, indeed, fractured. I needed to get to a hospital.

A whole new issue began crowding in on me.

I was in the middle of nowhere. How was I going to get out of there? I leaned forward slightly, sucking in air as the agony in my arm awoke and surged to new levels. With my good hand, I managed to reach for the key that was still in the ignition. I cranked it and heard...nothing. I was afraid the old beast had finally given up the ghost for good this time. I tried one more time, just to be sure, but there wasn't even a click. I let my hand drop away, and my forehead touched the steering wheel. Despair enveloped me.

How was I going to get out of there?

Nobody knew where I was. It was the weekend. I had made no plans with anyone. There was no place that, if I didn't show up, someone would notice and grow concerned. This section of road led only to Lynx Woods. No one would have reason to travel it except the odd farmer or two. And even they wouldn't be out in this kind of weather. Until someone realized I wasn't showing up at the Lynx Woods job site, I was a nonperson.

With temperatures dropping close to freezing at night, I was very much afraid I wouldn't make it long enough to be rescued. Exposure was a very real concern. I had to leave the vehicle and walk to where I stood a better chance of being spotted.

After several tries, I managed to release the seatbelt. Then I

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twisted and tried to pop open the driver's door. My arm shrieked in agony, and a gray pall settled over my vision. I struggled not to black out. I had to get out of there, pain or no pain. I edged around a little more, using my legs and butt to move me, trying to avoid jarring the arm.

Waves of nausea assaulted me, and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead, stinging the cuts on my face. I persisted, inch by inch, until I could wrap my good hand around the door handle. I jabbed down on it.

It didn't move.

*Don't do this to me. That would be a rotten trick, to trap me in this ancient piece of shit to freeze to death.* I bunched the muscles of my arm and pressed down with all my fading strength. The handle swung and the door popped open, spilling me onto the ground.

I screamed as my broken arm folded under me and took all my weight. This time there was no neat fade-to-black. This time, I passed out.

I awakened to find myself lying in a puddle of muddy, sour-smelling water. I rolled away from it onto my good side and managed to prop myself against the side of the Land Rover. My head felt woozy, and I wondered if it was a good idea to try to stand.

"Gotta get moving, buddy," I forced myself to speak aloud. Concentrating on the sound of my own voice, loud in the preternatural silence around me, I kept trying. "Up and at 'em. Nap time's over. Move."

I grabbed the rear door handle, and using the vehicle as a brace, dragged myself to my feet. At first they didn't want to stay under me, but eventually they got the hang of what I wanted from them,

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and they kept me upright. More or less.

The command to walk would have elicited giggles from the rest of my body, if any of those parts had been listening. As it was, I remained still for a long time, leaning against the Land Rover, swaying drunkenly on traitorous feet.

As I listened to my teeth chattering together, I knew I had to get going. I forced my wooden feet to take shuffling steps. I might have been moving like a drunken sailor after six years at sea, but at least I *was* moving.

My first major obstacle was to get around the tree that had caused the whole mess. I gritted my teeth and held my left arm against my chest to minimize the jolting it took at each step, and edged around the black bulk in the middle of the gravel road. I nearly fell twice, but I kept grabbing at branches and stayed upright. Then I was around it, and nothing lay before me but a clear path.

I kept to a straight line down the middle of the road, more or less. I couldn't have told anyone how fast I moved, or how long I was out there. I only knew it was an experience I never wanted to repeat.

My Blackberry was still in its holster on my belt, and I pulled it out. Waterlogged, with a cracked case, it gave me no signal. So much for a phone call. I trudged on. Waves of pain rolled over me and my consciousness faded in and out, but I pressed on, all too aware of what the alternative was.

He never told me his name, my good Samaritan. He appeared ahead of me after I'd been staggering for what seemed like days, but was probably only an hour or so. The beat-up, old Ford he drove shook and grumbled and belched smoke as he pulled to a stop in front of me and threw open the driver's door.

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"You're one sorry lookin' son of a bitch," he greeted me, and gently took hold of my uninjured arm. "And you're a long way from the nearest hospital, which I'd say is a real shame, cause if anyone needed a hospital real bad, it's you."

I couldn't have agreed with him more.

The stranger talked nonstop as he helped me into the warm cab of his pickup and all through the ride to the hospital, too. I would have married him and raised his children if he had wanted me to.

At the hospital, he got an orderly to help into a wheelchair, then with quiet aplomb he said, "Well, I have to get back to the missus. She'll be wondering what's kept me. You take care of yourself, now. Hear?"

And he was gone in a plume of oily smoke.

"Who the hell was he?" the orderly demanded. He started wheeling me inside. "He shouldn't just drop you off. He should have come in and got you admitted. Who is he, your dad?"

"Don't know," I managed to say around numb, swollen lips, realizing that he'd never told anyone his name. "He found me... I had an accident..."

"Car accident? Hit and run? Did he run into you? Is that why he was in such a hurry to leave?"

"No," I whispered, knowing I'd never be able to get this man to understand. "Hit a tree."

We were inside the hospital then. Someone gently lifted me out of the wheelchair and put me up onto a gurney. Someone else began cutting away my shirt. I could hear them talking. Their voices were moving farther away from me every second. I was suddenly very tired. It was impossible to keep my eyes open.

So I drifted off.

At least this time, I was warm.

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\* \* \*

I awoke slowly, for the third or fourth time, blinking with growing awareness of my surroundings. I finally opened my eyes all the way and realized I was still in the hospital room where I had first awakened an unknown length of time before.

Michael sat in a chair beside the bed reading *Women's Wear Daily* with a disbelieving look on his lean face. When I moved, he dropped the magazine and was at my side in an instant. "Tyler! Jesus, man, I thought you were never going to wake up."

"Hey, aren't you the one always telling me I need my beauty sleep?"

"Not enough sleep in the world for you, sugar." Michael said the same thing he said every time we told that lame joke. But now, his voice broke, and he had unformed tears in his eyes.

"Aw, Michael... It's not so bad..."

Then I did something I'd never done before. I broke down and bawled like a baby.

Instantly, Michael sat on the bed and took me in his arms. He clucked like a silly mother hen to calm me, and I was damned if I didn't respond. My tears subsided to a trickle.

I had a soft hitch in my voice when I spoke again. "I thought I was dead," I whispered. "I was sure I'd never get out of there."

"Shush, baby. You're safe now. You'll be all better soon."

"You know what the worst of it was?" I struggled into a sitting position, but never let go of Michael. I clung to him like he was a lifeline. "Knowing that there was no one who would even notice I was gone. I could have sat out there for days and not one person would have said, 'Hey, anyone know where Tyler is?' How did I fuck up my life so badly, Michael? Can you tell me that?"



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“You didn’t fuck up, hon. You just forgot who your friends are. Even Kat was asking after you. Just stop shutting us out, and I guarantee you the next time you decide to dance with a tree, someone will notice you’re not around.”

I clung to him and felt his surprisingly strong arms around my shoulders. Had he always been this strong and I hadn’t noticed?

“You’re a lot smarter than I ever gave you credit for, aren’t you?”

“Hey, you didn’t want smart from me. What we had wasn’t about that. We both knew that going in. I would have dyed my hair blond”—Michael patted his brown curly head—“but why mess with perfection? Face it, Tyler, you wanted eye candy.”

I winced. True or not, who wants to hear it laid out so baldly?

“What about Donny? What does he want?”

“Funny thing, Donny and I started out as just friends. I know you used to think we were fucking all the time, but in the beginning all we did was talk. Well, I talked, and he listened. Then it’s like I woke up one day and saw this gorgeous hunk in place of my friend, and he was looking at me the same way, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

No doubt Donny had earned the right to hear Michael’s story, and it had helped forge a stronger bond with them. I suddenly envied Donny.

Michael saw the look on my face and kissed me. “Listen, sugar. You can’t go on like this. Tearing yourself apart. You have to tell Charlie what he means to you, and let him know you’re there for him. But you can’t tie yourself into knots waiting for a man who hides from himself. Tell him and move on.”

“Tell him and move on.” Suddenly, my throat felt dry. Give up on the idea of Charlie and me? Could I really do that? “But—”

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"If he loves you as much as I think he does, he'll come through," Michael said firmly.

I guess that's what it always came down to. Is someone's love strong enough to carry them through? My love for Charlie could raise mountains, but if he wasn't willing to accept it, what difference did it make?

I felt the tears start again. This time, Michael held me while I wept and let me cry it out. Maybe he knew I needed the cathartic tears.

I thought I heard the door open, but before I could react, Michael said fiercely, "Can't you just leave us alone?"

The door shut, and I knew we were alone again in the room.

"Michael—" I said in a strangled voice.

"Hush. Silly cow can go somewhere else to peddle her pills."

Michael continued to cradle me in his arms, our heads resting together. I felt strangely comforted by this reversal of roles.

"I'm there for you, Tyler. You were always good to me. I won't forget that. Neither will Donny."

"Good to you? How the hell can you say that? I was the bastard who kept you around as a convenient fuck."

"For two years I was safe, Tyler. For two years I wasn't afraid to go home. You have no idea how wonderful that is after everything I've... Well, after everything. Plus, I never would have met Donny and gotten a chance to become friends with him. Because of you, he and I were able to be much more to each other than we would have been under other circumstances." He kissed the top of my head. "So shut the fuck up about what a bastard you were. You don't know what a real bastard is. I could introduce you to some, except I swore I'd never go back to that place."

I thought the damned tears were going to come again. The

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drugs must have been making me maudlin. As though to prove the point, I was swept up in a massive, jaw-splitting yawn.

“You need to get some rest, sugar.”

“You’re right.” Suddenly, I could barely keep my eyes open. “Will you come and see me again?”

“Sugar, I’ll be here to take you home tomorrow. They won’t be keeping you. Not when they need these beds for sick people.”

He tucked me in and leaned down to press his warm mouth to mine. I kissed him back with a fervor that startled both of us.

“Baby, if I weren’t a married man, I’d be giving the next nurse brave enough to walk in here a real eyeful. Now cut that out.”

I laughed shakily, but lay back on the bed as instructed. He straightened my covers again, but refrained from any more contact.

“I love you, Tyler. You take care of yourself.”

“You too, Michael. And if Donny doesn’t take care of you, then you know you’re always welcome at my place. And not as eye candy, either.”

Michael’s beautiful face lit up. He blew a kiss at me, then slipped out of the room.

I burrowed into stiff hospital sheets that smelled of bleach and within minutes, was out of it.

My last conscious thought was about Charlie.

\* \* \*

Michael was true to his word and arrived the next day just before the hospital released me. He brought a change of clothes. I just looked at him stupidly when he handed me the bag.

“I still have a key to your place,” he said with a lopsided grin. “You never asked for it back. I’m surprised you haven’t changed

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the locks.”

“Hey, if you intend to steal anything, go ahead. Feel free.” I drew out an old, soft, over-sized shirt perfect for putting on over the arm cast. “Far as I’m concerned, I owe you my damned life.”

I had spent most of the morning on the phone to my insurance company and the shop that had towed my Land Rover the day before. After translating mechanic doublespeak, I figured out that the vehicle was a write-off. That fit with what my doctor had told me—if I’d been going even ten miles an hour faster, I’d probably be dead or living out my life as a vegetable.

The insurance people weren’t happy, and the money I’d eventually receive wasn’t going to cover the cost of a new vehicle. But the bottom line was, I was going to have to buy a replacement with or without help from my insurance. I intended to get one built in this century that had a nodding acquaintance with the concept of safety. However, my current situation also meant that, in the short term, I was without a mode of transportation. I’d have to remedy that, and soon. I had a job to finish, one requiring reliable wheels that could handle back roads. Until I had time to buy a vehicle, I’d have to rent one. Fortunately, it looked like my insurance company would be on the hook for that cost, at least.

Michael helped me dress. It was awkward, getting the shirt on over the cast. Thank God it was my left arm. I could still function in basic mode.

“Come on, lover,” Michael said. “Let’s get you home.” He had brought a wheelchair with him, and now he helped me into the thing and guided me down the hall toward the main entrance.

I hated hospitals. For one thing, they all smelled the same. I don’t know if it was the type of disinfectant used, or what, but the odor was always bad. And the color schemes were horrendous. The

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same guy must paint all the hospitals in the world with the identical puke green and stool brown. I was so glad to get out of that place

I let Michael wheel me out into the sunlight. I had closed my eyes, only to open them to shards of blinding light shooting off the gleaming hoods of nearby cars. The sudden brightness brought tears to my eyes. I blinked away the pain and hunched over in the chair to keep my face averted, wishing I had sunglasses. Like the ones in the glove box of my Land Rover.

Michael helped me into his Mazda, and after returning the wheelchair, slid his lithe young body behind the wheel and sped away.

