

BROKEN



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To Lisa Carr and her family.
Thank you for being my first fans.

PROLOGUE

“YOU awake?” There was no response, so Bennett leaned closer to his lover’s ear and whispered, “Eli?” This time the young man stirred and mumbled a bit, but did not wake. Bennett began to play with Eli’s hair, using a strand to dangle against his nose and tickle him. Eli’s right hand suddenly flew to his face to brush away the nonexistent fly that was bugging him. Bennett chuckled lightly and began to bounce on the bed a bit. “Eli?”

“What?” he groaned finally. He didn’t turn to face Bennett, but kept a death grip on his pillow and his face to the wall. Bennett slowly ran his fingers along the base of his neck and into his hair causing Eli to shiver visibly from the sensation.

“Weren’t you thinking about getting a haircut?”

“You woke me to ask about my hair?” Eli asked; his voice was deep and heavy with sleep. He slowly stretched and rolled over to look at his boyfriend directly. His hooded blue eyes blinked slowly, taking in the man’s most innocent smirk.

“Well, you are getting a bit shaggy,” Bennett said as he reached out and ran the back of his hand along Eli’s jaw where the beginning of a beard was sprouting, “and slightly scruffy.”

“Or could it be that you simply can’t sleep?” Eli asked.

Bennett sighed and decided to let him be. Eli was right. He couldn’t sleep. He flipped onto his back to stare at their ceiling.

“I’m worried about the presentation,” Bennett admitted.

“Your design is flawless,” Eli said with a yawn. “They loved it during the preliminaries.”

“I know. I’m just second guessing myself.”

It was Eli’s turn to sigh. He reached out to rest his hand on his boyfriend’s abdomen and began to make slow circles in the blond fur on his belly. “Please, don’t doubt yourself,” he said softly.

Bennett looked over at Eli and, finding his eyes drifting closed again, he grinned wickedly as an idea popped into his head. “I know how you could make me feel better, sweetie,” he said eagerly.

“How?” Eli asked, fighting another yawn as he watched Bennett scramble onto his knees and reach toward the window.

Sunlight had begun leaking in through the blinds, casting black and gold stripes across their bed. Bennett opened the blinds and glanced at the house next door before snuggling back down next to Eli and kissing him deeply.

“You could help me frighten the neighbors,” he whispered hungrily at his partner’s neck. Eli chuckled delightedly as his lover’s hands began to move over his body.

A GENTLE tapping at the door woke him from his dream. He woke to a dark room. He woke alone. He closed his eyes again and took a deep breath, fighting the tightness that settled in his chest.

“Come in,” he said.

The door opened and cast the silhouette of his housemate on the wall next to his bed.

“Breakfast is ready.”

“Thanks,” he said, keeping his face to the wall and tugging the blankets up and tight to his neck as if he felt a chill. “I’m not hungry.” The figure remained at the door, but said nothing. He could feel the eyes on his back. “I just need to sleep a little longer,” he added. Neither of them said anything further, and the room fell dark again as he watched his friend’s shadow turn and leave. He shut his eyes and began

to drift off.

You should eat.

His eyes opened, and he focused again on the blank wall. “I’m tired.”

You’re tired a lot lately.

“It’s that disorder... seasonal... something. You get it when the days become—” he took a deep breath, trying to clear his head—“when winter approaches. There’s not enough sunlight or something.”

London isn’t known for its sunlight.

“What’s your point?”

You get this way every year, and it’s not a lack of sun, although opening the blinds might help brighten up this cave you’ve created for yourself.

“Leave them.”

The room fell silent again, but he could hear people moving about the house now. There were footsteps above his head, a conversation in the kitchen, and the floorboards creaked in the hallway outside his door.

Is your leg feeling stiff? You really should get out of bed.

He stretched his leg beneath the covers. It was stiff, but he didn’t get up.

Aren’t you going to look at me?

“No.”

Why?

“I remember what you look like.”

Do you?

“Yes.”

Do you remember what I looked like the last time you saw me?

CHAPTER 1

ALEC'S heart skipped a beat as the cab they were in nearly slammed into the back of a large truck ahead of them.

"We'll get out here, thanks," he shouted to the driver. The taxi stopped abruptly, throwing Alec off balance and against the back of the front seat. He quickly fished out his cash and handed it to the driver.

"Why here?" Mirabell whined.

"Because I want to live," he said under his breath as he stepped out and offered her his hand.

"Ooh, terribly chivalrous of you," she said, accepting it and deftly hopping to the street. She was tiny and appeared delicate, but she was far from breakable.

Alec stood on the street, looking around. "Where to?" he asked.

"If I don't get caffeine, I will gut someone," she said as she struggled to find her cigarettes in her purse. "Ah ha!" she said, holding the pack aloft. "This way."

Off she went up Old Compton with Alec in tow. She lit her cigarette and took a deep drag as the people before her parted like the Red Sea before Moses. Her bright, stylish clothes and frighteningly red hair clearly announced her presence, direction, and intent to the populace, a populace dull by comparison.

Though he was much taller and his stride longer, Alec had to fight to keep up as her quick little steps carried her briskly ahead of him. He

ran his fingers through his wavy, black hair in exasperation. “Exactly where are we going?” he asked.

“First we’re stopping in Algerian Coffee for... uh, coffee, then we’re going to pick up a few things for your new flat. You’ll need flannels, bath towels, bed sheets, pillow cases, and pillows,” she shouted over her shoulder. “What size is the bed, again?”

“The ad said it was a queen.”

“Of course it is,” she said with a laugh, and Alec frowned.

“I haven’t gotten the room yet,” he said. Mirabell came to an abrupt halt, and he almost ran her over. “I have an interview with the owner in a day or two,” Alec said.

“Didn’t you go to school with this bird?” she asked, looking at him over her glasses. “Aren’t you both products of some backwater, southern American bastion of education?”

He smiled tolerantly at her characterization of Louisiana State University. He had to admit to himself that her eagerness to be rid of him made sense. He had been crashing on her sofa for nearly two months.

“We had a couple of psychology classes together, but it’s not like we were best friends.” Mirabell stood there, waiting impatiently for him to continue. Her pointy-toed shoe tapped incessantly as his eyes traveled over the faces in the crowd rushing past them. “Actually, I’m surprised she remembered me,” he said. “I was only there for a couple terms.” He looked down at her, but she said nothing. “We talked once or twice during a study group. That’s it.”

Mirabell spun on her heel to continue up the street, and Alec followed. A block or so later they reached the coffee shop.

“Wait here,” she commanded as she removed a wallet from her purse and shoved the emerald green bag into his hands. She disappeared into the shop, leaving him standing on the foreign street and feeling very far from home. He looked around at the people walking past him. They resembled those in his hometown of Huntington—just better dressed.

Alec had left West Virginia to begin his psychology studies at

LSU more than a decade earlier. Unfortunately and for personal reasons, he was only there for a short while before relocating to Chicago to complete his degree. He had spent about ten years there and would have remained if not for another instance of personal difficulty which had brought him to London.

He looked around and found it not so different from Chicago. It had the same bustling energy and crowds needing to be somewhere else right away. It served up horrid traffic, but that was balanced by a wealth of cultural and artistic diversions. He was curious about the social scene, but he knew he'd find his way eventually—just as he had before.

Passersby tossed a few curious glances at him and his purse, which prompted Alec to stare into the dark confines of the shop that had swallowed Mirabell. Where was she? He caught the eye of an older gentleman loaded down with shopping bags as he tagged along behind a very determined-looking woman. The man gave him an understanding smile and quickly disappeared into the crowd as he ran after his wife.

Alec wondered how long it took to get coffee as his gaze wandered a bit farther up the street. He saw a burgundy awning extending out from the coffee shop, covering a small collection of tables and chairs. He saw several small groups of people sitting there, enjoying their coffee and spirited conversation.

At the table nearest him, three people were sitting: two young men and an older woman. No one spoke, but they made rapid, complicated movements with their hands. He understood immediately that they were communicating with sign language. He glanced beyond them and saw several diners staring at them. *Rude much?* However, he quickly found his eyes drawn back to their discussion.

He was nearly entranced as their hands sometimes made broad, sweeping motions and other times paused; hanging in midair, their fingers flashed quickly through a series of movements. He knew they were spelling out a word because he'd learned the signing alphabet once, many years ago. He doubted he could recognize any of the letters now, however. *F! That was the letter F!* He was thrilled at this for some reason, but then he laughed quietly. *I've only twenty-five more to go.*

He watched their facial expressions. Raised eyebrows indicated a question. Furrowed brow could mean anger or intensity of thought. Sometimes the gestures would become forceful or abrupt as one tried to get his or her point across. Suddenly, Alec recognized another sign: the international sign for “Check, please!”