He chattered all the way to my place. "I'll get you settled, then I have to run and do some errands. I'll be back later to see if you need anything. Now you remember what the doctor said, no showers, don't get the cast wet and for God's sake, don't try to use that arm. Not for a few days at least."

"Yes, Mother."

Michael ignored my sarcasm. "Any requests for dinner? Put 'em in now, or take what I bring. Don't worry, I'll stick with stuff that's easy to eat one-handed, that doesn't need much slicing or dicing."

I tried to think about eating. I figured there were still drugs in my system since I had next to no appetite. Still, I had to eat something. "I don't know. Something light. My appetite's still in the toilet."

"Charming. Well, I'll find something to tempt you. We have to get you eating again. You look downright haggard."

It wasn't until I got to my place that I realized what an understatement that was. Michael followed me up to the third

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floor. Before he could stop me, I was in the bathroom, standing in front of the vanity mirror. I stared at my ruined face. The doctors reinforced my hazy memory of the accident by telling me that I had hit my face on the steering wheel on the first impact. I had followed that with a blow to the side of my head off the door panel. I was lucky not to have a concussion or worse. I did have a set of black eyes that made me look like a bearded raccoon, along with a swollen mouth.

“Jesus,” I muttered.

I heard Michael curse, then he was beside me, dragging me away. “What the hell are you doing? How you look right now isn’t important.”

“Oh?” I asked grimly. “Because there’s no one to see me?”

“No,” he snapped. “Because you’re alive, and that’s more important than bruises that will fade.”

Michael was right. Still, it was hard to look at the mess of my face and think it would ever heal.

He got me undressed and helped me into a short silk robe and boxers that would enable me to move around the house in comfort. He put a bottle of water by the bed, told me not to traipse up and down the stairs, and reminded me again to take it easy. After making sure my pain killers were within easy reach and left open so I wouldn’t have to fight a childproof cap, he left.

I sat back on the bed, propped against the headboard, with the TV remote near my good hand. I flicked on the tube and drank some of the water while I watched an inane game show that made absolutely no sense, but seemed to have everybody on it very excited. I could barely pay attention. I left on the TV, as much for company as to see what might be next.

I must have dozed. The phone startled me awake. I grabbed it

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and snapped, “Yes?”

Jessie was on the other end. “Tyler? You are home. That must mean you’re better. Thank God—”

“How’d you know what happened?”

“Your friend, what’s his name...Michael? He called. Said he got my number out of your day planner and thought we’d like to know what’s going on. Sounds like you had a rough few days.”

“Yeah, well. I’ve had better.” I watched the TV game host being bounced around in the arms of an overweight contestant. “How are things at the site? Was there any lingering storm damage?”

“Nothing to worry about. The site held up very well, actually. You’d have been proud. I know Mr. Thurlow was calling every five minutes when we didn’t know where you were, asking about the status of the project. I think he finally understands that you’ve done such a good job with the design, not even a storm like that could set back the project. Now he thinks you’re some kind of genius.”

“You mean he didn’t know that already?”

“Ha. Any idea when you’ll be back onsite?”

“Not for at least a week.” I grimaced. “I’ve been ordered to rest by the doctor.”

“So if I see you around here anytime soon, I can boot your ass out of the place? Cool.”

“Not if you value your job.”

She laughed and soon after told me to take care of myself and hung up. The really bad game show had been replaced by an equally deplorable teenage angst show tackling some major life issue. It was more than I could handle. I started channel-surfing.

Michael showed up around six o’clock. He had take-out

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Szechwan, which always used to be one of our favorite lazy day, in-bed meals. It proved surprisingly tasty given my lack of appetite. I finished a whole plateful and lay back on the bed, sipping green tea.

“Thanks, Michael.”

He dumped all the leftovers into the paper sack the restaurant had given him and sank onto the bed next to me. “I’ll put this in the fridge. It’ll be easy to heat up for lunch tomorrow. I’ll bring something over for supper.”

“You’re too damned good to me, Michael.” I leaned into him and put my good arm around his slender shoulders. His head came down on my chest. We sat like that for a while, then he raised his head and kissed me. It wasn’t an erotic kiss. If it had been, I wasn’t sure how I would have responded. Part of me wouldn’t have had any trouble going to bed with Michael. I remembered how damned good he was. But the thinking part knew it wouldn’t be the best idea. Michael would only end up feeling bad for cheating on Donny. And I’d just feel bad.

Fortunately, Michael’s thinking part was in tune with mine, and he pulled away before the kiss could change to something more. He patted my shoulder awkwardly. “I’ll see myself out. You have a good night, Tyler. And—”

“I know, I know. No shower. No physical activity. No nothing.”

“Self-pity becomes you, sugar.” Michael grinned at my discomfort. “You’ll live through this. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right.”

I managed to stay awake until nearly nine o’clock, then boredom and a strange lethargy overcame me that probably came from inactivity and drugs. I fell asleep. I woke to the pulse of the



TV light glowing and flickering across my bare legs. I killed the TV and clumsily maneuvered around to get under the covers. Once I got comfortable, it wasn't long before I fell asleep again. I didn't wake up until the phone jerked me out of a dream I was loathe to leave.

I snatched the handset, thumbed it on, and snarled, "What?"

"My, my, grumpy bear." Michael sounded so disgustingly cheerful I would have throttled the man if he'd been in the room. But then, he had a reason to be cheerful. He'd spent the night with the man he loved. I'd spent mine in wistfully erotic dreams that left my damned sheets stained and my heart heavy.

I rubbed my raspy face and grimaced. "Sorry. I was in the middle of a dream and you startled me."

"A juicy one, I hope."

"Yeah," I muttered. "And now I have to change the fucking sheets."

Michael hooted with laughter and after a while, I had to join in. "There," he said in obvious satisfaction. "That's what I want to hear."

"Will you be over later?" I was surprised at how eager I was to hear him say yes. I examined my new feelings for Michael and knew I didn't love him. Not like that. But he was turning out to be wonderful company now that the complications of sex and cohabiting were removed from the equation.

"Donny and I will drop by, but we can't stay long. We have tickets for *La Bohème*."

"When did you become an opera fan?"

"Donny's teaching me. It's actually interesting, once you get past the language and the dreadful costumes."

"What else is there?"

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“The stories!” Michael enthused. “The music, too. It’s so...powerful.”

“Nah, that’s just acoustics.”

“You’re laughing at me.” Michael ruined his outraged act by giggling. “It is fun.”

“You say so. I’ll stick to jazz.”

“Anyway, we will come by for supper. Something quick again, maybe pizza?”

“Pizza sounds good. Lots of anchovies.”

“Why not just use the fish you’ve already got there? I’m sure Donny would help you catch them.”

“Not salty enough.”

We made small talk for a few more minutes, then he had to go. I faced the prospect of an endless day with nothing but TV and my non-communicative fish to keep me company.

Which is probably as good an explanation as any for why I did what I did.

I emailed Charlie again.

*Dear Charlie,*

*Maybe you’ve already written off what we had. Maybe I’m wrong to intrude in your life without you asking me to. But I sit here and think about what we had, and I can’t let that go without a fight. At least, I thought we had something. Something good. Incredible, even. All my life I’ve waited for a man like you without even knowing it. You make me laugh, you make me cry, most of all you make me so hot, I can’t think straight when I’m around you. Even when I’m not around you, I*

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*dream of your perfect body.*

*I guess what I'm trying to say is, I love you, Charlie. I will probably always love you. But I have come to realize that I can't live as a shadow man, hiding from people who can't tolerate anyone who is different from them. If I turn into a liar to placate those people, then my whole life becomes a lie. I'm not sure even my love for you can survive that.*

*So this becomes the hardest letter I have ever written to anyone. I love you. I want you to know that. But I have to move on. I hope some day you can come to terms with who you are and be happy. That means more to me than anything else.*

*I love you, man. Take care of yourself.*

I finished the email and abruptly got up from the computer. Pacing the length of the bedroom, I paused by the aquarium, then moved to the front of the room where I looked down on Broadview. A streetcar rumbled past, stopping only to discharge and pick up new passengers. Then it moved on, out of my view.

I came back to stand in front of the computer, staring at the screen. The words blurred in my vision. But I didn't need to see them to know what they said.

"Good-bye, Charlie," I whispered as I hit the send key.

## CHAPTER 8

Time passed in a blur. My arm began to heal. So did my face, the nasty purple and blue bruises fading to a sickly green and yellow. My arm ached and itched, and I knew I was going to have my own internal weather barometer from that point on. I wrested a rental vehicle from the insurance company, but was informed that I'd have to pay for an upgrade if I wanted 4-wheel drive. I had to think about that. Did I want it? Once I was hooked up with serious wheels, I'd have to go back to the project site...something I should have been eager to do, but for some reason, felt strangely reluctant about. Cold feet from the accident?

I made a point to check my email only once a day or less. There was the usual spam waiting to be deleted, some emails from old clients who liked to keep in touch, an occasional message from

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someone who knew my work. I ignored them all. A feeling of depression settled over me every time I closed my email program, and I did my best to deny the emotion.

Michael came by. Sometimes with Donny, sometimes alone. I let him drag me out to clubs, and I went through the motions of having a good time. We even visited the Tangerine Dream, where Kat fell onto my lap and declared she had pined away to a shadow without me. Then she asked slyly where the hunk was.

I knew damned well who she meant, but played dumb. “What hunk? I’m surrounded by them, sweetheart.”

“Hah, not like that one. You know who I mean, you’re just playing cute.”

“I told you he was just here on business.”

“And you let him get away—”

“Can it, Johnny.” Michael used Kat’s real name. “Just leave it alone, okay?”

Kat eyes moved from Michael to me, then a look of dawning awareness lit her long face. “Ah, it’s like that, is it? Sorry, Tyler. So, how’s your arm, anyway?”

Other people came up to me that night. People I knew only vaguely, but who seemed to know me well enough to ask after my health, and in many cases, my business. Apparently, I wasn’t quite as isolated as I had thought.

By the time Michael and Donny deposited me back home, I was feeling pretty good about myself. Which is why I decided to stop hiding out on the third floor and made up my mind it was time to go back to work.

I drove out to the project site the next day.

Lynx Woods looked good. If there had been any residual damage from the storm, it had long since been removed. I saw no

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sign of the tree that had taken me out that fateful night.

Jessie spotted me and came over with Karl and the others. They waited until I clambered awkwardly out of the rented Explorer and dropped to the ground before they crowded around me.

“Looking good, boss,” Karl said.

“So’s this place. You guys have done great work. I’m impressed.”

“Hey, you taught us well.”

I grunted.

They followed me as I strolled to the river and stopped on the rocky shore overlooking the placid water. “The opening’s supposed to be next Thursday. Mr. Thurlow expects to bring all those political bigwigs out here. I want to know now if there’s anything we’ve missed.”

“We’ll be ready,” Jessie said. “The gravel for the parking lot will be delivered first thing Monday. The grader crew will be out on Tuesday to level it.”

“Good. Then I think we are truly set.”

To say the site was transformed, was an understatement. I knew all those “before” pictures were going to look incredible next to the “after” shots I was about to take. I hefted the camera, experimenting with it until I found a hold that enabled me to take pictures even though my injured arm made the process awkward. I handed off the video to Jessie. “Let’s do it, then.”

They walked with me as I spent the rest of the day strolling the entire fifty acres. They pointed out things to my restless eye. I managed to snap the equivalent of a triple roll of film, while Jessie followed and videoed what could have been a feature-length movie. I was going to be busy editing all the footage. We wound up back at the willow, where I took nearly a dozen pictures from

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every angle.

"Now let me get back and check these out. If we're green, I'll let you know, but so far I'd say everything's perfect. Congratulations, guys. You'll pulled off another success. Biggest one yet, too."

I shook everyone's hands.

Clapping Jessie on the back, I said to her, "Next project, you're my site foreman. Is that fair?"

Jessie grinned, and the others all hooted and punched her in the arm or slapped her back.

"Teacher's pet."

"Suck up."

"Hey, not fair." Karl laughed. "How are we supposed to accuse her of sleeping her way to the top if the boss is gay?"

"Well then it's a good thing I didn't make you foreman, isn't it, Karl?"

Everybody roared with laughter. It was a good conclusion to a rough project.

I was exhausted. I knew I wasn't used to that kind of activity, so the tiredness wasn't any big surprise. What did surprise me, was how great I felt. We had done a good thing in Lynx Woods. Not only in terms of completing the project in the time frame allotted, but also in the way we had brought a dead landscape back to vibrant life.

"You can be proud of yourselves," I said as we gathered one last time around the cooler with drinks in our hands. "So let's call it a day. One last time up here tomorrow to make sure we didn't overlook anything, then we can call it a wrap."