The group paid and prepared to leave, gathering up their few books and shopping bags. Then one of the young men grabbed his iPod. *What the hell do you need with an iPod?* The man clipped it to his jacket and hung the ear buds around his neck before slinging his backpack over his shoulder and reaching for his—cane.

Unashamedly staring now, Alec watched the young man and his friends leave the shelter of the awning and hug their goodbyes. The man turned and began walking directly toward him, and Alec quickly tried to focus his attention elsewhere. After all, there was plenty to look at on the busy street. Why was he staring at this guy?

The man looked to be somewhere in his mid to late twenties and was about one or two inches shorter than Alec with a slight build. He probably weighed 140 pounds... 150, tops. *Pounds*. He knew that wasn't the right word. *They call it something else over here.*

Despite the limp and the cane, the man appeared quite fit. As he watched him, an unconscious smile spread across Alec's face. The man paused near him to adjust his backpack, tug his cap down tight on his head, and put in his headphones. He selected a play list and prepared to cross the busy street as Alec fought back the urge to stop traffic for him.

Suddenly, a couple of teenagers ran by. One of them grabbed hold of the man's backpack as he passed. He was counting on his momentum to throw his victim off balance so that he could make off with the bag. He counted wrong. The man held tightly to the backpack and jerked the boy backward, clean off his feet. The boy landed with a thud, and the wind was knocked out of him. The other boy continued running as the focus of Alec's attention stood there and tickled the teen's throat with the tip of his cane.

“What, exactly, were you up to, little man?” he asked calmly, smiling down at the boy. His voice was deep, deeper than Alec thought possible. It resonated. The teenager gasped, fighting desperately to fill

his lungs and squirm away. “Relax and breathe. It’ll come,” the man assured him as he tugged his ear buds out.

The man must have felt himself being watched because he glanced up at Alec with eyes so large and bright blue that Alec felt his heart stutter and his grip tightened on Mirabell’s bag. He smiled uncertainly and thought again how ridiculous he must look standing there holding the purse. Blue Eyes returned his attention to his captive who was breathing easier now.

“It looks like your friend has abandoned you. If I let you go—unharméd,” he began, slowly blinking for effect and pressing his cane tip more firmly against the boy’s Adam’s apple, “you must promise never to try this again.” The boy nodded rapidly. “The next cripple you try to toss might break open your wee skull and spill your tiny brain all over the street.”

Blue Eyes smiled broadly before allowing the boy to scramble to his feet and flee. Both he and Alec watched the teen go, but when the boy was a good block away, he turned and flipped them off. Blue Eyes simply sighed as he replaced his headphones and then favored Alec with a brief smile before walking across the street and disappearing into the crowd.

Nice smile.

CHAPTER 2

ELI adjusted the bass levels on his stereo equipment and achieved the perfect balance for the tune he was burning. He sat alone in his main floor bedroom working on a party disc for a friend who had big plans for the weekend. He quickly plugged in his headset so that his housemates wouldn't hear. If they did, they might abandon their individual pursuits and gather in the living room for an impromptu dance session.

There was nothing they liked better than hot, sweaty dancing to pounding house music, except maybe hot, sweaty sex. It always got them in the mood. Tony and Lyle were pretty boys, forever young and fierce. He and their other housemate, Ilsa, had taken to simply watching them from the hallway and shaking their heads in disapproval.

The three of them were probably spread throughout the property: Tony in the basement painting, Lyle upstairs gathering laundry, and Ilsa had mentioned something about finishing up her yard work. Eli glanced out his window. It was an uncommonly hot day outside, so Ilsa was probably ready to drop in the grass at this very moment.

As the music poured into his head, memories of joining the boys on the dance floor came back to him. He grinned as he recalled dancing with Bennett until he thought they might drop—hot, sticky, and grinding against each other. Eli pressed the ear buds deeper and let the throbbing beat fill his skull, making it vibrate.

His eyes closed, and he swayed to the rhythm as he sat in his chair. Behind his eyelids, he could see the lights pulsing. The dance

floor was so crowded it resembled a human carpet as it undulated beneath a high, smoke-clouded ceiling—not cigarette smoke, that was a no-no, but that theatrical smog the clubs pumped out for effect.

He could smell it, and he wondered if it was not just as bad for them as the nicotine kind. He smiled again, imagining them jumping up and down in place, the floor feeling like it might give way. It was almost as if they were trying to cave it in; the entire time they laughed and smiled at the prospect of tomorrow's headlines.

FLOOR COLLAPSES AT GAY CLUB DUE TO GREAT DJ!

Of course, no one would be hurt and the damage would be quickly repaired, probably in time for the next weekend. It would give them all something mind-blowing to talk about during the week.

“Oh, yeah, I was there!”

“Saw the whole thing!”

“It was horrifying!”

“I thought I was a dead man!”

He chuckled out loud as he swayed. He imagined Bennett returning the smile and grabbing him suddenly, pulling him close, and kissing him deeply. Eli could almost feel Bennett's tongue brush against his; the sensation was hypnotic. Eli reluctantly broke the kiss and rested his head against his lover's chest where a dusting of coarse hair tickled his smooth face. He could smell Bennett's scent—just there, at his neck. They were forever young, forever fierce, and forever in love.

A jolt of pain shot through Eli's right leg, abruptly bringing him back to the present. The air-conditioning in the house had made it ache more than usual. He quickly tore the ear buds from his head and switched off the music still pouring from them.

He began massaging his leg, trying to work out the stiffness. His hands moved slowly down his calf and over his ankle, but it wasn't helping. He cursed, grabbed his cane, and struggled to his feet. Crossing the room to his bed, he angrily tossed the cane aside and stretched his leg out. He positioned it so that the sunlight spilling through the window would help warm it as he massaged the muscles. He didn't go dancing anymore; he hadn't been for nearly two years.

The anniversary of Bennett's death was quickly approaching. It seemed to come around faster each year, or maybe his anticipation of it began earlier. His friends would want to take him out somewhere quiet like Collette's Pub, a place they could get pissed in peace. They could talk there without all the dancing and the meat-market atmosphere. There would be no pulsing lights and no drama. It was all dark wood and warmth, their own little hidey-hole with good food and friendly people.

Of course, there would be the occasional sound of furniture being shoved backward as a couple of old lesbians stood to do battle. The noise made by ancient, rickety wooden chairs as they scraped across the floor was unmistakable. It always caused curious heads to turn, but a forceful "Ladies!" from Collette was usually all it took to defuse the situation.

The aching of his leg was beginning to ease. His friends would want to keep his thoughts occupied because they didn't want him lost in memories of his lover. What they failed to realize was that it couldn't be avoided. Bennett was everywhere in this city. He was in the clubs, at the theater, the concert halls, and the market; he was up one street and down another. Bennett was in the walls of their very home.

After getting out of the hospital, Eli had moved into the main floor bedroom while Tony and Lyle took over his old room on the second floor—the one he had shared with Bennett. It was the largest in the house and easiest to divide. Besides, he could no longer manage the stairs. Ilsa remained where she was, quite happy in her small back room on the second floor. There had been occasional whispers about renting the partially furnished attic room, but nothing had been decided.

He heard a door slam somewhere in the house and then footsteps on the stairs. Lyle had probably gathered another load of laundry. He was terribly neat, occasionally nagging, and spent much of his spare time cleaning up after his other three housemates. Eli stopped rubbing his leg and listened. The house was silent for a moment. He imagined Lyle standing just outside his door wondering if he should knock... then he knocked.

"Eli? Got filth?"

"Come in, Lyle."

The door opened and Lyle walked in. He was tall and slender with a shaved head and large dark brown eyes. His impeccably neat goatee was sprinkled with gray, “prematurely,” he swore. He was carrying a tall wicker basket and a duffel bag, both of which he dropped to the floor.

“Just came to grab your laundry, mate.”

“It’s just there,” Eli said, indicating the dark blue duffel behind the door.

“Oh, you got it together, eh?” Lyle asked, grabbing it up.

“I can still manage some things,” he snapped, instantly regretting his tone when he saw the look on his friend’s face.

“I know that,” Lyle said. A silence fell between them as he moved all the laundry into the hall, and then he stepped back into the room. Eli felt a discussion coming on. “You know, some of us were talking about what to do about Sunday.”

“Sunday?”

“We thought maybe dinner out at a restaurant might be nice. We haven’t done that in a while.” Eli said nothing, just kept massaging his leg. “What do you think?” Lyle asked.

“I think it sounds like you want to celebrate something and, as far as I know, there’s nothing worth celebrating,” he said; his tone was more cross than he intended.

Lyle shot him a reproving look. “Tony’s show at Prim Gallery,” he said.

Eli’s eyes went wide in shock and shame. “I’m sorry, I completely forgot,” he said, falling over himself to apologize. “I didn’t mean... I’m sorry, Lyle.” He cursed himself for being so self-absorbed. “Of course, dinner out before the show would be great and a complete celebration.”

Suddenly understanding the confusion, Lyle began speaking very rapidly. “Oh, no, I’m sorry, I meant this Sunday, not next month, not *that* Sunday.” The color drained from his friend’s face, but Eli raised his hand and waved off the comment. Lyle fell silent, smiled weakly, and nodded before leaving the room.

Eli fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He took several deep breaths, trying to untie the knot developing in his gut. He thought it bitterly amusing that he could sail through the other eleven months, but as summer waned, the fog in his brain began spreading. The memories, depression, and nightmares grew more vivid. He was easily agitated and often took it out on those closest to him. Days like today, he just wanted to curl up and die.

He closed his eyes and continued his breathing—taught to him by a therapist he saw shortly after waking up in the hospital. Over the past two years, he'd been surprised to find it did help hold his anxiety at bay. It calmed him. It relaxed him. Unfortunately, it also helped him drift off to sleep and into nightmares.

FROM where he was lying, he could see blood on Bennett's shirt. It was a new shirt, and he'd never be able to get it clean again. In his head, he ran through the list of stain removal strategies his mother had taught him before he left home, but he could come up with nothing that would rescue the shirt. *Rescue... that would be nice.*

The concrete was cold and rough against his face. He couldn't raise his head to get relief because a medium-sized skinhead had his arms pulled behind him and his knee in Eli's back, pinning him to the alley floor. The thug jeered and laughed as his two bigger buddies continued to beat Bennett to death as Eli watched. *You don't even look like yourself anymore.* Bennett's short blond hair was dark and shiny with blood; his mouth was distorted. He'd lost some teeth. Eli could no longer see the green of his eyes, because they were swollen shut.

He struggled beneath the thug, but wasn't strong enough to free himself. And if he had, what would he do? What could he do? When they were first cornered after leaving the theater, Eli's instinct was to run. He had always been a good runner and knew they wouldn't have a prayer of catching him under normal circumstances. With the threat of a severe beating nipping at his heels, there's no telling how fast he could go.

However, Bennett gave up running from idiots like this years ago. He wouldn't even entertain the idea. Bennett Ian Tucker was a fighter.

Eli could see it in his eyes the moment it began. He also saw fear in them, concern for him; but he wasn't leaving without Bennett. He might not be much good in a fight, but Eli wouldn't abandon him. Now, with his right leg shattered, his running days were probably over.

He thought he heard sirens, but it may have been the ringing in his ears. However, their attackers also appeared to pause and listen like antelope on the plains of Africa sensing something dangerous rustling in the bush, something they feared. The biggest of them had Bennett by the hair and had drawn back his fist to cave in Bennett's face, but he stopped, stood up, and let Bennett's head drop to the pavement with a dull thud.

Eli couldn't hear what they were saying. He kept his gaze locked on his boyfriend's face, searching for some sign that Bennett was still in there. Eli was only a few feet from him, but it might as well have been miles. The thug pinning Eli rose and joined the others for a discussion. Perhaps they were talking about wrapping up their little party, killing them both, and then heading home for a beer.

Though he was free, Eli couldn't move because his ribs cried out whenever he took a breath. Bennett was no longer moving, and Eli couldn't tell if he was still breathing. All he wanted was to crawl over to Bennett so that they could die together, but he could barely raise his head.

"Hey!"

He didn't bother to look up as their leader shouted at him. Eli's eyes remained fixed on Bennett because he thought he saw some movement. Perhaps he had tried to open his eyes or speak. Surely he hadn't imagined it.

"Remember this, you filthy faggot!" their leader said as he strolled up to his boyfriend, drew back his boot-clad foot and kicked him in the face. Eli's heart stuttered and then raced. A deep groan tried to build in his chest, but he couldn't draw enough breath to scream. He felt tears stinging the cuts on his face as his thug returned. The man smiled wickedly down at him as he drew his foot back. *I'm ready*. The man kicked him as hard as he could in the stomach, forcing what little breath he had out of him, and Eli blacked out.

Later, he heard businesslike, efficient voices. There was light

coming from somewhere.

“Make room at the mouth to get that bus back here for the bodies.”

Bodies?

“How many?” a different voice asked.

“Two. I thought it was a mugging gone wrong, but look at this.”

An officer lifted the sheet off Bennett’s body.

“Bloody hell!”

“We checked his pockets. They’d been to the theater. We found ticket stubs and a receipt for Racer’s up the street. Sean’s there now asking around.”

“Oh Lord, the queers will go through the roof!”

“As we should,” the first officer said under his breath as he scribbled down notes about the crime scene.

Suddenly there were hands on Eli. They were moving him, but his ribs cried out and he gasped and coughed violently.

“Holy shit! This one’s alive!”

“Mother fuck! Who checked him?” someone demanded, but no one spoke up.

There was hurried movement, running, shouting, and then gentler hands were touching him, checking him over for broken bones. He tasted copper as blood poured from his mouth. He tried to open his eyes, but only one would open slightly. There was a woman leaning over him wearing a dark blue uniform and latex gloves.

“Hold on,” she said softly. “You’re going to be all right.” She reached down and brushed his hair back from his forehead. Her similarly dressed male partner gently helped her place him on his back. He almost passed out from the pain despite their care. They continued to examine him and took his vitals.

“Respirations are shallow. Ribs?”

“I count four broken, possibly five. Right leg. Skull is fractured, jaw might be broken. BP’s low. Belly is hard and distended.”

The male paramedic suddenly stood up. “We’re going, now!” he

shouted.

He disappeared. Eli heard a car engine come to life and then the beeping of a back-up alarm. The female attendant had started an IV by the time her partner returned with a stretcher. The two of them, along with several detectives, carefully moved him onto it and belted him in. As they rolled him toward the ambulance, he tried to look for Bennett but couldn't turn his head because of a neck brace. Several officers watched as he passed by them.

“He’s about my son’s age,” one whispered in disbelief.

Eli felt cold and, against his better judgment, allowed his eyes to close.

HE WOKE with a start as someone banged on his bedroom door. The room was dark and much too cold to bear. His leg throbbed as he found his cane and crossed the room to turn off the air-conditioning. For a few moments, he stood in the darkness, his heart racing, and listened to his panicked breathing.

“Eli!” More banging. “It’s dinner, sugar!” It was Ilsa.

“C-coming!” he managed.

He looked across the room and was startled to see a red eye blazing away at him. His stereo system’s accusatory stare burned through the darkness. “You forgot me,” it seemed to say. He switched off his stereo, and moving as quickly as he could, he entered his tiny bathroom. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust after he turned on the light, and then he relieved himself before quickly washing his hands and face.

He wasn’t particularly hungry, but if he took too long to appear, Ilsa would return to collect him, and he hated it when she fussed over him. Reaching for the light, Eli paused as he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Before he could stop himself, he leaned closer to the mirror and ran his finger along a scar just below his jaw. It was barely noticeable, but he felt like it could be seen from space. He lifted the hair out of his eyes to peek at the pale scar at his hairline.

His index finger traced his left eye socket looking for a

depression. It had been cracked, but the only evidence of it now was a tiny bit of nerve damage. His eyelid would droop or become sluggish when he was tired or drunk. His fingers traveled on to search his skull, and he found unevenness where another fracture had occurred.

Occurred. That's the word the doctor had used. Eli smiled sadly at the memory. It was as if his skull had fractured spontaneously without the force of a skinhead's hate behind it. His hair covered it, but he knew it was there. He examined his nose, which was really the only part of his face he liked. It had been broken for the second time and now had a little kink in it which he had decided was endearing. He stopped himself. He didn't want a repeat of last year when he had taken this examination too far.

Eli had climbed up on the rim of the tub to get a look in the mirror at the scars on his torso and had very nearly broken his neck. But even more troubling was what he saw in the mirror after climbing back down: Bennett standing there.

He had watched in disbelief as his dead partner stepped wet and steamy from the shower and moved to stand behind him. He had wrapped his arms around Eli, pulling him back against his chest. Eli had closed his eyes, slipping happily into the fantasy as Bennett began tickling his neck with kisses. But when he opened his eyes, he had only seen Bennett's sunken face covered in blood.

Now here he was again—looking in the mirror, assessing the physical and emotional damage from two years ago. Eli found himself staring into his own eyes for a long time. They looked haunted, and he could feel a familiar tightness forming in his throat. Knowing the tears were close behind, he sighed and left the bathroom.