"When will you call Mr. Thurlow?" Jessie asked.

"Tomorrow, I think."

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That night, I uploaded all the digital images to my laptop and began culling through them. After due consideration, I picked out a dozen of the best and printed them on my color laser. Then I went back through the original “before” shots, hunting for the worst of the bunch. I had a large number to choose from. I made sure to include a few pictures of the dump site we had finished clearing only the week before.

The entire fifty-acre site had been a magnet for illegal dumpers who didn’t want to pay fees to legally dispose of their garbage. The stuff had seemed to gather at one spot. I had brought in a recycling company to sort through it all. I’d had them compile a list of what they’d found and planned to include it in the final report, along with visual images. It was a powerful indictment.

I scanned the garbage list. I already knew most of the items on it. Eleven mattresses. Two entire bed sets. Thirty-seven appliances, ranging from toasters to refrigerators. Forty-six computers and another seventy-two monitors. Kitchen sinks to car tires. Enough sofas and easy chairs to stock a furniture store. A ton of newsprint, magazines, and just plain paper. One hundred and twenty-nine mostly sealed bags of garbage. We’d even found an old Ford Pinto, essentially intact. Victim of some teenage joyride, no doubt.

I continued to sort through the “before” shots. I suppose I should have been expecting it, but it still clipped me in the gut when I saw him.

Charlie.

There he was, as he had looked the first day he’d showed up on the site. Other shots depicted subsequent visits. Charlie sketching. Charlie wandering through the site. Charlie straddling his bike, his powerful legs holding the Harley upright.

I remembered how I had with those legs straddling me, my



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cock buried up that incredible ass. My balls ached and I was instantly hard. Groaning, I knew I wouldn't be able to think clearly unless I did something about that. I stumbled to the bathroom where I unzipped my jeans and pulled out my swollen prick. I stroked myself a few times, then let my mind wander. Unfortunately, it wandered back to Charlie as he sprawled across my bed, his hard, brown cock lying across his flat stomach. Then I imaged Charlie with his dick embedded deep in my ass, my legs wrapped around his pumping hips. I barely needed a dozen more strokes before I blew my load into the shower.

I cleaned up and went back to the computer. I quickly finalized the group of "worst" pictures—twenty shots that would compose a display for the dedication. I wouldn't need any "after" shots for the ceremony since the site, itself, would be my testament....that and Charlie's four panels. I'd post the "after" shots on my new business website.

It was going to be one damned impressive portfolio. With that and all the added publicity from the unveiling, I was probably going to be a busy boy soon. That suited me just fine. If I was caught up in work, I wouldn't have time to brood over what-might-have-beens.

My phone call to Thurlow the next day was anticlimactic. He thanked me for the call, but had been out to the site earlier in the week and knew for himself how close we were.

"That artist, Reid. He's done as well. I spoke with him just yesterday. He'll be bringing the four panels down with him next week. I'm quite excited. How about you, McKay?"

"Excited," I echoed. "It's a wonderful moment, sir. You did a good thing." It always paid to toot the client's horn as much as possible. Besides which, without their vision—no matter how crass

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the motivation—there would be no projects.

“Excellent. Excellent.” Thurlow preened. “Then we’ll be seeing you next week at the dedication.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, sir.” I felt a sick excitement in my stomach that went beyond butterflies. Charlie was going to be there, unveiling his work. This time, he couldn’t avoid me.

Even if he wanted to.

\* \* \*

The day of the dedication dawned sunny and cool, with a definite autumn nip in the air. It felt good. There would be a lot of fall color up at Lynx Woods. I just hoped the sunshine would hold.

I dressed with care, though the cast on my arm threw off the look. Michael grabbed an hour from his job at the TV studio to trim my goatee and make sure I had my tie on straight.

He kissed my mouth when he was done. “You’re looking hot, sugar. You’ll have that sexy painter dribbling in his Hanes.”

I leaned toward the bathroom mirror and touched my eye, still discolored, though Michael’s genius at makeup had gone a long way toward concealing it. What could I do? Thurlow wasn’t going to put off the dedication until I recovered a hundred percent. We needed to do it now, before winter sealed up the site.

Michael grabbed my good arm. “Come on, sexy. I’ll walk you to the Explorer. Then I gotta get back to work before Raoul grows another ulcer on top of the first two I gave him.”

At the SUV, he kissed me one more time. “For luck,” he said, then scrambled into his Mazda and sped out of the lot.

My timing was good. I arrived at Lynx Woods before any of the guests. The only other vehicles on the grounds belonged to the

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catering crew. Jessie, Karl and the others pulled in soon after. I always tried to get the benefactor to include my whole crew in the opening day ceremonies, since I would have never gotten the job done without them. Some, like Thurlow, seemed to respect hard work and didn't have a problem with the request; others were irritated at the idea of being asked to mix with non-socialites and blue-collar workers.

Thurlow had gone all out in catering the event. I watched a pair of burly setup guys haul a six-foot folding table out of their truck.

One of them spotted me. "Where do you want this?"

I pointed to the edge of the newly laid gravel parking lot. "Have to be there. It's the closest thing to a level spot."

Three more tables were set up, and they were followed by tubs of ice and massive coolers that tucked under the tables once their contents of tinfoil-covered trays and bowls had been removed.

I wandered over to the activity and studied one of the tubs. "Is that going to stay cold enough all day?" I glanced up at the sun. "It's going to get warm."

"There's a core of dry ice in each of the tubs," the burlier of the two setup men said. "That will guarantee heat transfer is kept to a minimum. We're also setting up a canopy to limit sun exposure."

I could just imagine some high-end catering firm in Toronto getting a phone call from Winston Thurlow about the big party he'd had in mind. Any catering owner would foam at the mouth at such a job. But I wondered what they had thought after they'd found out where Thurlow expected the party to be held. Still, from the looks of it, Thurlow had chosen his caterer wisely.

The ceremony setup continued. The last items to be brought out were massive punch bowls with inner linings filled with frozen water. A rainbow of sangrias and virgin punches flowed into the

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ice bowls. Then they were covered loosely with tinfoil. Finally, the crew returned to the truck one more time and came out with the canvas canopy, which they set up to shield the laden tables.

Chairs were loosely grouped around the tables. I grabbed a few and hauled them toward the river, figuring a few guests might like the view. I even put a couple around the willow.

Folks began to arrive. Thurlow preened with self-satisfaction at the spread he had created, gorging on the endless flow of praise he received from his guests. I had already seen the Provincial Premier grab a photo op with him, and other high-powered politicians hovered to share in the honors. A big-name talk show host had his ear, and a TV crew followed various politicians around, in search of a quote or a gaffe.

A crowd gathered in a cordoned-off section to the far left of the picnic area. I could make out several shapes huddled under drop clothes, and knew they signaled the location of Charlie's paintings and the dedication plaque that Thurlow had sent up to the site early in the week. That was when I glanced around.

And saw Charlie.

Watching me.

His gaze was naked with hunger, and I felt my knees go weak just looking at him. But when I moved toward him, he disappeared into the well-heeled crowd. Jesus, what kind of game was he playing? I swore under my breath and headed in the opposite direction. My path took me over by the willow.

I slipped around behind the massive trunk and crouched among the twisted roots, staring at the slow-moving brown water. There were no herons today, nor any wood ducks. Nothing marred the serene surface except the occasional ruffle from an undertow.

I knew I had to be an incongruous sight—a man dressed in

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Hugo Boss and Italian leather hunched beside a dirty stream under a scraggly willow tree when the party was going on behind him. I picked up a small stone from the bare ground and flipped it onto the water. The ripples it created vanished almost as soon as they were made. There was probably some kind of metaphor for life in that.

I heard voices behind me and figured the ceremony was starting. I climbed to my feet, dusted off my pant legs, and would have headed back, but an arm came out and braced against the tree trunk, blocking my path.

I looked from the wall of chest muscles into Charlie's tension-riddled face. His eyes bore down into mine. "You want to tell me what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's this I hear about an accident? And why the hell do I have to learn about it from someone I barely know? You couldn't pick up the phone and tell me yourself?"

"Tell you what? I had a minor car accident. No big deal."

He pointedly looked at my bruised face and then let his gaze slide down to the jacket sleeve hanging limply at my side. The cast bulged under it.

"No big deal?" he murmured. "That's not what your girl told me."

"My girl?"

"Jessie. She tells me you totaled the Land Rover and spent a couple of days in the hospital. Why didn't you tell me, Tyler? Instead, I get a letter from you giving me the brush-off."

"I didn't want you coming back out of pity!"

Charlie's arm still blocked my exit, and when I tried to duck under it, he blocked that move, too.

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“What the hell—”

“Why do you haunt me?” Charlie stared at my mouth. “Why the hell can’t I get you out of my mind?”

“Maybe you can’t forget me for the same reason I can’t forget you. You can’t just blow off love. Not that easily.”

Under Charlie’s designer suit, he wore the shirt I had bought him in Gatlinburg. I walked my fingers up his silk tie and pulled down his head until it was level with mine. “Go ahead and try to forget *this*.” And I planted my mouth on his.

He jerked away, but not before he had started kissing me back. I let him go. He watched me through half-closed eyes, his mouth drawn in a tight line. He never blinked, never looked away. His eyes were dark pools I could drown in.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “I can’t forget. Damn you to hell.” Then he put his big hands on either side of my face, leaned down and covered my mouth with his.

It wasn’t a wild, fuck-me kiss. He didn’t shove his tongue into my mouth, or try to swallow my tonsils. But it was a kiss laced with passion and tenderness. I melted into him.

Someone cleared her throat. Charlie dragged his mouth away from mine.

Jessie stood behind the willow, watching us. “Well,” she said softly. “That explains a lot.”

“Jessie,” I said in a strangled voice, not even sure what I was going to say.

She regarded us with curious eyes. There was no censure there, not even any real surprise. “I’d tell you not to bother stopping on my account,” she said. “But the ceremony’s starting, and Mr. Thurlow is beginning to look a little frantic. I think he’s wondering where the two stars of his show are.”

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“I—” Charlie had a glazed, deer-in-the-headlight look.

I took pity on him and rubbed his shoulder to sooth him. “We don’t want him to come looking for us, do we?” I whispered.

“I—we—”

“I think I’d better help.” Jessie stepped forward and put herself between the two of us. Then she gave Charlie a small shove that got him moving in the right direction. As he vanished around the twisted tree trunk, I shook myself like a dog coming out of a daze.

Jessie followed Charlie, and I brought up the rear. When I got back to the party, I saw the core of the press had arrived. Camera crews tripped over each other vying for the best sound bites. I realized how close Charlie and I had come to potential disaster. If reporters had filmed Charlie and me kissing, they’d have had an amazing lead for the evening news.

I glanced over at Charlie, who was talking to Thurlow. He still had a glazed look on his chiseled face, and I could tell he wasn’t hearing a thing Thurlow said. I sidled past Jessie and got close enough to eavesdrop.

“Perhaps when all this hoopla is over, we could discuss some sort of endowment for young art students,” Thurlow was saying. “Does that sound like something you’d be interested in?”

I strolled up to them and watched Charlie jump when I stepped into view. I barely acknowledged Thurlow. Charlie stared at me.

“Ah, Tyler.” Thurlow was oblivious to the tension swirling around him. “How does this moment feel? Glad it’s over?”

“Actually, I feel a bit let down, sir,” I said, never taking my eyes off Charlie. I edged closer. “It always feels like I’m leaving something when it’s barely gotten started.”

“Yes, well, I seem to remember you telling me that this is just a beginning.”

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"If things go like they should, that's exactly what it is, sir."

Charlie eyed me feverishly. I caught a glint of passion in his storm-gray eyes and got hard. My cock felt heavy between my legs. I wanted to reach down and adjust myself, but couldn't move.

I heard a sound check from the makeshift stage as the TV people finished setting up their equipment.

"I do believe it's time," Thurlow said. He practically vibrated with excitement. "Charlie? Tyler? Will you accompany me?"

We followed him. Show time.

I somehow managed to stay awake during the mind-numbing ceremony. Speakers droned on, hoping to say words that would make up the magic six seconds captured on the late night news. I did my own canned spiel about how we can rebuild the world if enough people care. Then Charlie spoke.

He stood beside Thurlow on the grass near the shrouded panels. He talked about the need to release the artist in each of us, that art was not some elitist game but could be embraced by all. He talked about creating sanctuaries like this one.

And all the time, he was staring at me. Measuring me. Openly wanting me.

I felt alternately hot and cold. Fevered chills raced through me, dotting my exposed skin with goose bumps. I began to imagine what the night to follow could be like...seeing Charlie and me in bed together, fantasizing about the way he'd look at me and touch me. Just Charlie and me, like before...