Eli paused at his bedroom door and scanned the shadowy interior of his room. His gaze came to rest on a couple of photographs that were caught in the light from the bathroom. One was a picture showing the two of them at a New York City Pride celebration three years before. They looked ridiculously happy, but he couldn't remember what they had been laughing about. His hand was shaking a bit when opened his door and headed to dinner.

CHAPTER 3

ILSA checked the oven while keeping an ear out for Eli. She had been concerned he might not join them for dinner, and with that in mind, she prepared one of his favorite meals: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a steamed vegetable medley.

They always ate well, thanks to her culinary education, but the unseasonably hot weather wasn't a good match for using the oven. Even so, the menu was set, and she was sure Eli could smell the meal all the way in his room.

She switched off the oven immediately after removing the meat, and then, dodging Tony who was parked in front of the icebox and slowly adding cubes to his whisky, she carefully placed the hot pan on the kitchen island. Lyle had set the table and was now at the other end of the island vigorously mixing seasonings into the vegetables. Ilsa quickly sliced the loaf and transferred it to a serving dish.

Tony took a spot against a doorframe and watched the hurried activity of his housemates. It looked like they were almost done. He ran his glass across his forehead and opened the back door to let in a breeze before heading for the dining room. Lyle finished his mixing, grabbed a small tray of butter and, nimbly whipping around a slow-moving Tony, carried them in and placed them on the table. He zipped back into the kitchen to grab the mashed potatoes and returned.

Over the clatter of dishes and preparations, Ilsa thought she heard Eli's door. She paused in the middle of garnishing the neatly arranged meatloaf and listened. She detected the muffled tap of his rubber-tipped

cane as he came down the hall toward the dining room.

There was a knock at the front door, and the sounds of Eli's approach changed direction. Ilsa heard the door open and then muffled conversation. Tony paused to glance at the visitor Eli was speaking with.

"It's Brandt," he said as he resumed his stroll to the table.

"What?" Ilsa asked.

"At the door, it's Ellison Brandt... from next door." He sipped his drink. "Probably delivering another misplaced package."

Eli entered the dining room. "Package for you, Tony, left it on the hall table," he said as he took a seat next to Lyle. Tony saluted Eli with his drink just as Ilsa set the tray of meat in the center of the table and sat down.

"I don't know how that man affords his wife," Tony said. "She's having crap delivered every few days, and I'm tired of my gear getting lost in the shuffle."

Eli was squinting in the brightness of the dining room, but that didn't surprise Ilsa when she considered all the time he had been spending in his darkened room.

"Sorry, I must have dozed off," he said, glancing around at his friends. He accepted the dish of potatoes from Tony, who had already scooped two huge ladles of them onto his plate.

"No kidding," Ilsa laughed as she dropped into her chair. She nibbled a green bean and looked up at Eli's hair. He blushed brightly and tried to smooth it back down on his head. Tony and Lyle quickly filled their plates with everything but vegetables and began eating.

"Must you do that?" Lyle snapped.

"What?" Tony asked.

"You're making yummy sounds as you eat," Lyle said glaring at him.

"Guys," Ilsa interrupted. "Let's not start, okay?"

The two of them looked at her as if she were speaking Aramaic. "What did we do?" Tony asked as Lyle nodded in agreement. A smile

touched Eli's lips. Ilsa spotted it but said nothing.

"You two are notorious for fighting over the silliest things," she said as she unceremoniously dished out vegetables onto both their plates. "You should admit you want each other and get it over with." Struck dumb by the accusation, they simply stared at her. "Go on!" she said, glancing toward the hall. "Upstairs. Eli and I will wait for you."

Both men appeared too shocked to continue with their disagreement. Tony avoided looking at Lyle and began to nervously tug on his braid. His hair was thinning in front, "prematurely," he swore, but he had managed to produce a magnificent long braid of blond hair.

"Leave it to you, Ilsa," Lyle said with a giggle, "to say the most outrageous thing. Tony and I are not remotely interested in each other. We're just friends."

"Right. We love each other like brothers; we always have," Tony said.

Ilsa looked at them through half-open, suspicious eyes. What neither of the men knew was that there were bets going around in their small community of friends as to when they'd finally cave in and hook up. The wagering intensified when it became widely known that they were now "platonically" sharing a bedroom.

They were hardly compatible. Tony was a free spirited artist, which was code for slob. He was also a self-absorbed, childish, heavy drinker, and his half of their bedroom would have been a disaster if not for Lyle's insistence on order.

She looked around the table at her housemates and shook her head. The gay obsession with perfection had them all looking a bit too thin for her taste. Perhaps her cooking might put some pounds on them—if they ate enough of it, that is.

Ilsa was perfect in her own way: a beautiful, black, strong Southern American woman who enjoyed speaking her mind and taking up space. She also liked to point out that she hadn't grown into the woman she was by eating rice cakes and lettuce. She'd grown up on grits, bacon, Moon Pies, and burgers.

She kept glancing at Eli, hoping he would enter the conversation. He didn't. She watched him place a small amount of food on his plate

and wondered if he knew she was watching him; was that for her benefit? He was sleeping too much, not eating enough, and isolating himself, as if interacting with his housemates was becoming a strain.

She watched him push his food around his plate. *I have to stop playing mother.* She focused on her own food, but couldn't keep thoughts at bay of restoring Eli to the man he'd been. He had regained his strength but not his spirit, and she believed he needed a different kind of therapy. He took part in some sessions for survivors of trauma but had given up after only a few, declaring he had no need of it. However, Ilsa had a plan.

"I've set a meeting for a new boarder," she announced to the table. Everyone paused in their eating to look at her, not quite sure they'd heard correctly.

"Boarder?" Tony asked.

"Yes. He's an American here to do research for a book."

"He'll take the attic room, then?" Lyle wondered aloud, already calculating in his mind what cleaning needed to be done and how the furniture should be placed. Ilsa nodded absently as she watched Eli return to his meal without a word.

"What sort of book?" Lyle wanted to know.

"I don't know," she lied.

"Is he... family?" Tony asked, and Lyle shot him a dirty look.

"Of course," Ilsa said, a bit taken aback.

"Well, you know, Ilsa, you have been known to..." Tony said, wriggling his eyebrows up and down. Ilsa snorted with laughter.

On two occasions, she had brought men home for a romp, much to the shock of Tony, Lyle, Eli, and Bennett. She now thought of herself as bisexual, announcing that men were an acquired taste, and if ever she met an uncommonly spectacular one, he might be worth a shag. This amused her housemates to no end.

Suddenly, Eli grabbed his plate and got up from the table.

"You're done?" Ilsa asked.

"I'm just not very hungry," he said as he walked into the kitchen.

“I’ll wrap this up for later.”

Ilsa knew it would never be touched. “I’ve got hot apple pie and vanilla ice cream, sweetie,” she said. Eli’s activities in the kitchen ceased for a moment. *I’ve got him.*

“Maybe later,” he said as he finished in the kitchen and limped back to his room.

“Is the new guy good-looking?” Tony and Lyle asked simultaneously.

CHAPTER 4

PEACHES RESTAURANT was a popular oddity among London eateries. It offered Southern American cooking courtesy of an honest-to-God Southern American. Alec walked through the doors of Ilsa's restaurant in search of a home. The ad he'd seen said she would be conducting interviews, and he was ready to make his pitch for her attic room.

Mirabell had given him the once-over before shoving him out the door. "Change your shirt," she'd instructed. "You want her to want to live with you."

The main room of the restaurant, done in a trendy pale blue and chocolate brown, was empty. He stood nervously by the entrance and searched for any signs of life. He wasn't entirely sure he'd recognize her after all these years, but the moment she pushed through the kitchen doors and spotted him, he knew he had the right place and the right woman.

She was tall for a woman, about five-nine, with coffee-colored skin, warm caramel eyes, and wavy dark hair. Alec wondered what her hair looked like when she wasn't on the job because, at the moment, it was pulled back and tied on top of her head in a dramatic, tangled mess.

"Alec?" she asked as she approached him, wiping her hands quickly on her apron.

"Yes. Ilsa?" He shook her hand and smiled.

“Let’s have a seat, shall we?”

They entered the seating area and grabbed a table in the center. The moment they sat, a waiter appeared.

“May I bring you something to drink?” he asked, startling Alec, who glanced at Ilsa. He hadn’t expected a meal.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, “but I’m giving the wait staff and my support kitchen staff evaluations today.”

“So I’m your guinea pig?” Alec asked and she nodded. “What sort of food do you serve here?” She didn’t answer. Instead, she sat back, crossed her legs, folded her arms across her chest, and looked pointedly at their waiter.