Bad idea. I got even harder. The fantasy was going to kill me.

While everyone clapped politely, Thurlow signaled his assistants to draw aside the drop clothes. I took another step forward and held my breath. First to be exposed were the four paintings. The crowd gave an appreciative sigh. As I swallowed



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past the sudden lump in my throat, I thought their reaction was grossly underwhelming.

The theme of the willow united the four paintings. There was the Great Blue Heron in the river, one foot raised, poised to strike. A Great Horned Owl stared down balefully from the willow's bent branches. A herd of deer moved like living wraiths through an early morning mist, and a solitary lynx stalked its prey across a blanket of fall leaves so sharp, I could hear them rustle under padded paws.

I heard the crowd mutter.

"Incredible."

"Who is this guy? Is he someone famous?"

"Look at the eyes on that wild cat, whatever it is, you'd swear he's looking right through you."

Charlie never took his eyes off me. I knew he did more than look through me. He peered into my soul and all that lay buried under it.

"Charlie," I whispered.

He read my lips. My breathing shortened as I saw the expression on his face. I was only able to drag my gaze away when someone clapped me on the back and offered their congratulations. Someone with a lot of blonde, perfectly coifed hair and a camera trailing after her, asked me a bunch of inane questions. I answered as best I could. It didn't do to alienate the press, not if I wanted my ideas to be heard by anyone.

When I looked up again, Charlie was gone.

The ceremony dragged on. Finally, the half-ton granite boulder that had been inlaid with the dedication plaque was unveiled. I had had a hand at designing the thing, so I had made sure the name Charlie had first used in conjunction with the place was on it. Lynx

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Woods was now official.

I moved through the thinning crowd. Politicians were the first to go. The news crews followed close on their heels. The parking lot was clearing out fast. The once-laden tables had emptied, and several of the iced punch bowls were down to dregs.

Still no sign of Charlie. Since I didn't know what vehicle he'd arrived in, I didn't have a clue what to look for to see if he was still on site. Had he ridden a bike? Used a rental car? Or perhaps someone like Thurlow had given him a lift. I'd noticed a few limos in the lot. Maybe he'd hired one of those.

I spotted Jessie talking to Karl and approached them. I nodded at Karl and speared Jessie with my gaze. "You seen Charlie?"

She shook her head. "Not lately. Could he be back down by the river?"

Quickly, I toured the site. No Charlie. He was running again.

With an explosive curse, I stalked to my vehicle, shoved the key into the rental's door and jerked the latch. The door popped open. Thurlow strode up to me and stood impatiently, waiting for my attention. I stopped short of climbing into the SUV and stared at him.

"You're a hard man to keep track of, Tyler," Thurlow said. "But I wanted to see you one more time before you got away. I'm impressed with the work you've done here. I have to admit, I'm impressed with you. I've already spoken to several of my colleagues, and some have expressed an interest in having you manage projects for them."

I didn't know what to say. I stammered out a thank you, but Thurlow waved it aside.

"They have your contact information, so I'll leave it in their hands to talk to you personally. I just wanted to make sure you got

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this as an expression of my appreciation. You've outdone yourself here."

And he handed me a check. Its amount was significantly larger than the bonus we had negotiated. My mouth fell open. I stared down at the piece of paper in my hand. All those zeros must have done something to my brain. I felt numb.

"Thank you, Mr. Thurlow. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," Thurlow said cheerfully. "Just enjoy your bonus. I look forward to the next time we can work together." Then he turned on his heels and strode away.

I clambered into the Explorer. The door shut with a solid clunk. I stared out at the lingering guests, noting many of them were still gathered around the four panels. Even from here, the power of Charlie's work blew me away. Later today, the paintings would be moved to Thurlow's office building where they would be on display in the lobby indefinitely.

Charlie as an artist, had a vision and strength that left me weak in the knees and in awe. But Charlie as a man was another story. I knew he was going through strong stuff. Wrestling over identity questions about something so basic as your sexual self-image was rough going at any age, but for an adult who thought he knew who he was, it had to be that much harder.

I wanted Charlie to be strong, but it wasn't happening. He couldn't seem to face himself down. His demons kept overpowering him. So he kept running.

I jammed the key into the ignition and cranked on the engine.

I was angry at his cowardice. Angry at his weakness. I knew that was a harsh verdict, but I had watched him practically drool over me less than an hour before. I knew he wanted me. I knew exactly what he wanted to do with me. But he ran, rather than

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admit it to himself.

“Screw you, Charlie Reid,” I muttered, doing a precise three-point turn and heading the Explorer toward Toronto. “I’ve had enough of your games. Play them by yourself.”

The next day, I paid my grateful crew their part of the bonus, went home, and booked a flight to England.

## CHAPTER 9

I didn't have any formal plans. I spent two days in London, taking the Tube to the two-hundred-fifty-year-old Kew Gardens, where I spent four wonderful hours. Then I traveled south to the equally famous Wakehurst Place. I strolled through the Himalayan Glade, loving the extensive water gardens and the little walled-in gardens that dotted the landscape. The British, I decided, had earned their reputation as skilled gardeners.

Best of all, to my mind, was the Loder Valley Nature Reserve, a refuge for the native flora and fauna of the Sussex Weald. It was a fascinating area only thirty miles south of London that boasted one of the largest stretches of ancient forest in the country. Walking through it was like going back to antediluvian times. Charlie would have loved it. I could see his bold brush strokes

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capturing its raw beauty and making it accessible to everyone.

I wandered north, ferreting out small bed-and-breakfasts in tiny medieval villages where charm seemed to be part of the package. They made me feel at home.

In Edinburgh, the Athens Of The North, I stopped for coffee at the Blue Moon Café, reportedly the oldest gay café in all of Scotland. I sipped my hot drink and realized I felt lonely, reflecting on my trip thus far as wonderful, but far from perfect because I had no one to share it with. That I was horny, too, went without saying. It had been weeks since I'd had my cock up Charlie's delicious ass, and I was beginning to feel the lack. I needed a diversion so I wouldn't fall into the self-pity trap.

I decided to do some pubbing in the area. Leith Walk would be the place to go for this activity, or so I'd been told. The historic length of street included the best of Edinburgh's gay scene. I soon found myself at one of its most famous institutions—CC Bloom's, a dance club and gay bar.

Enter Randy.

He couldn't have been more than twenty-one...even younger than Michael, though not by much. He was gorgeous. Five-ten, streaked, short blond hair and the bluest eyes I had seen in a long time. When I first noticed him, he was standing by the bar. I zoned in on his tightly packed ass that just about begged me to bury my nose in it. He glanced over his shoulder, as though aware he was being watched, and caught my eye.

His face lit up and less than two minutes later, he was sitting at my table, his hand on my knee, asking me where I was from. The accent always did me in. A Scotsman and a set of bagpipes, and what little honor I had was shot.

"Canada!" he squealed. "I love Canadian men. So virile."

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His hand moved higher on my leg, brushing my rapidly swelling basket. “Are you virile, Tyler?” He licked his lips as he squeezed my cock. “So big. Will you have your way with me, Canadian? Do you want to fuck me? Only fifty quid.”

Suddenly, I noticed how his pretty face had gone slack around dilated eyes. Shit, I should have known. He was high *and* he was a hustler.

He seemed to sense the changed atmosphere. He kept trying, anyway. “Why don’t we go someplace quieter and see what happens?” He took my hand. His slender fingers were warm. He glanced at the sleeve hanging empty on my left side. “What happened to you, Tyler?”

“Car accident. It’s nothing. Listen, Randy—” I broke free of his beguiling touch.

He cocked his beautiful blond head at me. “Tyler?”

Suddenly, he looked uneasy. He rubbed his wrist with the fingers of his left hand.

I swore under my breath.

Randy flinched as if I’d hit him.

For some reason, I remembered Michael telling me how safe he had felt with me for the two years we’d lived together. Was Randy showing me what Michael had endured before we’d gotten together? Picking up strangers, never knowing what they might want or do? Taking whatever they gave you because you had no choice, you had to survive?

I suddenly felt nauseous.

Randy began to look panicky. What the hell did he read in my face? Disgust? Anger? How was I going to tell him my emotions weren’t directed at him?

“Listen, Randy,” I said. “You’re sweet, and I’m sure it would

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be a lot of fun to take you to bed and find out if your ass is as delicious as it looks, but I have a policy never to pay for sex. Call me old-fashioned, but it's the way I am."

"But, Tyler—"

"Don't interrupt me, Randy." I handed him ten quid, then held up another ten. "What I am going to do is pay you to spend the rest of the evening with me. We'll hit a few pubs and grab some dinner, then I'll drop you off at home. The night's on me, but I want it understood that I'm not going to fuck you."

"Am I that disgusting to you?"

"What? Hell, no. Christ, you're the sexiest thing I've seen in a long time. This is about me. Well, are you up for it? A night of hot music and good food? I'm relying on you to tell me where we can find both. Deal?"

He thought about it a minute, his eyes glued on my crotch. He looked almost wistful, then he grinned. "Deal."

Randy knew Edinburgh, I'll give the little queen that. He'd spent all twenty-one years of his life there. His family had always been dirt poor, and there had been a lot of violence in his home, so his decision to cut out at seventeen had seemed natural. It was only later that he had realized he had no particular talent or skill, and had fallen into hustling. He was young and terminally cute, and men fell all over themselves to bed him. He made a good living, especially off the gay tourist trade.

Nobody had ever paid him to pub crawl before. We had fun, even if I did spend half the evening sporting a sometimes-painful boner that I finally relieved in a pub bathroom stall. Alone.

Randy laughed easily and had a sardonic wit that made him seem older than his years. At one point, he told me he was thinking of going back to school. "I'm going to study marketing, financial



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planning. I'm pretty good with numbers. My teachers always said I was a natural."

"Sound like a smart move." I put my hand over his and squeezed his fingers. "Get educated. Get a real job. Then who you go to bed with is your choice. Do it for fun, not because you think you have to."

"And what if I said to you, 'I want to go to bed with Tyler McKay?' Would you still turn me down?"

I raised his hand to my mouth, tickling the palm with my goatee. "Fraid so, pumpkin."

Randy sighed. "You must love him very much."

I didn't even bother denying it. I just muttered, "And I'm a damned fool for it."

At the end of the evening, I tried to get Randy to tell me where he lived so I could make sure he got back safely. He refused to tell me. Then he said he couldn't go back there, his "roommate" had company, and he'd been instructed to stay away. I wasn't sure I believed him, but I could hardly leave him to wander the streets of Edinburgh until dawn.

Which is how we ended up back at my hotel room. Both of us were pleasantly buzzed, and Randy lived up to his name as he amorously followed me around the small room, rubbing against me. I held him away from me, my good hand firmly on his slender shoulder. "If you want to stay here, man, stop that. I'm not made of stone, but I really would hate myself in the morning if I gave in now. That side of the bed is yours. Keep on it and no stripping. I don't want to wake up to a naked man in my bed."

Randy grinned. "Why would that be, McKay?"

"Just go to sleep, Randy."

The next day, he talked me into renting a car and led me on a

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exhausting day trip through the surrounding countryside. Again, he refused to reveal where he lived, and this time I was just too damned tired to argue. We didn't crawl back to the hotel room until nearly midnight. I instantly fell into bed and slept.

I'm not sure how long I was asleep, but at some point in the night I awakened to the delicious sensation of Randy's mouth wrapped around my cock. His hand firmly wedged between my ass cheeks; his finger was at the entrance to my back door.

I groaned when he slid the digit inside. His mouth worked harder on my prick, and seconds later, I blew my load all over my stomach and his fist. He slid up my length and nestled his head against my shoulder, his fingers playing with the light sprinkling of hair on my chest and abs.

"I hope you're not mad," he whispered. "I had to do that. You've been so sweet to me, and I had to repay you somehow."

I kissed his upturned mouth. "I can't say I'm sorry. But you gotta stop thinking in terms of always paying back someone with sex. Have sex for your own pleasure."

He squeezed my tender balls gently and nibbled on my lower lip. "I did do that for my pleasure."

It was only fair that I reciprocate, so when I saw Randy's hard cock bobbing against the pale skin of his stomach, I didn't think twice. I dove down and did what I'd dreamed of doing the first time I'd seen his gorgeous body at the bar. I buried my nose in the Scotsman's ass. He grunted and raised his hips, his fingers sliding through my hair. I fucked his hole with my mouth, ramming my tongue down his tight sphincter, then working over the skin behind his balls. I sucked his tightly compacted balls. All the while, I stroked him with my fist, my fingers wrapped tightly around his six-inch, uncut dick.

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With a cry, he slammed his hips up, thrusting his cock into my hand. He shuddered as I pumped harder toward release. He clawed at me, then I felt the throbbing in his shaft, and he strained to unload himself, splashing hot cum all over both of us. Then he softened and slipped out of my grip. I lay back down on the rumpled bed and draped my arm over my face.

“What’s wrong, Tyler? I’m sorry, but I was so hard when I woke up, and you were, too...”

“No, don’t, Randy.” I reached for him, cradling his unresisting form in the crook of my good arm. “You were wonderful. I just don’t want you to think you had to. I don’t want you feeling obligated.”

“Just fun, Tyler. It’s all just fun.”

I held him until we both fell back to sleep.

The next time I awakened, I was alone in bed. Randy had gone out to get coffee, then had left again. A takeout cup sat on the bedside table. The coffee was still warm. I drank it, showered and got dressed.

Then I checked out of the hotel and caught a train for Killarney.

I felt bad about Randy, wondering if I’d taken advantage of him. Then again, there was a question about who had taken advantage of whom. All I knew was that I felt like I’d betrayed someone, even as my heart told me who that someone was. I cursed myself roundly. Did I think Charlie had spent five minutes thinking about what he’d done to me?

\* \* \*

Killarney was even prettier than I’d expected. I found a

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charming little bed-and-breakfast tucked away in the old part of town and settled in.

Apparently, my great-great grandmother had emigrated from the area. There was some family story about an amorous landowner and a sixteen-year old Amelia O'Sullivan, who hadn't returned his affections and had run off to Canada to avoid being raped. No one in the family knew how true it was, but it made a good tale, and my mother always delighted in telling it at every Christmas dinner when the whole family sat around the table with the turkey and cholesterol-building trimmings.

I decided to see if I could find anyone in the village who had heard of Amelia O'Sullivan and her family. It didn't take long before I ran across Judy, a lady who thought she might be my distant cousin. She invited me to supper with her husband and their six kids. I never actually found out if we were related, but it didn't stop the family from treating me like a long-lost brother.

By the end of the night, Judy had half-convinced me I should move to Killarney. I had never been involved with such a large, boisterous group and was feeling maudlin enough to embrace the experience. The next day, Dave, Judy's oldest son, asked me to join him and his uncle at a nearby stable the uncle managed. Now, the last time I'd been on a horse, Madonna was telling everyone she was a material girl on Top-40 radio. God, did that make me feel old.

Dave was a cute kid, barely fifteen, and blessed with more energy than a thousand battery-run bunnies. He rode a big, black horse that snorted and pawed the ground in a display of temper I found intimidating. In contrast, my horse stood with its head hanging down to its knees, apparently in a half sleep. That suited me just fine. Between my lack of experience on horseback and the

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fact I had only one good arm, I needed the calmest horse I could find.

David's Uncle Ian was a good-looking, thirty-something man with dark brooding eyes and a slow, easy smile that would have been sexy if I had been looking for anything like that.

The first time he smiled at me was when he noticed me eyeing Dave's fire-eating horse.

"Trilby isn't as fierce as he makes out," he said in a soft voice. "Young Davey's too good a horseman to put up with bad behavior. Horse just has spirit, like Davey."

I was relieved since I'd been wondering how I would explain to Dave's mother that her eldest son had gotten mangled during our outing. It wouldn't have exactly put me on the woman's good side, cousin or no cousin.

In fact, the ride turned out to be very low key, with the horses moving at a sedate walk. I had plenty of time to take in the sights around me. Believe me, seeing Ireland from horseback was an experience I'd recommend to anyone who could manage it.

Afterward, we dropped Dave at his home, then Ian offered to take me for a drink. I accepted. I was a big fan of Irish beer.

I didn't even catch the name of the place. It offered what I'd come to consider typical pub atmosphere—good beer, simple food that was enjoyable even if it wouldn't win any culinary prizes, and lots of people out to have a good time.

It was also decidedly gay.

I stood just inside the doorway and looked at Ian, who was watching me. He offered me his slow, lazy smile. "Thought you might like this over some of the other places in town."

"You?"

"Yeah. Me. Though I hope you won't blab. Some people know

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and some don't, for reasons I don't need to get into."

"Oh trust me, I know all the reasons." I held out my hand.  
"Well, I'm pleased to meet the real you, Ian."

"The pleasure's mine, McKay." He clasped my hand in his.

"Make it Tyler."

"Tyler it is. What's your poison, Tyler?"

I considered a Guinness, but the strong black stout never agreed with my head, so in the end, I opted for a light draft ale. Ian was a stronger man than I was and came back gripping a huge tankard of foaming black beer.

"So I was right, then." Ian swept his hand around the pub. A few of the other customers glanced our way. Checking out the stranger in town? "This is not shocking you."

"You just guessed I was gay? What if you'd been wrong?"

Ian laughed, wiping a mustache of brown foam off his upper lip. "Then I'd be wearing a red face and begging you to forgive my stupidity. But I've been watching you all day. I'm not usually wrong."

"Good gaydar, eh?"

"Finely tuned."

It was a fun night. Ian told me about a couple of times his gaydar had failed him miserably, and I shared a story about a painful mistake I had made in my senior year of high school. They were the kind of stories that are hilarious in retrospect, but traumatic as hell when they're happening. Thank God for hindsight.

"You involved with anyone?" I asked after we were well into our second round of beer. "Or you a dedicated bachelor?"

"Involved. Blacksmith. He's got a place just out of town. Been together three years, now. You?"

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“No,” I said, inevitable thoughts of Charlie surfacing. “I broke up with someone recently. We weren’t together very long.”

“Pity when that happens. I don’t think men are meant to be alone.”

“It happens though. You have to live with it.”

“As long as you don’t settle.” Ian waved heartily at the bartender who poured him another Guinness. “You only hurt yourself if you settle.”

I nodded sagely, but really didn’t want this conversation to go any further. I poured the rest of my beer down my throat and signaled for another. “What’s the food like here?”

“Good. You feeling a bit peckish?”

“Feeling major peckish.”

“Then let’s have us a bite to eat.”

The rest of the evening passed in a friendly blur. I got hit on a few times, but nothing I couldn’t deflect. Afterward, Ian dropped me off at my bed-and-breakfast, promising to have me over to meet his “blacksmith” before I left town. Then he walked away, wandering down the dark street singing some vaguely Irish ditty. It reminded me of an episode of *The Black Adder* in which Prince Edmund ( a.k.a. the Black Adder) and Queen Elizabeth the First sing a dirty song about a goblin.

Grinning like the village idiot, I let myself into the sleeping house and went straight to bed. I woke the next day with a vague headache that faded after the third coffee. I spent the day wandering among the tourist traps and met Ian back at the pub at four o’clock.

After a single pint, we headed over to the smithy where I met Kelsey, the blacksmith—a big, burley man who embodied the image of a “black Irishman” and had a rare knack for appearing to

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be both gentle and tough as nails at the same time. By the end of the evening, I could see why Ian loved the guy. I was half in love with him, too.

“When are you heading back, Tyler?” Kelsey roared.

I was finding that he shouted everything out of his mouth. He claimed that working around noisy forges all day meant that he had to yell to be heard. I think he just liked being loud.

“Unfortunately, I’m leaving Killarney tomorrow to continue my trip. But I have to start thinking about getting back to Canada relatively soon. I have a business to run.”

“Surely you can stay here a couple more days,” Kelsey said. “Ian and I would love to take you up to Dingle day after tomorrow, so’s you can meet some more of our friends. They don’t get much chance to be around folks from the Colonies.”

Actually, my flight didn’t leave for another ten days. Did it make much sense to spend the time in London, feeling alone? Or here, surrounded by new friends and family. It was a no-brainer.

“I’d love to.”

“It’s settled then. Be here day after tomorrow...early. Pack a pair of walking shoes. If the weather’s fine, we plan some hiking.”

“I’ll be here.”

\* \* \*

Dingle was even more beautiful than Killarney. A mountainous peninsula, it jutted out into the rough, storm-tossed Atlantic, rich in history and ancient tradition.

Kelsey was downright garrulous about the place. “There’ve been tribes and whatnot in the area going back over six thousand years. The area’s remote, which probably explains why over two



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thousand monuments recording the history of those six thousand years have been preserved.”

“Kelsey’s a real history buff,” Ian said with obvious pride.

“Studied it all my life. Keeps me out of trouble.”

“You mentioned a hike,” I said as the Dingle peninsula rolled by the car window. The land looked inviting. A walking tour would be welcome.

“Aye,” Kelsey said. “I’d like to do that up around the Loch a’Duin Valley near Cloghane. It’s a glacial basin, with nearly a hundred stone structures dating back five thousand years. You up to walking around fifteen hundred acres?”

“As long as you don’t expect me to cover the whole thing.”

Kelsey looked at Ian. They were both grinning. “How ’bout half?”

They burst out laughing at the look on my face.

“And if we get tired there, we can always move on to Riasc, Gallarus, and Kilmalkedar to finish up. You up for it, Canadian boy?”

“Can I reconsider this?”

“Too late,” Ian said. He reached over to take Kelsey’s hand. “You’ve passed the point of no return.”

Kelsey took pity on me. “Don’t worry, boyo, I’ve booked us into a friend’s place tonight. He’s got a hot tub for spoiled Yankee tourists. I think it’ll work on tired Canadian muscles, too.”

I would remember his words with wistfulness that evening. But I started out the day thinking I didn’t want it to end. Everything seemed magical. The Loch a’Duin Valley was exactly as Kelsey had described it, and more. But as the day continued, my feet and legs grew into one solid, hot ache. Even my arm began to hurt again. It was the kind of pain that settled in for a long stay. I was

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no longer sure a hot tub would be enough.

When we finally arrived at the place owned by Kelsey's friends, I was on the verge of collapse. Ian took one look at my face and said to Kelsey, "I think we pushed him too hard." He led me through the house, out to where a large, four-man hot tub sat beneath a gazebo-style structure.

Kelsey disappeared, then returned moments later with a thin, balding little guy who looked like he might have been related to an Irish leprechaun. Kelsey introduced him as Graham MacCarthy, his friend and hotelier. Graham carried a stack of towels, which he set on a bench inside the gazebo, then took our drink orders and left us.

Ian and Kelsey helped me undress to my boxers. Then the three of us slipped into the hot water. I sank as low as I could and still keep my arm cast above the surface.

Graham soon returned bearing mugs of beer. I grasped one with my good arm. The beer went down smoothly and was gone in four gulps. Then I sank back into the water and closed my eyes.

The swirling currents felt incredible. All my aches whirled away with them, and a wonderful lethargy encompassed me. I was barely conscious of the other two in the tub with me, and paid no attention to what they were doing until I heard Ian groan.

I opened my eyes to find Kelsey kissing his lover, one hand under the water, obviously stroking him. I grew hard instantly, and slipped my hand between my legs to begin fondling myself. I watched Ian's face as he moaned, nearing orgasm. So was I. I blew my viscous load into the swirling water at almost the same time Ian appeared to shoot his. I leaned my head against the hot tub wall, feeling even more enervated than before.

I didn't dare fall asleep in the water and dragged my eyes open

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to find Kelsey and Ian moving apart. “Hey, guys,” I said softly. “We got beds here, too? Sorry, but I’m about ready to pass out.”

“Oh, we have beds.” Ian grinned at me. Arm in arm, he and Kelsey led me back into the house.

Graham reappeared and ushered us down a long hallway. “You and Ian are in the green room. I know you’ll like it there,” Graham told Kelsey. “Tyler, you can have the blue room. There’s a mini fridge in each room, stocked with drinks. Feel free. Bathrooms are here, through this door.” He gestured to his right.

I thanked him and crept into my assigned quarters. The quilted bed looked so inviting, I barely paused to undress before I slipped between the covers. I was asleep in minutes. I awakened several hours later and groped for my watch after it became obvious I wasn’t going right back to sleep. It was early evening in Toronto. I knew Michael would still be up. Night owl Michael never got to bed before midnight.

He answered on the third ring. “Tyler, so good to hear from you. I mean, most friends would send a postcard or something when they went on an extended trip like that, but—”

“Okay, Michael, I get the message.” I suppressed my laughter, glad I had phoned. “It’s good to hear your voice, too. I’m sorry I wasn’t in touch earlier.”

“Don’t tell me...you’ve been so busy, you can’t tear yourself away to let old friends in on the fun.”

“Something like that. It has been a bit hectic. So how are things in the New World?”

“Good, good.” Michael began to sound enthusiastic. “I’ve been put on a new show with Rick Mercer. The man’s a genius. I just hope the thing gets picked up. Donny sends his love. Wonders when you’re gonna be home. Says he’s tired of feeding your fish.

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He's threatening to use all of them for a massive stir-fry some day. I think he wants you to get some giant salmon or something so his efforts will be worth his while."

"Right. Tell him I love him, too."