“Sir, we offer a wide selection of classic Southern American dishes. Comfort food, if you will.” He spoke crisply and clearly.

“In that case I’ll start with iced tea.”

The waiter turned to Ilsa without missing a beat.

“And you, ma’am?”

“I’ll have the same. Unsweetened, please.”

“Make mine unsweetened also,” Alec amended quickly.

“Yes, sir. I’ll be right back with your drinks and some water.” The waiter turned and headed to the bar. Ilsa watched him go. She appeared to be expecting something.

“Davy! Menus!” she shouted. They heard some glasses rattle violently behind the bar, but no breakage. “Also you didn’t introduce yourself.”

“I thought you were the chef here,” Alec said. “Are you also the manager?”

“The owner—much to the manager’s dismay—wants me to train as backup manager, so I’m putting everyone through their paces this afternoon.”

“And loving it, by the look of things,” Alec said with a smile. Ilsa returned it just as their waiter appeared with their drinks. He carefully lowered them one by one onto their table.

“My name is David”—he glanced sternly at Ilsa who only grinned wickedly at him—“and I’ll be your waiter tonight.” When he was done placing the drinks, he pulled two menus from under his tray and placed them on the table. “I’ll be back after you’ve had time to look over our selections.” But before he could leave, Ilsa spoke up.

“Any specials?” she asked as she opened her menu.

David appeared to curse himself silently, but then, in his most professional voice he said, “Grilled chicken, boiled red potatoes, and French cut green beans.”

“Ah, sounds like heaven,” Alec said. “I’ll have that, but could I have garlic potatoes?”

“Absolutely, sir.” David turned to Ilsa and waited. She took her time.

“I’ll have a burger, well-done with pickles, catsup, mayo, mustard... no cheese, tomato, or onions.” The waiter was writing furiously on his order pad. “And I want it on Texas toast with a side of steak fries.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He collected the menus and fled to the kitchen. Ilsa sipped her tea and looked quite pleased with herself.

“You appear positively drunk with power,” Alec said.

Ilsa chuckled lightly. “It’s all for show. The staff here is excellent,” she said softly. She pulled an ice chip from her tea and popped it in her mouth. “This is really more of a test for me than for them.”

“But comfort food?”

“Yeah, I’ve been slowly expanding the menu here for three years. A little bit here, a little bit there.”

“I guess there’s only so much fish and chips a Southern girl like you can eat.”

“You got that right!” Ilsa said as she sat forward and laughed heartily. “My next hurdle is getting them to accept sweet cole slaw with their fish instead of vinegar.” Alec chuckled. “My housemates assure me the planet will stop spinning if I add it to the menu.”

“About your friends, how do they feel about a new boarder?”

“Well, you wouldn’t really be a new boarder; you’d be the first. All of us moved in together at relatively the same time four years ago.”

“So I’d be the outsider?”

“Not for long. We’re a good bunch of coconuts. You’d probably fit right in.”

“I appreciate that, Ilsa, but I’m curious... did you feed the other candidates for the room like you’re feeding me?”

“Honestly, Alec, you’re my first and only choice,” she said. He couldn’t hide his surprise, and he wondered why he warranted such consideration. “Think of this as a celebratory welcome to your new home.”

“Really? Don’t you want to run me by the others?”

“Not necessary. I own the house, and they’ve already expressed an interest in meeting you.”

“Well, that’s fantastic. I’ve been in London nearly two months, and I think the friend I’ve been staying with is about ready to chuck me out on the street.”

“That difficult to live with, huh?” Ilsa asked.

“Not me. She’s just very particular about her space,” Alec said diplomatically as he recalled several of Mirabell’s tantrums. His thoughts eventually returned to Ilsa. “I’m surprised you remembered me from college.”

“Oh, I didn’t,” she said just as David returned with their food. “I found your ad seeking a room to rent online. I didn’t realize who you were until I Googled you.” She took a knife and sliced her massive burger in two. She scrutinized the center and found it perfectly cooked. “Congratulations on the book, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

Alec had written a bestseller on surviving trauma and loss that was now being considered for some university psychology curriculums.

“Thank you, David,” Alec said as the waiter finished delivering their meal. He beamed gratefully down at Alec a bit too long,

apparently, because Ilsa cleared her throat menacingly and chased the young man off.

The food smelled delicious. Alec eagerly took a mouthful of buttery garlic potatoes and decided he could die a happy man. Ilsa watched him and smiled as his eyes rolled back in his head. They ate much of their meal in joyful silence.

“Dessert?” Ilsa asked a good while later.

“Good Lord, no!”

“Aw, come on. We’ve got—oops, wait a minute. Davy!” The waiter rushed over. “What dessert would you recommend?”

“We have a warm chocolate nut brownie with vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup. We also have a fresh apple pie or crème brûlée. If you’d like something lighter, we have a succulent fresh fruit bowl.”

Ilsa looked at Alec seductively, and he succumbed.

“I’ll have the brownie and ice cream, but hold the chocolate sauce,” Alec said prompting Ilsa to cover her heart as if wounded. Alec shook his head. “It’s overkill. There is such a thing as too sweet.”

“Bring me his chocolate sauce in a cup with a straw,” she said to David.

The waiter’s eyes widened in shock. “Really?” he asked.

“No.” Ilsa began to giggle. “Just bring me the fruit bowl. I love fresh melon.” He quickly cleared away their dishes and headed for the kitchen.

“So where did you end up after you left LSU?” Alec asked.

“I went to New York University to study film.”

“We both fled. I landed in Chicago shortly after you left; I lived there for ten years.”

“Why did you leave Louisiana?”

“Personal reasons.”

Ilsa nodded. “Me too. I just wanted to get away from there—from the parents. You know, they disowned me after I came out. They thought my talk of being a lesbian came from curiosity and my

psychology studies. They figured it would pass.”

“What changed their minds?”

“I brought home a girlfriend,” Ilsa said, smiling wistfully. “Once they realized I was serious and that their friends and neighbors would know, they wanted nothing more to do with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No worries, sugar. They told me I could come back to visit when ‘I got right with the Lord’.”

“I’m surprised. I thought they might be more open-minded, naming you Ilsa and all.”

“My name’s not Ilsa,” she said with a laugh. “I was born Constance Rose Lacoste. In high school I told my friends to call me Ilsa because I thought it sounded exotic.” She laughed and rolled her eyes. “My parents refused to, of course, but it stuck anyway. At home in Monroe, Louisiana, I was Constance; elsewhere in the world, I am Ilsa.”

“It does suit you.”

“Thank you.”

“But how did you manage school without their support?”

“My Grandma Marie, God bless her.” Ilsa crossed herself unconsciously. “She understood me and my situation. The family had always described her as sort of a black sheep, which was code for big ol’ alcoholic dyke!”

Alec almost choked on his water as he laughed.

David returned with their desserts, and Alec suddenly realized he would definitely make room for it. They dug in. Alec secured a piece of brownie and ice cream on his spoon but didn’t eat it. His attention was on Ilsa and her story.

“Luckily for me, she was great with investments and left me her brownstone in New York and a chunk of cash when she passed. So I happily told my parents to go fuck themselves.” Ilsa grabbed a slice of sweet melon and popped it in her mouth.

“I bet that was satisfying,” he said. Her eyes grew wide as if to

say, “You have no idea,” as the melon melted in her mouth.

“I rent out the building, and that supports my life here. This job,” she said, indicating the dining area, “is primarily a labor of love.”

“Let me think. You went from psychology to film, and now you’re a chef?” Alec saw his dessert was quickly melting on the spoon, so he finally tasted it and found it so good he thought he might faint.

“Hey, life’s a journey, sugar. How about you?”

“What about me?”

“You left LSU for Chicago and now you’re in London?”

“Oh, well...” Alec hesitated long enough for a teeth-jarring crash from the kitchen to grab their attention.

“Jesus Howard Christ!” Ilsa said, jumping to her feet. “Alec, I think I’m needed, sorry.” He was about to tell her not to worry when a scream emanated from the other room. Ilsa ran toward the kitchen doors, but turned before going through them. “You can move in Sunday. Early, if possible. We’ll be ready for you.”

Alec waved her off. “Okay, I’ll call you. Go on, take care of that, and thanks!”

Ilsa disappeared into the kitchen, but Alec could hear her shouting from where he sat. He smiled, and suddenly David materialized at his side.

“May I put that in a box for you, sir?”

Alec seriously thought about it, but his stomach was uncomfortably full. “No, thank you, David, I’m good,” he said. “Everything was delicious... just spectacular.” *But I’ll have to swim the Atlantic to burn off this meal.*

CHAPTER 5

TONY stood by the car glaring at Eli. “You swear?” he asked.

“I swear,” Eli said.