"Will do," Michael said cheerfully. "Where are you right now? Still in London?"

"Nah, I'm up in Ireland." I told him the whole story about Cousin Judy and her brother-in-law, Ian, and Kelsey, the blacksmith.

"Oh...blacksmith. You know what they say about blacksmiths, don't you?"

"No, what do they say about them?"

"Damned if I know. Sounds like you've met some new friends. Any action along with it? Is my baby getting any?"

I thought briefly of Randy. "Not really. Right now we're up in Cloghane at a B&B that belongs to a friend of Kelsey's. It's probably a little too rustic for you, not a designer fashion outlet for miles."

"*Très* boring. Well, as long as you're having fun. Coming home soon? I miss you."

"Miss you, too. I'll be back soon, probably."

"Let me know. We'll have dinner, and you can give us all the dish in detail. Love you, Tyler."

"Same to you, Michael. Give Donny a kiss for me."

"With pleasure."

I hung up and was finally able to get back to sleep.

I spent the next day walking with my new friends, then back to the hot tub. This time, I managed to recover from the hike and had supper with Graham and his family. I was feeling lively enough after supper to sit up with interest when Ian and Kelsey mentioned

## *LYNX WOODS*

a pub visit. We ended up having a great time at a village establishment, and after a convivial evening, I slid back into bed and slept straight through until morning.

I didn't really want to leave, but I knew Kelsey had a smithy to get back to, and while Ian had a few more days off from his job as stable manager, he didn't want to stay without Kelsey. We decided to take one more short hike through a section of the wilds we hadn't hit yet, follow it up with lunch, then return to Killarney before full dark.

The short walk didn't tired me out at all, and I was sitting down to a substantial meal with lots of cheese, freshly baked breads and a beautifully cooked lamb when Graham was called away from the table. He came back moments later with a massive package in his hands and a puzzled look on his pixie-like face. He met my inquisitive gaze. "It's for you, Tyler."

My first thought was that Michael had sent me something. Who else knew where I was? But as he handed over the package, Graham added, "It's from the United States. It came overnight by private courier. Whoever sent it, wanted to make sure it got here fast. That's gotta be expensive."

My hands were shaking when I took the plainly wrapped package. It was rectangular and had to be over three feet on each side, and about the thickness of a big Stephen King novel. I struggled to remove the stiff paper and was grateful when Graham supplied me with a pair of scissors. After I unwrapped the outer layer, I found the parcel was further encased in tissue paper, which crinkled under my scrabbling fingers.

Finally, the object lay exposed. I held my breath while I studied it: a painting...a Charlie Reid painting. But not one I'd seen before.

## LYNX WOODS

It was riddled with tension. Two male lynxes squared off under the willow tree at Lynx Woods. The animals seemed beyond alive. They projected a vitality that was mesmerizing. I could almost hear the soft sound of their breathing, their savage growls as they challenged each other for dominance under the twisted boughs of “our” tree.

“My God, it’s beautiful. And who might this be from?” Ian stood by my shoulder, his voice hushed as he studied the painting along with everyone else.

“A friend,” I managed in a strangled voice. Then I spotted the folded paper taped to the bottom right-hand corner of the glass-encased painting.

“Your friend has talent to spare,” Ian said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so powerful.”

I propped up the painting against the back of a cushioned sofa and unfolded the enclosed note with fingers that wouldn’t stop shaking. I recognized Charlie’s bold writing, the same he used to sign his masterpieces.

*Tyler, please come home. I need you.*

*Charlie*

*Gatlinburg, TN.*

Ian must have read the note’s content. He leaned over and murmured directly into my ear, “More than just a friend, I wager.”

“He used to be.”

“Perhaps he wants to be again.”

Could it be? Had Charlie decided he couldn’t live without me? I stared at the painting where it lay against the sofa. Everyone was crowded around it now, admiring it openly.

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I stared at the two dominant, alpha animals vying for control. Their masculinity was unquestionable. Their strength and their haughtiness was unassailable. Who would come out on top?

“Charlie,” I murmured so softly, I doubted even Ian heard me.

Suddenly, I glanced at my watch. “I have to get back to Killarney. I need to call the airline and find out if they can move up my flight.”

A massive hand closed over my shoulder. I looked up to find Kelsey grinning at me.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you there. We’ll get you to Heathrow, too, if that’s really your wish. Truth be told, you’d make better time out of Shannon. Come on, let’s get this lovely thing wrapped up again. I wouldn’t want any harm to come to it during its long journey back.”

We were on the road in less than thirty minutes. I was on a train to Shannon early the next morning.

None of it was happening fast enough. I didn’t know time could move so slowly.

## CHAPTER 10

I was quite sure the flight attendant thought I was a total basket case. I barely ate the rubbery chicken she put in front of me, and though I ordered a couple of drinks from the passing trolley, I did little more than sip desultorily, letting the ice melt and dilute the fine single malt.

I tried to sleep and only succeeded in dozing for thirty or forty minutes at a time. I stuck a pair of uncomfortable earphones on my head and attempted to get into the alleged comedy that was playing and couldn't concentrate on it.

I even made an effort to start up a conversation with my seatmate, a three-piece suited drone who turned out to be an investment banker from Norfolk, Virginia. His trip to Ireland had been a total failure, and apparently the rest of Mr. Three-Piece's



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life was falling into the toilet, too. The third time I ordered the single malt, I finished the drink before the ice had time to think about melting.

Throughout ninety minutes of listening to his misery masquerading as a plea for help, I made all the proper noises, and I actually thought the guy's funk had lifted a little by the time he finished his fifth drink and lay his head against his seat and passed out.

I got a sympathetic look from the flight attendant on her next round. Apparently, she'd been listening in on the conversation. "Another drink, sir?"

"No, thanks. How about coffee, instead? Strong and black."

"You're in luck." She smiled. "What we've got in the galley is both."

She was right. It was strong. And it had the desired effect of perking me up. I snagged a few bags of peanuts and a second cup.

My next attempt to sleep met with more success. I woke up on the approach to Kennedy, where I would switch planes to Gatlinburg.

My seatmate looked decidedly worse for wear when he got up and stumbled toward the toilets. When he came back, it was obvious he had tried to splash water on his face and had only succeeded in getting it all over his now-rumpled suit. He nursed a cup of black coffee and didn't even look at me.

Customs took forever. I finally got to my terminal and began another round of hurry up and wait. It was nearly ten o'clock when I boarded the next plane and twenty minutes more before we took off.

Another terminal, another counter. This one for a rental car. They had nothing available but an older Honda Civic. I tossed the

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woman my MasterCard and asked her to make sure it was gassed up.

I crammed all my luggage into the hatchback, except for the painting, which I tucked away on the floor in front. Then I drove south.

Itching to ram my foot onto the gas pedal, I forced himself to keep the needle on sixty. I knew southern cops loved giving Yankees and foreign tourists speeding tickets. As a result, the fifteen-mile trip seemed interminable.

There were no lights visible around or inside Charlie's house when I pulled into the driveway. Feeling a strong sense of déjà vu, I crunched to a stop behind Charlie's Harley and threw the car into park. The engine whined into silence, and all I could hear through the closed windows was the somnolent roar of hundreds of crickets.

I climbed out of the car. Another vehicle was parked on the grass. A Lexus. Charlie's winter vehicle? I didn't imagine he used the Harley once snow started flying. After a brief debate on whether to unload my luggage, I compromised. I wasn't leaving the painting in the car, so I retrieved it, left the other stuff in the hatch, and climbed the steps to the veranda.

I had barely reached the top when the door flew open and Charlie stepped out.

"Tyler."

"Charlie."

"I'm glad you came." His gaze darted over the wrapped painting in my hand, then back to my face. "I'm glad you got my message."

Did he mean something deeper than that innocuous statement? Had he been sending me a message? I came because I hoped so.

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Carefully, I propped the painting against the wall of the house. When I straightened, I caught Charlie staring at me avidly. I returned his look and wasn't happy with what I saw. He looked haggard, as though sleep and food had eluded him for some time. Just what had he gone through before he had sent me that note?

"What message is that, Charlie?"

"You're pissed at me, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "You blame me? I've been getting the runaround from you for months now. Am I asking too much to finally know what's going on?"

"No, you deserve that much, at least." Charlie held open the door.

I grabbed the painting and followed him inside.

The house looked exactly as it had the last time I'd seen it. I glanced up the stairs toward his bedroom, but the door was closed. I couldn't tell whether I'd awakened him or not.

I set down the painting on the dining room table beside a bowl of apples, their just-picked smell permeating the spacious room. I picked up one of the pieces of fruit and rubbed the shiny red surface against my sleeve before taking a bite.

Following Charlie farther into the old house, I noticed lights burning in the rear. Charlie's studio. So he hadn't been sleeping.

I nodded toward the room. "Working on something new?"

"Whitstone wants to do another show, so I'm creating an expanded series on the area surrounding Lynx Woods." He fingered the torn fringe of his jeans pocket. "After the dedication, I went up to the Bruce Peninsula for a few days. Ever been to Flowerpot Island?"

I nodded, well familiar with Ontario's Fathom Five National Marine Park, of which Flowerpot Island was a part. The island was

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named for its sea stacks—towering formations of stone topped by greenery, looking exactly like flower pots.

“It’s quite the sight. I plan to go back in the spring. I understand it’s especially nice that time of year.”

“I imagine Lynx Woods is, too. The trilliums and jack-in-the-pulpits will be out then.”

“I’ll have to make sure I visit both. What about you, do you have any plans?”

“Nothing solid. Thurlow may have some contacts for me. With any luck, another project will come from them.”

“Well I hope so. You’re too talented to be sitting around idle.”

We stepped into his studio. After tossing my half-eaten apple into a nearby wastebasket, I gravitated toward the projects he was currently working on. There were several finished and half-finished paintings clearly inspired by Flowerpot Island. One painting, in particular, drew my eye—a close-up view of the largest flowerpot. It was stunning against a backdrop of the crystal-clear waters of Georgian Bay, made all the more spectacular by the visual contrast of a storm brewing at a distance over the lake. Ponderous black thunderheads reared over the horizon, and a line of common terns winged their way inland, seeking shelter. I expected to hear the growl of thunder at any moment, and I swore I heard the hiss of surf on the stony beach below the sea stack.

“Beautiful,” I murmured.

Charlie and I were standing shoulder to shoulder now, nearly touching. The heat from his body caressed mine. It was all I could do not to reach out to him. I refused to succumb to my body’s base desires. I wanted to know where I stood with Charlie Reid first. But I was terrified to ask.

“How have you been, Tyler? For real?”

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"Hurt," I said softly. "What do you expect? I thought we had something, then I find you don't want anything to do with me. How am I supposed to feel?"

"That's not true," Charlie protested, but then he fell silent.

"Come on, Charlie. Talk to me."

"He can't. He's still too damned afraid you're going to reject him."

I spun around at the strange voice, and watched a petite blonde woman walk over from the far side of the studio. I wondered if this was Charlie's sister. Had she been there the whole time? Heard it all?

"Trish." Charlie sounded less than happy.

His sister stuck out her hand. I took it gingerly. "Trish Reid-Phillips. Maybe this lunk told you about me? It sure took him long enough to tell me about *you*."

"How much did he tell you?"

"Well, I know about his being gay. That finally came out two weeks ago." Her pretty face lit up in a smile. "I learned about you yesterday. What can I say? He's slow."

Charlie looked like he was chewing something bitter. His little sister ignored him.

I returned her smile, still holding her hand. "He's right, you two don't look alike at all."

"Charlie's from the deep end of the gene pool. I'm more the shallow, in-your-face type. I don't take shit from him and sure hope I don't have to take it from you, Tyler McKay."

"Oh, call me Tyler." My smile widened. "I make it a point not to give anyone shit. Did he surprise you?"

"About being gay? A little. But not really. It ended up explaining so much, it was almost like I'd known all along, but

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didn't know. Does that make sense?"

"More than you can imagine." I finally dropped her hand and turned to face Charlie. "What's this about my rejecting you? I'm here, aren't I? I came running the minute you gave me a sign. What more do you want? Blood? My heart on a platter?"

Charlie winced.

"I'm not sure if you understand what I'm asking for, so I'll tell you...just so there's no misunderstanding." I stepped closer until I was right in Charlie's face. His eyes followed my every move. "I don't expect you to march in a Pride Parade down Main Street, U.S.A. wearing a little pink triangle. I don't expect you to kiss me in public or hold my hand in the middle of the grocery store. But I do want to live with you. I want us to be partners, sharing our lives equally in the good times and the bad. I don't want to have to run away from our partnership at the first sign someone suspects what's going on between us. More important, I don't want to have to pretend I don't know you, or don't love you, just to cater to some narrow-minded homophobe or his brother."

"Bravo!" Trish clapped and grinned at her brother. "Oh, very well put, Tyler."

"Anything else?" Charlie asked in a tension-filled voice. His eyes were dilated; his skin was flushed.

"Just this: I love you, Charlie Reid. I want to marry you, and barring that, I want to spend the rest of my life being with you." When I reached out to take his hand, he clutched at my fingers. "Why did you tell your sister about us, Charlie?"

"I wanted to come out. At least to the people I love. I figured I owed them that much. And I wanted them to know about you, so that they wouldn't be surprised when they found you living here. With me."

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“My home is in Toronto.”

Charlie’s face fell. Even Trish looked disappointed.

I brought Charlie’s hand to my mouth, touching my bearded lips to his calloused skin. I couldn’t torment him any more. “Okay, so maybe we should split up the living arrangements. Could you spend half the year in Toronto? My place is big enough. There would be lots of subjects for you to paint.”

The smile on his face was heartbreaking. I wanted to kiss him. But the kind of kiss I had in mind might be more than his little sister could handle, so I held back.

“At least, let’s try it for a while, okay?” I used my hold on Charlie’s hand to draw him closer. “I’ll warn you now, Charlie. I won’t run away this time. Don’t try to send me packing because of some redneck cracker.”

“Crackers are Georgians,” Charlie said. Then he and Trish laughed at the same time. I joined in.

“Well, if you guys don’t mind, I’m going to run home,” Trish said, shaking my hand again. “Thank you, Tyler. I know you’re going to be good for him. Hell, if you can put up with him as long as you have, I already know you have something special going. Don’t let him screw it up.”

“I’ll do my best.”

After she left the room, I turned to face Charlie. I reached up to touch his face, tracing the outline of his mouth with my fingertip. “Charlie—”

His response was to fold me into his embrace and ram his mouth down on mine.

Kissing Charlie was better than any sex I’d ever had with anyone...other than Charlie, himself, of course. He held my head between his hands and tackled my mouth with the same dedication

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that he gave to his paintings. Even before we broke apart from the first round, I was raging hard and threatening to come in my boxers.

When we did separate, I groaned and reached for him. He responded by crying out my name and attacking me again. Our tongues met and caressed, tangling together, then exploring teeth, gums, and lips. I ate his wild cries, reducing them to moans that vibrated through both of us.

His fingers caught in my hair, then moved down my back, pressing against my ass, pushing the throbbing bulge between his legs into my stomach. His agile hands traveled up, sliding under my T-shirt, skating over my bare skin.

We stripped away each other's shirts. Hot, naked flesh met hot, naked flesh.

I moaned deep in my throat. I could feel the driving force of Charlie's heart thundering in his chest. Sweat slicked his bronze skin, and he slid over me like satin-coated steel. His nipples were bullet-hard knobs of brown flesh drilling into my damp skin.

His mouth left mine and traveled up and down my throat. Teeth nibbled on the skin above my carotid. Whispered words of lust and love danced in my ears as he softly bit the flesh around my lobe.

I wrapped one leg around his hip, trying desperately to push his pulsing, stone-hard cock against my denim-encased erection. He grabbed my ass in both hands and lifted me off the floor. My legs circled his hips, and I rocked against him, grunting at the rising pressure in my prick and balls.

Charlie walked with me wrapped around him like that. We made it into the living room where he lay me down on the sofa. Feverishly, his hands attacked the button and fly on my jeans. He wrenched the garment off my hips and legs, and tossed it aside.



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Then he stripped off my wet boxers. I cried out as cool air hit damp skin, but he was there, burrowing between my outstretched legs, rubbing his massive basket into my sweat-stippled stomach.

“Charlie,” I groaned and tugged at his jeans. But with only one good hand, I couldn’t open them. “Please...”

He obeyed my unspoken command, and I stared avidly as he slid off his jockeys and jeans in one motion. Then he was back between my legs. Now, his swollen dick was free to rub against my rigid stomach muscles.

I cupped his ass with my good hand, sliding my stiff fingers between his cheeks and playing with the puckered flesh guarding his back door. I inserted one finger, and Charlie’s hips jerked. He slammed his mouth back onto mine and kissed me so hard, I was leaking pre-cum in a running stream.

As soon as he saw that, he pulled me to the edge of the couch and slid to his knees on the floor in front of me. His tongue circled my swollen cock head, lapping up a stream of fluid. Then he wrapped his lips around my engorged helmet and dove until his nose was buried in my pubes. I curved forward, rocketing my hips so that my prick plunged down his throat. At the same time, I screamed his name.

He fucked me with his mouth, his hot, wet lips sliding up and down my rigid dick. My balls tightened, and I could feel the cum boiling up in them, ready to explode. I tried to warn Charlie, but words wouldn’t come. I was beyond speech, beyond coherent thought. Eyes closed, I leaned back on the sofa and surrendered to the pure sensation of his mouth on my rock-hard penis, the teasing glide of his waist-length hair over my cock and balls. His tongue brushed my piss slit and twirled around my shaft.

I exploded, blasting my hot load into Charlie’s greedy mouth.

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Again and again, I pulsed load after load of white hot spunk down his throat, and he took it all and came back demanding more. My consciousness blurred and faded as he drained me beyond dry.

Charlie shifted until he lay atop me, and I melted into his embrace, only dimly conscious of the rough fabric under me, my only awareness that of Charlie...his arms, his hard body rocking against me. His mouth traveled back to my face, where he covered me with semen-flavored kisses.

I became acutely aware of the length of Charlie's cock nudging between my thighs, poking against the puckered skin behind my balls.

"Charlie..."

"Oh baby," he said hoarsely. He nuzzled my ear and nipped my earlobe. "I've missed you. Tell me you want me. Tell me you want me to fuck you."

I did. More than anything. I captured his mouth, using my tongue as a battering ram down his throat. I growled, and the pre-cum-soaked head of his prick rubbed against my tight hole. I humped my hips to give him better access.

"I'm clean, Charlie," I whispered, wrapping my hand around his length and smearing him with pre-cum. "I've been tested, and I'm clean. What about you?"

"Oh Jesus, Tyler. I got tested the day after I begged you to give me a blow job. I don't know if I was just scared, or if I was hoping...I'm clean, too. What does that mean?"

"No rubber, just bare skin. I want to feel you against the walls of my fuck hole. Bare skin. Only you."

Charlie groaned, and his cock jerked in my hand. Bracing one leg against the back of the sofa, the other draped over his shoulder, I guided his self-lubricated prick into me, easing his fat head

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through the tight ring of muscle, pausing while my body adjusted to the invasion. He continued to enter me slowly, tenderly, then rocked harder, pushing more of himself into my tight channel. He muttered against my damp throat, "Baby, oh baby, you are always so tight. You are so fucking hot."

The first time he brushed against my prostate, I twitched. My penis stirred and started getting hard again, though I could have sworn that would have been impossible.

When his balls came up against my crack, he stopped, eyes screwed shut. His breathing was labored. Hot air swept over the sheen of sweat on my chest.

Then he began to move. Slowly at first, his rhythm easy, almost gentle. He slid away until his head nearly popped out, then thrust into me again until his balls slapped against my ass. He repeated this action again and again. His dick slid over my prostate, pushing all my buttons so that I pressed back, breathing in ragged gasps as my cock rose between us. Finally, Charlie reached down and wrapped his hand around my hard-on, and I cried out at the dual sensations.

Pressure rose. I tightened my muscles, squeezing his fat prick and rousing a guttural groan from deep inside him. He drove deeper, riding me unmercifully now. Tighter. Harder. Faster.

Charlie slammed into me, losing all semblance of control. I urged him on, wanting even more of him. He rammed me again and again. The heavy sofa rocked under us.

Each lunge jack-hammered him into me. He grunted with each thrust, his chest hitching. His cock swelled even bigger, and his balls grew tight. His grunts became low, guttural groans that wracked his body and sent my own cock throbbing toward release.

Then he froze, buried so far inside me, I could feel him nudge

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my stomach. I felt his orgasm. My ass tightened around him, and his cum exploded into me. Again and again he erupted, and I squeezed him until there was nothing more.

He sagged forward, his head resting on my shoulder. His panting breath was shallow; his skin radiated heat. He was shaking.

So was I.

Charlie rose, his arms braced on either side of my head. His eyes were wet with tears. I reached up to brush one away with my good hand.

"Please don't, Charlie," I whispered. "Don't cry. I can take anything from you but that."

He swallowed and brushed my face with his lips. "Can you, Tyler? Can you take the fact that I love you, yet I almost let you go rather than face that it meant being gay? That I tried so hard to deny that this meant anything." He kissed my mouth and held me tight against him. "That I couldn't admit to myself, let alone to anyone else, that the thing I wanted most in the world was to fuck another man and be fucked by him?"

"Yes," I murmured against his mouth. "I can, because you're here and you made your choice. And I'm going to love you enough that you'll never doubt it for a minute, or wonder if you made the right choice."

"I love you, Tyler."

The only words I wanted to hear.

He held me close, then I gently pushed him away. "Let's go to bed, Charlie. I'm so exhausted, I can barely see straight. The last month has been... hard."

So, over my protests that I wasn't *that* tired, he scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs to his bedroom. Our bedroom, now. Where he tucked me in and crawled beside me.

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And held me all night long.

\* \* \*

I awoke at first light to find Charlie had rolled away in the middle of the night. Now, I was pressed against his back, one knee thrust between the delicious mounds of his butt cheeks. I thought of the treasure that lay between those muscular globes, and how I had possessed it once, and got instantly hard.

I inched down Charlie's back, spreading feather-light kisses over his flawless skin. When I reached his ass, I held one cheek with my good hand and gently spread him open. My tongue darted out and tasted his masculine sweat, that scent that was uniquely Charlie. I opened him wider and dove in, my tongue acting like a miniature cock as I probed and dug into his tight channel, preparing him for the invasion to come.

Charlie groaned and undulated his hips. When I slipped a finger up his back door, he writhed against my touch. I eased back up along his length, slipping my knee between his legs and pressing against him. I nipped at the skin of his shoulder blades and tasted his earlobes.

"Charlie," I whispered, closing my fist over his swollen cock and pumping him lightly. "Do you want me to fuck you, Charlie?"

"Yes!" he said fiercely. "God yes, fuck me, Tyler. I'm begging you..."

I made sure my cock head was well lubricated with pre-cum and lube, then I turned to him. "I'll need some help," I whispered, holding up my cast.

Charlie grinned and pressed me onto my back before he crawled on top of me, straddling me with his knees. "Oh, man. All

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you have to do is ask.”

As soon as he was in position, I gently inserted myself into his tight hole. Charlie shuddered as he slid onto my pole, engulfing more and more of my cock inside him.

“Oh, God, Tyler. You feel so good.” He moaned as I rocked my hips, pushing myself up and into him, past the ring of muscle, sliding over his prostate, and eliciting more groans from him. I repeated the action, and got the same response.

It was too early in the morning for self-control. I soon lost mine.

Fucking Charlie was an experience I wanted to repeat again and again over the years to come. He was lover, soul mate, best friend, and to have my cock up the ass of such a strong man, was the most powerful aphrodisiac imaginable. I rocketed into him as he slammed onto my cock, crying my name. I moaned, loving the feel of my bare cock stuffing his naked hole.

I reached out and began pumping his cock with my hand. Immediately, he erupted, shooting his load onto my stomach and chest, and all over the sheets under us. I was close behind him, my own cock exploding deep into his channel.

Charlie moaned and slumped onto my cum-slicked chest, his breathing harsh in my ears. I kissed his neck and shoulders, my hand stroking the skin of his back.

He dropped away to lie at my side and we nestled against each other in post-coital bliss. Then his arms wrapped around me and he pulled me close.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he murmured. “Sleep good?”

“Better than good. I’m so glad you sent that message.”

He smiled against my damp skin. “You liked that, did you? Every time I thought of you, I kept seeing Lynx Woods, and the

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image of two cats just seemed so right.”

“Two alphas in a pissing contest.”

“I don’t see it as winners and losers. We both win in this round, don’t you think?”

“Definitely.” I teased his mouth with my lips and tongue, taking my time because kissing Charlie was an experience to be savored. “Can you get away from here for a while? Come back with me to Toronto?”

“I have all these paintings to finish up... can you give me a few days?”

“A few days?” I pretended to think about it.

“Two, maybe three,”

“Three days here, with you. Hmm...I suppose I can handle that.”

He leaned over and gave me a hard kiss. “You’ll pay for that, McKay. But how ’bout we hit the shower right now, and then I’ll make you breakfast.”

“And he feeds me, too. I think I’m in heaven.”