The artist contemplated the sincerity level in his friend’s face. Eli raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes, trying to look as honest as possible.

Tony started smiling. “Okay, it begins at six thirty, so don’t be late. I don’t want you to miss my introduction and my speech.”

“I wouldn’t consider missing it. I’ll be there. Sorry about missing dinner.”

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” the artist said, casting a hateful glance at Eli’s friend Casey, who sat behind the wheel.

“I know, mate. This was a last minute deal. They need me.”

Tony said nothing as Eli patted him on the shoulder and told his friend to drive. He scrunched down in the seat and did not turn to watch Tony grow smaller in the rear window.

Casey had called him earlier, absolutely frantic about an all-day fund raiser the hospital had scheduled. Their interpreter had fallen ill and could he “please, please fill in?” Since Casey was the nurse who had been holding his hand when he woke in the hospital and continued to do so through his physical therapy, he could hardly refuse her. The petite blonde had become one of his best friends and was now convinced she was in love with his other best friend, Ilsa.

He couldn't discourage her. He loved them both and thought they were spectacular women, but he feared Ilsa's indecision and flirtatious ways might not lend themselves to the committed happily-ever-after Casey imagined.

"I promise to have you back in plenty of time," she assured him as she turned onto the expressway to bypass city traffic.

"You'd better, or I'm moving in with you."

"We could just switch homes," she said with a chuckle. "That way you'd have a place and I could live with Ilsa."

"That may not be all it's cracked up to be, love."

"Oh, stop it. Just tell me what she likes, how to get her attention," Casey said. "I'm not sure she knows I exist."

"She knows. You're just—" Eli realized too late that he didn't have a good way to finish that sentence. He glanced at her, but her eyes were on the road, and she was grinning sadly.

"I'm just not her type," she said quietly. "You don't think she'd fancy me."

"Casey, there's nothing wrong with you. You're a beautiful girl, but Ilsa is not looking to settle down, and I believe you are. The two of you simply want different things."

She glanced quickly at Eli to protest. "Who said I wanted to settle down? We could be just as casual as she'd like."

He smiled and shook his head, not believing her for a second. He turned to watch the road rush by his window. Casey was young with romantic ideals, and he didn't want to take that from her, that hope of how things could be. He'd felt that way once. He sighed and had little to say for the duration of the ride, despite her attempts to engage him.

"How are you, really?" she asked, trying again.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just tired." He didn't elaborate.

"Are you not sleeping?"

"I'm sleeping on and off."

"Nightmares?"

Eli sighed. "I'm fine, Casey. Let's drop it, okay?"

"I'm here if you need to talk," she said, glancing at him. "You know that, right?"

"I know... it's just...."

"What?"

"Ilsa and I got into it the other day."

"About?"

"Africa," he said, looking out the window.

"Sorry, love, I'm with her on that."

Eli laughed. "That's a surprise!"

"No seriously, moving to Africa to work with deaf children is admirable, but your true reasons are flawed."

"You sound just like her," he said, anger heating his voice. "The two of you have no idea what my reasons are."

Casey rolled her eyes. "The fuck we don't! You're running away. You've got this daft idea that a location change will somehow fix everything." She was speeding a bit, and Eli checked his seatbelt. "Tell me I'm wrong," she demanded.

He couldn't. "Please slow down," he said.

Casey glanced at the speedometer and eased her foot off the accelerator. "Am I wrong?" she asked calmly.

He didn't say anything for nearly a mile. "Did you know there are still mornings I wake up and, just for a few moments, think he's in the shower or working in the yard?" Eli asked. "He liked to get an early start." Casey watched the road. "And there are those super busy days when I have two or more clients. I get in from work and expect him to be right behind me and ready for dinner."

"Eli—"

"No! Listen to me," he shouted, and Casey flinched. He was instantly sorry and cursed himself. "I'm sorry, but you need to imagine what it feels like when those few delusional, happy moments pass, when I realize he's not anywhere, not anymore."

When she felt safe to speak, Casey began softly. “We love you, and we want you to stay with us, not go off and lose yourself in some other country.”

“Most of the people who know and love me knew and loved Bennett. They cannot conceive of me without him, and I understand that because neither can I.” They were silent for another mile. “Look, Casey, maybe you and Ilsa are right about my motives, but I believe I can be of some use there, and forgive me if I think there’s less chance of Bennett confusion when I wake up in a hut in an African village.”

“I suspect you’ll simply be confused by the large, hairy, many-legged, fanged creature crawling up your leg,” she said, and Eli grinned against his will. “How long would you be gone?”

“At least a year, but it’s not written in stone, okay?” he said. “I gave my application to a friend, and that has to be approved.”

Casey nodded. “What’s the organization?”

“Some Christian mission group, I can’t remember the name, but they’ve been doing this work for a few years.”

Eli closed his eyes and tried to imagine the sunsets in Ethiopia, the children running around, playing and signing to each other at the school. He imagined the sounds, smells, music, and landscape. It would be an alien world—one he could lose himself in. He squirmed under the knowledge that Ilsa and Casey knew exactly what his motives were, and hated that they were always right and that he was so transparent.

“I really appreciate you doing this, Eli,” Casey said as they neared the hospital. “I was in a real bind.”

He sat up straight in his seat for the first time since entering the car. “I’m glad to help. Besides, I needed to get out of the house today. We have a new guy moving in, and the place is crazy right now.”

Casey parked and turned off the car.

“What do you know about him?”

“Just that he went to school with Ilsa at some point during the past thirty-two years of her life.” They got out and made their way toward the main entrance of the hospital. “I guess I’ll meet him when I get home after the art show.”

“You mind if I join you at the gallery? I was going to drop you off, but I could hang around. I love art.”

“Art, huh?” He looked into her eager eyes. “Casey, I think you just want in Ilsa’s pants,” he said with a knowing grin.

“What’s your point?” she asked with a giggle.

CHAPTER 6

ANTHONY JAMES was one of two featured artists at the Prim Gallery for the night. Judging from the discussions throughout the room, his paintings seemed to have a substantial impact on the viewers. His works made powerful use of color that filled them with emotion and life. The most striking piece he'd done was a nude of Ilsa.

Her curvy, smooth, brown body created a compelling silhouette on one large canvas. She stood by it, trying to look casual. She ate cheese, drank sparkling cider, and participated in animated conversations as she waited for someone in her immediate vicinity to make the connection.

The other artist was Prissy Matlick. Her pieces were more like wall sculpture than paintings and came off cold against Tony's work, so the crowd was not as enthusiastic in their appraisal of it. Lyle had even whispered in his roommate's ear that he really didn't get her stuff, which made Tony beam with gratitude.

The bright lights created such a vibrant glare off the white walls that many had to focus on the artwork to give their eyes some peace. Perhaps that was the gallery's plan all along. Soft, obscure classical music emanated from the sound system as people milled about and discussed what the artist was trying to say with this piece or that.

So far, the only difficulty of the evening had been a slight bottleneck created by an ill-placed bar and refreshment table. However, after filling up their tiny plates and ordering their drinks, the art lovers quickly spread throughout the room.

It had begun to rain lightly by the time Eli and Casey showed up. They were late because, after the fundraiser ended, she had rushed to her locker in the hospital to change. She always kept some type of party clothing on hand in case a festive opportunity presented itself. Tonight she wanted to look her best for Ilsa, and she accomplished that with a beautiful deep blue cocktail dress. It set off her short, blonde hair and bright blue eyes perfectly. However, she nearly lost her footing by the door due to wet shoes and haste. Eli followed her more carefully.

“Try not to appear quite so eager, my dear, lest you end up with your heels pointed towards heaven.” Casey ignored him at first, fussing with her dress and hair, all the while searching the large room for signs of Ilsa.

“From your mouth to God’s ear, love,” she said as her eyes scanned the room.

Eli shook his head and made his way to the bar where he ordered two glasses of wine. Casey joined him after realizing he’d walked away. He handed her a glass and took one for himself. They didn’t want to linger by the bar, so they stepped deeper into the room and began to mingle.

They stopped at Tony’s first canvas, which showed a vast lake and a long, narrow dock stretching out into it. The lake appeared to glow as if a fire blazed just beneath the surface. At the end of the dock was a chair with a blanket tossed carelessly over it. A coffee mug with steam rising from it sat at the foot of the chair. The scene was filled with life, or perhaps life had just stepped away. He and Casey moved along to the next piece.

AT THE back of the gallery, Alec stood with Ilsa, watching the crowd. She had invited him along, suggesting the showing would be a good introduction to her group of London friends. Tony and Lyle had been too busy finalizing the show to give him a proper welcome earlier.

In fact, the house had been terribly chaotic, with movers for the art show loading canvases and Alec’s crew bringing in his things. He didn’t own very much, but whatever he did own had to be carried up

two flights of stairs. Ilsa hadn't even had time to introduce the three of them once they reached the gallery.

"Ilsa, who is that?" Alec asked.

"Where?"

"Over there near the entrance. He's just beginning to make his way around."

"In the dark suit jacket and jeans?"

"Yeah, the guy with the cane."

"That's one of your new roomies, Eli Burke."

"I swear I've seen him somewhere recently." Alec searched his memory for a few moments. "What does he do?"

"He's an interpreter for the deaf," she answered, and Alec's heart skipped a couple of beats as he finally placed him. *Blue eyes*. Ilsa followed Alec's gaze as he remained focused on Eli. "Actually," she began, "I wanted to speak to you about him. You see—"

"Hey all!"

"Hello, Mirabell," Alec said. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Loving it, love. Loving it!" She was already drunk. They'd only been at the gallery for thirty minutes, but Alec suspected she'd already had a couple of belts before he called her about the showing. "Does anyone have a light?" she asked, patting her pockets as a cigarette dangled on her lips.

"There's no smoking in the gallery, Mira," Alec said in exasperation. She rolled her eyes.

"I know that, love. I'll take it outside," she assured them.

"Sorry, I don't have any," Ilsa said.

Mirabell's glassy gaze traveled to her friend, but Alec simply shook his head.

"I'm so thrilled you decided to let Alec move in!" she said, grabbing Ilsa's arm repeatedly to steady herself. "I'm Mirabell Boot, by the way."

“Happy to have him,” Ilsa said with a smile. “And it’s nice to meet you.”

“There were times I thought I’d be stuck with him for another month,” she announced as she raised her glass in salute. “Now I can have my sofa back!” Alec grabbed the glass before she could bring it to her lips again.

“That’s enough, pumpkin. Let’s get you some coffee, shall we?” Mirabell made a pouty face as Alec took her by the arm, excused himself, and guided her toward the refreshment table.

CASEY had located her quarry and witnessed Ilsa’s entire exchange with Mirabell. “Who was that horrid woman chatting up Ilsa?” she asked Eli as she watched the woman being led away by her gentleman friend.

“I don’t know,” he said as he looked at the next canvas.

It was the back porch of their house on an overcast afternoon. In the far corner of the deck sat a figure in shadow; he appeared isolated and lonely. Above and to the right of this lone figure, the sun sat just behind a bank of clouds, on the verge of breaking through. You couldn’t make out the face, but Eli knew it was him. He’d spent a lot of time out back after arriving home from the hospital. Somehow the house had been too noisy or too quiet, he couldn’t remember which. He walked on to the next canvas, and Casey followed.

“I tell you, that hair color does not occur in nature,” she was saying of her newly acquired nemesis. Her gaze locked on Mirabell as Alec sat her on a sofa against the far wall and placed a cup of coffee in her hands. He timidly glanced their way after getting her settled.

Suddenly, Casey realized Ilsa was alone. “Back in a tick,” she said as she hastily beat it over there.

Eli didn’t even notice that she’d gone. He was busy looking over Tony’s next piece. It was of two people with misshapen heads, balloon size with rolling eyes. Eli leaned in and squinted to read the title. *Mum and Dud*, it read. He stifled a chuckle as he sipped his wine. *No*

confusion about how he feels about the folks.

“You made it!” Tony shouted, appearing at his side. Lyle was close behind, and Eli hugged them both.

“I told you I would, silly. This”—he gestured indicating the expanse of the room—“is truly amazing, Tony. I’m gobsmacked!”

Color rose to the artist’s cheeks. “Thank you, Eli. You’re too kind.”

“I mean it! You spent so much time in the basement, but I’m ashamed to say I had no idea of the enormity of your abilities and vision.”

“I would have happily shown you my studio any time you wanted,” Tony said.

Eli stopped smiling and fumbled for the right words. “I’m sorry, Tony. I was preoccupied, I guess. I lost track of a lot of things for a while.” They smiled at each other. He looked around the room again. “But truly, each one of these paintings has more depth and emotion than I ever thought possible in a two-dimensional medium. There’s a story in every one.”

He raised his glass high and toasted his friend, causing tears to rise to Tony’s eyes. The artist was momentarily unable to speak and turned to Lyle, wrapping his arms around him. Though clearly startled, Lyle reciprocated, tossing Eli an uncertain and amused glance.

Tony composed himself quickly. “You have no idea what a trying few weeks it’s been!” he exclaimed. “Choosing the works for display, transporting them....”

“Changing your mind time and again,” Lyle added snidely.

Tony ignored him. “Luckily, Lyle knew some movers he uses for estate sales to help with all the loading and unloading and hanging and transporting.”

“Even with their help,” Lyle began, “we were making changes right up to the last minute! It was absolutely horrifying!”

“I can imagine,” Eli said, amused by their turmoil.

“Excuse me,” a dark haired gentleman said as he sidled up to their

group. “I think I saw you take down a thug the other day on Old Compton.”

Recognition lit up Eli’s eyes. “Oh, yes! You’re the bloke with the green purse!”

A pained smile spread across the man’s handsome face. “I was hoping you wouldn’t remember that!” he said. “I’m Alec, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you; I’m Eli.” They attempted to shake hands, but Eli had a cane in one and an empty wine glass in the other. Lyle leaned in and took the glass from him, allowing them to shake finally. “This is the artist, Tony James, and our friend Lyle Davies.”

“Nice to meet you,” Alec said, giving each a smile and a nod before his attention promptly returned to Eli. This sparked an exchange of knowing glances between Tony and Lyle.

“You were pretty impressive with that kid,” Alec continued.

“Oh, that was nothing. The only thing he learned, I’m afraid, is not to mess with me.”

“Well, that’s something,” Alec said. Their chatter petered out, but only momentarily as Eli realized they had an entire room of art to examine.

“So what do you think?” he asked indicating the artwork.

“I’ve been here a while, and I’ve studied all of them,” Alec said as he looked around the gallery. “And I have to say this one is my favorite.” He glanced at Tony and pointed to the painting of Eli on the back porch, and they all moved toward it.

“Really?” Eli asked. “Why?”

“I like the story in it. On the surface or at first glance, it’s dark and the figure appears hopeless and defeated, but the sunlight behind the clouds is a sign of hope, don’t you think? It’s a prediction that things will change.”

Tony was nodding gently. Eli didn’t know what to say as he saw the painting through Alec’s eyes. Tony and Lyle stood by waiting for Eli’s opinion of Alec’s assessment. Before he could speak, they were interrupted.

A massive man in an ill-fitting gray suit suddenly appeared. “Boss, where do you want to hang number sixteen?” It was one of the movers Lyle had hired. He was holding up a covered canvas.

“There are only fifteen,” Tony insisted. “No even numbers.

“But Stavros saw this one and added it to the truck. He thinks it’s good, yes?” The man removed the covering from the canvas with one quick tug, and Eli found himself staring at Bennett.

It was a simple painting with more muted colors than the others in the show. Bennett was looking out at them, back over his shoulder as he walked away. He inhabited some distant, unknown, otherworldly coast. There were warm hues behind him as the sun set. The sky above him was dark and threatening, but the ocean at his right was calm. Anyone who didn’t know him wouldn’t see him in this work, but Eli saw him. The detail stopped his breath. He was perfect, like he remembered; he was tall, strong, healthy and—okay; somehow, he was okay. What little color there was in Eli’s face drained away.

“Are you all right?” Alec asked, reaching out to steady him, but Eli pulled away as Tony and Lyle rushed to cover the painting. They only succeeded in getting in each other’s way.

“I’m s-sorry. This was supposed to stay at home in the basement,” Tony said rapidly, his words spilling over each other. “I—my instructions- they weren’t followed- I didn’t mean for this to- I’m so sorry.” Tony finally snatched the canvas out of the mover’s hands as Lyle shooed away the large, confused man.

FROM across the room, Ilsa caught sight of Eli’s expression and made her way toward him, effectively abandoning a very friendly Casey. However, the nurse followed close on her heels. Before Ilsa could reach him, Eli turned without a word and headed for the door. He reached it, but stopped when faced with a downpour the likes of which he hadn’t seen in years.

He needed to escape. He wanted out of here. He turned and faced the onlookers. Everyone in the room seemed to be looking at him. It was surreal. The art on the walls should be holding their attention, not

him. Their perplexed, inquisitive stares made his skin crawl. Even Alec, the good looking man with the green purse, was watching him with concern. He'd be damned if he would lose it in front of these people. He saw Tony and Lyle rushing the canvas through the crowd to the back of the room and out a side door.