Laughing, he dragged me out of bed and into the bathroom. He slapped my butt. “Get your ass in there and get cleaned up. I have some serious plans for you later, and I want you fed and clean.

We had a minor intermission in the shower involving three soapy hands and a couple of very hard dicks. We laughed as I struggled to keep my cast out of the water with only mixed success. Funny how I was like a teenager around Charlie, perpetually hard and horny. But the man was just so fuckable. Not to mention suckable.

I made coffee while Charlie scrambled eggs with onions and cheese. We ate on the veranda where we caught up on what had been happening in our lives. He told me about finally coming out

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to his family. Trish had taken it better than his parents had, but ultimately, everyone had accepted the news. His parents had told him they loved him, and made it clear they didn't want to lose him.

In turn, I told him of my trip through Great Britain, though I didn't mention Randy. Maybe later. "You should visit the Sussex Weald and the Dingle area. I imagine you'd find a ton of material in both places. I know I'd pay big for those vistas on canvas."

"I've considered it more than once. Even go up to the Hebrides. Maybe you can take me back there, be my tour guide."

"Any time," I said huskily. "Hey, how did you find me there, anyway? I didn't leave any forwarding address." I knew the answer, I just wanted to hear him admit it.

He grinned self-consciously. "I got the information from Michael. He was very reluctant to give it to me at first. I'm afraid I had to do some first-class begging. Then I had to tell him I loved you and wouldn't do anything to hurt you again. That man is altogether too protective of you," Charlie growled. "Are you sure that relationship is over?"

"Completely." I felt warm at Charlie's jealousy. "He feels the same way about Donny as I do about you. He and I are just friends."

"I hope so."

I left my chair and slid onto his lap. I played with the hair of his ponytail. "No need to be jealous."

"I'm not."

"Good."

"I don't get jealous."

"Good."

"No reason to, right?"

"Right. None."



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“Then I’m not jealous.”

“Good.”

He kissed me then, and any doubt I may have had vanished in a wave of desire. I clung to him.

“Love me?” I murmured against his mouth.

“With all my heart.”

“Good.”

He smacked my ass. “Let me make a couple of phone calls, then I’ll meet you in the studio.”

I stood, and Charlie moved past me to climb the stairs. I made my way into the studio and spent the next fifteen minutes studying Charlie’s new paintings. I grew more impressed with his talent with every passing second. I was in awe of him. That he loved me, and wanted to be with me, had me even more awestruck.

When he finally entered the studio, I was sitting in front of the Flowerpot painting, gazing at the play of light and shadow he used to convey the menace of the approaching storm.

He kissed me lightly on the mouth. “All done. You ready to watch me work?”

Over the next three days, a new intimacy grew between us.

It had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with trust. He let me watch him paint, an intimacy he had never offered another person. Even his sister had never seen him at work in his studio.

I finally confessed about Randy, which created an awkward moment we soon got over. I think we both realized how little it meant. Mostly, we talked about each other.

Not that there wasn’t some powerful sex too. Every night Charlie led me upstairs to our bedroom and showed in a multitude of ways, that he loved and cherished me. I returned his passion

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three-fold. There was no slacking of our desire for each other, if anything it grew in strength, surprising us with the potency of our need for each other.

On the morning of the fourth day, we packed and piled our stuff into the Honda Civic and drove away from Gatlinburg. But we knew we'd be back. Soon.

\* \* \*

Toronto was wet and cold. We huddled in the back seat of the taxi, staring out at the gray world beyond the rain-washed windows. The streets swirled with fallen leaves, and the trees thrust their bare branches into the sullen fall sky.

It would be winter soon.

"Thanksgiving will be here before we know it," Charlie said. He held my hand in his lap, ignoring the looks the taxi driver was giving us.

"Thanksgiving—" Then it came to me. "Ah, the American Thanksgiving." I'd already missed the Canadian holiday in October. I hadn't even thought of it while I'd been abroad.

"There's another one?" Charlie asked, then grinned at the look on my face. "Maybe we can have Michael and Donny over for supper. Is there such a thing as too much turkey?"

"Not for Michael there isn't. Let's check with them. Maybe ask a few others, too. I'd like to introduce you to some friends. I've got a great recipe for stuffing."

"No, you have to try my mother's corn bread stuffing. It's not Thanksgiving without it."

I snuggled closer, relieved that he had made it clear he wasn't worried about what people, like the taxi driver, thought about us.

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My thoughts shifted to the way in which we would be spending our holidays. I could see this couple business was going to take some adjusting on both our sides. When I had been with Michael, I'd never had to consider his family since he'd cut off all contact with them. For my part, I had never taken him—or anyone, for that matter—to my home for any holidays. Idly, I wondered if Michael and Donny would be more of a family for each other than Michael and I had been. I hoped so.

Aloud, I said, "I'm going to have to call my mother. What are we going to do about Christmas this year?"

Charlie looked at me, amused. "Christmas? We have some time before we need to worry about it."

"Okay, but still...where are we going to go for it? Where do you usually spend the holidays?"

"At home." He froze.

This time, I laughed at the look of consternation on his face. "Ha! Precisely. And you thought it would be easy."

He sank back into the taxi's patched seat. "You know, I never thought about in-laws in this couple thing. But you get them, don't you?" He looked like he wanted to bury his head in his hands. "I've only told Trish about you. My parents don't know, yet. How are they going to react? I come out one day, the next I'm throwing a whole other family at them."

"The joys of relationships one-oh-one. Talk about a steep learning curve."

The taxi pulled up to the curb in front of my Broadview duplex. We scrambled out, grabbed luggage from the trunk, and stood on the wet sidewalk while I paid the driver.

After lugging bags up the front steps, I fumbled around for my long unused key. That was when I saw the note on the door. I

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grabbed the paper and stuffed it in my pocket, then let us in out of the rain. As we stacked our bags in the foyer, a distant rumble of thunder warned us to shut the front door. I did so and turned on the hall light to erase the deepening gloom. It was going to be a turbulent night.

I glanced wistfully at the inactive fireplace in the front room. I really needed to get that thing cleaned so it could be used. Romantic evenings in front of a roaring fire were suddenly taking on a whole new meaning.

“Don’t forget about the note,” Charlie said.

I pulled it from my pocket, and he looked over my shoulder as I unfolded it and glanced at the handwriting. It was from Michael.

*Meet me at the Tangerine Dream. Imperative you come at once. Will explain when you get there.*

I reread the note a couple of times. “How the hell did he even know we’d be back tonight?”

“Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he means another night, or maybe he just means you.”

I looked at the note again. “No, see it’s dated. Today.”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know then.”

Lightning flashed outside, and the wind picked up, battering the front door of the house.

“You really want to go out in this just to find out?” I said. “Let me call him.”

The phone at Michael and Donny’s rang several times before being picked up by their voice mail. I ignored the breathless request to leave my name and message, and hung up, frowning.

“Nothing?”

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I shook my head.

Charlie rubbed my back through my thin jacket. “Well I don’t mind going down there, if you don’t. We can grab a bite and still get back here early if he’s not around. It’ll save us cooking.”

I could see the value in that. And I was getting hungry. “Sure, let’s do it. I got a sudden craving for one of their beef dips, anyway.”

We bundled up warmly and opted for another taxi, rather than drive around in the bad weather. Thirty minutes later, the taxi dropped us off in front of the neon-sheathed Tangerine Dream.

We rushed through the torrential rain and stopped inside the front door, laughing and shaking water out of our hair and clothes.

“You think maybe we should have stayed at home?” I muttered, then cursed when I stumbled into Charlie in the dark restaurant. “Where the hell are the lights? Did the power go out or something?”

Charlie gripped my arm to steady me. Then his other arm went around my shoulder. Over my protests, he roughly propelled me through the inner door to the bar.

The explosion of light made me duck. I blinked and couldn’t see a thing for several seconds. But I could hear. The room filled with loud cheering and the sound of dozens of hands clapping and banging on tabletops. When my eyes adjusted, the first thing I saw was a ring of familiar faces. The second was the banner:

*CONGRATULATIONS, CHARLIE AND TYLER!  
BEST WISHES TO THE GREATEST COUPLE OF  
THE YEAR!!*

Someone had scribbled the word “second” above the

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“GREATEST.” When my eyes fastened on Michael, I knew exactly who was responsible for this entire evening. I wouldn’t have been very surprised if he had even arranged the weather.

Charlie stood beside me, his arm still around my shoulder. Laughing, he leaned over and gave me a kiss. “Don’t you just love these people? When I told them I wanted something really public to show you how much I loved you, Michael came up with this.”

I spotted Jessie in the crowd, and Karl, and the rest of the crew. Kat was in six-inch spikes and a sequined jumpsuit cut down to show off her rippling, hirsute chest. She winked when she saw me looking and raised her parasol drink in our general direction.

Michael sat under the banner, his arms around Donny as they grinned at my discomposure. There was a pair of empty seats beside them, and Charlie led me over to them, his arm keeping me tight against his hip. He stopped us less than a yard away.

“Well,” Michael drawled. “Did it work?”

“Did you catch that look?” Charlie ran his hand up and down my side. “It worked. Big time.”

“How long have you two been planning this?” I demanded.

“Soon as you got back from Ireland.” Jessie stepped into the breach. I stared at her.

“You, too? Is there anyone not a part of this conspiracy?”

Jessie seemed to consider the question a moment. “The bartender didn’t really have much to do with it. Although he did suggest some really nice Irish beer in honor of your trip.”

I groaned and buried my face against Charlie’s chest, who planted a kiss on top of my damp head.

“Don’t ever doubt the guy loves you, man,” Michael said. “I’ve been arm twisted by some of the best, but this guy had me giving up your whereabouts in Ireland with nothing more than a few glib

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words and a tear or two.”

“Hey,” Charlie protested. “There were no tears. I just asked you politely for Tyler’s location and you eventually gave it to me.”

“Only after you threatened to remove parts of my body that I hold very near and dear to me.” Michael tried to glare from the shelter of Donny’s arms. But he couldn’t stop grinning long enough to make it convincing. “You’re a brute. Worse, you’re an American brute.”

“It’s called negotiating. Something you Northern pansies should get used to.”

“It’s called bullying. I should have mobilized the UN. Yankee Imperialist.”

“Canadian pinko.”

“Capitalist swine.”

“Hoser.”

“Cracker.”

“Crackers are Georgians,” Charlie and I said at the same time.

I grinned up at Charlie. For his part, he gave me a very thorough, very committed kiss. The whole bar was cheering by the time we broke apart.

“You ever going to doubt me again?” Charlie said softly, for my ears only.

I gazed up at him adoringly. “Never.”

And welcomed Charlie’s mouth back on mine.

## **P. A. BROWN**

At 22 years of age, P. A. Brown's life changed forever when she sold everything she owned and moved 2,000 miles away to a city she'd never visited, where she knew no one. Coming from a sheltered life, she spent the next eight years doing her own wild and crazy thing. She roamed the good and bad streets of Los Angeles, doing things that in retrospect were probably downright idiotic. Knowing nothing about the city (or any big city) she made the brilliant decision to get a cheap apartment. She found one, in the heart of a crime-ridden section of Hollywood, one she later found out was called a war zone by the LAPD. There were stabbings and shootings and assaults every weekend. Thus was her introduction to life in a big American city.

Most of her time in L. A. was spent in the underbelly of the city, including a month or so living out of a car. She visited Skid Row, spent time on the streets of Hollywood, and befriended a bartender who was killed after she went home with a customer. And you wonder why she writes crime novels? During the 80s, P. A. saw the advent of a terrible disease no one understood that became known as AIDS. Being immersed in the gay community, P. A. knew a lot of people who died in those days. For a brief period, she was even a "Valley Girl," living within spitting distance of the famous Sherman Oaks Galleria. Does she miss it? Every minute of every day.

For more information on P. A. Brown, please visit her website at:

<http://www.pabrown.ca>



\* \* \*

**Don't miss *Memory Of Darkness*  
by P. A. Brown,  
available at [AmberAllure.com](http://AmberAllure.com)!**

*Johnny Wager has been a loser all his life and proud of it. But when a West Hollywood twink ends up dead in a hotel room with Wager literally holding the bag, he knows his life is going to change for the worse. Pursued by the West Hollywood sheriffs for a murder he knows he didn't commit, Wager has to stay one step ahead of them and prove his innocence. It doesn't help matters any that his own son, Mark Wager, is a deputy sheriff who has joined the manhunt and has more reason than anyone to find the father who failed him all his life and bring him to justice.*

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*Can Wager stop the killers and reconcile with his son or will he end up being the next victim? Betrayed by friends, beset by his own conscience that has come back late in life with a vengeance, and the need to redeem himself, he battles the ruthless mob in the only way he knows how: with cunning and a total disrespect for the law.*

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