"Eli?" Ilsa said softly, as she navigated her way to the front of the crowd and walked toward him. "Sugar, you can't go out there. Not now."

I could. It's just water.

She reached out her hand to him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. His knuckles had gone white on the head of his cane as he stood stock still, trying to calm his heart. It felt as though it was striking his ribs, attempting to break free. He grabbed hold of every thought bouncing around inside his skull and attempted to calm them. He held them, squeezing them into submission, suffocating them. He wanted to scream or cry or vomit. He wanted to turn from his friend and disappear into the damp darkness of the evening, but he didn't. He opened his eyes and took Ilsa's hand.

"I'm all right," he managed. His voice was steady, but he was shaking a bit as he fought to shut down all the noise inside him. "I was just caught off-guard. I'm sorry for the drama."

"Sugar, that wasn't drama," Ilsa said, chuckling lightly. "That didn't even register on my queen-o-meter." A smile danced across his lips as they wandered nearer to the refreshment table. Nearly everyone had gone back to their critiques of the show; however, Casey and Alec continued to watch the two of them.

"I need a drink," Eli said.

"We all do, sweetie." They stopped directly in front of the bartender. Ilsa searched Eli's face and then turned to the young man behind the bar. "Bourbon, the good stuff, a double. And one sparkling water, please."

CHAPTER 7

ALEC decided to send Mirabell home in a taxi, but she had other ideas and disappeared into the night with a small group of revelers. Luckily, the rain let up by the time everyone was ready to leave, and, following enthusiastic applause for Tony and a smattering for Matlick, leave they did. Matlick exited in a theatrical huff, announcing that the less-than-enthusiastic response to her work was obviously due to the crowd's ignorance of true creativity.

Alec looked around the gallery, taking note of the dwindling numbers, but he didn't want to leave just yet. Earlier, he'd lost sight of Ilsa and Eli and wanted to make sure everything was all right with them before taking off. Also, Eli's reaction to that painting had him curious. Tony and Lyle had rushed it out of sight so quickly he'd missed his chance to examine it more closely.

Later in the evening, he'd caught sight of Tony slow dancing with a distinguished older gentleman near the back of the room before losing track of him, and Alec had no idea where Lyle had gone. Ilsa suddenly appeared and, taking stock of the room, spotted and approached Alec.

"Hey there, I was hoping you'd still be here."

"I wasn't eager to go back to the house alone."

"I understand. Listen, Alec, could you could help me with something?"

He nodded and quickly followed her out of the room. They went through a side door at the back of the main hall. He found himself in a

massive storage area littered with a multitude of canvases; some were crated, some exposed. He heard raucous singing—a rather bawdy tune, if he was hearing right.

It was Eli. Against the far wall was a large, old black sofa, a couple of end tables, a tall lamp, and Eli. He lay sprawled across the sofa, singing at the top of his lungs. His cane lay on the floor at his feet.

“It’s the bloke with the green purse!” he shouted, trying to get up. Ilsa rushed over and settled him back down. She looked back at Alec.

“I’m so sorry, but I need some help getting him home.”

“Of course,” Alec said as he joined them by the sofa. He knelt down and picked up Eli’s cane. “How do you want to do this?”

“I’ll get the car—if you could stay here and watch him for me?” Alec nodded and Ilsa hopped up. “Be right back!” She rushed away from them, mumbling, shaking her head, and patting her pockets for her keys as she disappeared through the door. Eli was singing more softly now, and Alec sat down next to him. He laid the cane across his lap and rested his hands on the cool metal. The thicker, padded handle had faint scars, dents, and discolorations in it. *You’ve been dropped more than once, haven’t you?* Alec glanced at Eli and wondered how long he’d been using the cane; what had they been through together?

“How are you doing, Eli?” he asked, absently fingering the adjustment button on the dull metal shaft.

Eli looked at him, seemingly noticing him for the first time. “You’re here for real,” he said smiling at Alec like an idiot. “I thought I was dreaming you,” he slurred. “You’re lovely.”

“Thank you, Eli. You’re drunk.”

“You saw me kick that kid’s arse,” he said. Eli began laughing quietly to himself as Alec looked on. Once he regained control, his expression grew very serious. He sat up straight and looked deeply into Alec’s eyes. “I don’t let anyone fuck with me anymore,” he growled. Alec didn’t hear a word he said because he was lost in the blueness of his eyes. Eli’s face softened, and his eyes grew sad and slipped away from Alec. “Not anymore,” he whispered.

“Tell me,” Alec began after watching him for a few moments.

“Who was the man in the painting?” Eli didn’t answer right away because he found himself falling backward on the sofa. He overcompensated and ended up falling into Alec instead, who caught him and held him steady.

“Bennett, that was Bennett Tucker,” he said as he tried to right himself. “Is this sofa moving?” he asked, looking down at the cushions in wonderment.

“No,” Alec said with a grin. He paused, trying to find the right words. “Bennett... was he—” Alec gave up. It was a stupid question. “He was important to you,” he stated. Eli looked at him sharply and snatched the cane from his hands. He pushed himself away from Alec and managed to get to his feet. Alec stood to help steady him, but Eli waved him off.

“I’m fine!”

Eli wandered off across the room and paused by a stack of canvases. He began going through them slowly despite being unsteady on his feet. He didn’t find what he was looking for, so he moved to another stack. Again, there was no joy. “Can you...” Eli looked back at Alec. “Will you help me find it?” he asked. The plaintive look in his eyes spurred Alec into action, and he walked quickly over to another pile and began looking through it. “I know they brought it in here,” Eli was saying as he searched, his voice growing softer. “I saw... I saw them... c-carry it in here.”

Alec found it. It was the fifth one in the stack he was going through. It still had the covering tossed haphazardly over it. It appeared Tony and Lyle had been in a rush when they attempted to bury the painting.

“Eli?” He didn’t seem to hear him because he was too intent on his search. “Eli, I—”

“I’m back,” Ilsa announced. “I’ve got the car right out front, let’s go.”

“I want it,” Eli stated as he teetered violently to the left.

“No you don’t, sweetie,” Ilsa said softly and slid her arm around her friend’s waist. Alec placed the other canvases back on top of the one of Bennett and joined Ilsa in supporting him. Eli didn’t need his

cane with them helping him along, so it became his job to simply hang onto it. Just as light as Alec had surmised that day in Soho, Eli was not difficult to carry.

When they got to the car, Ilsa let them into the back seat and then slid behind the wheel. Alec leaned over and buckled Eli in, fearing he'd fall in the floor if he wasn't secured to the seat.

"What about Lyle and Tony?" Alec asked as she started the car.

"Tony went home with someone, and Lyle left hours ago, in a bit of a fit, I must say."

"Lyle's in love with Tony, but won't admit it," Eli offered thickly as he worked at the seatbelt buckle. "They share a room at my house but swear they're just friends." He laughed out loud as his hand landed excitingly close to Alec's crotch, causing him to bump his head on the roof of the car. Eli failed to notice. "Lyle wants him bad," he purred. His hand slid even farther up his thigh before Alec grabbed it and held it still. Eli began laughing again.

Ilsa pulled into traffic, which was very light at this time of night. She glanced in her rearview mirror at Alec's face. "I have to apologize about this, Alec. This is not how I wanted the first night in your new home to go, believe me."

"I'll survive, Ilsa. Life happens."

"Yeah, but you'd think an alcoholic would know not to settle Eli with it."

"You're an alcoholic?"

Ilsa's gaze locked with his in the mirror. "Sorry. Didn't I mention that?" she asked. Alec looked amused at her distress. "Sexual preference and cash are not the only things I inherited from my granny."

He shook his head, smiled, and looked out the window. He was trying very hard not to look at Eli, who sat quietly at his side. The young man had occupied his thoughts for about a month and now Alec was going to be living with him. He closed his eyes and remembered that moment on the street, the moment when Eli glanced up at him as he stood over that kid. *Those eyes*. Alec had felt nailed to the spot.

Ilsa was talking.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I said I’m hoping you aren’t regretting your decision to move in with us.”

He looked up at her reflection and was about to reassure her when he suddenly found Eli’s mouth at his neck. Eli was kissing and nibbling and licking like a mad man. He’d undone his seatbelt and was practically on top of Alec, breathing him in. His hands seemed to be everywhere they shouldn’t. Alec’s head hit the roof again as Eli found his manhood and gave it an aggressive squeeze through his jeans.

“Mmmm... you smell good,” Eli whispered in his ear. He sucked on Alec’s ear lobe, his whiskers scratched Alec’s face, and his fingers tangled painfully in Alec’s hair.

“Holy shit!” Alec said as he fought to keep Eli at bay. “Good Lord! Hang on!”

“I’m trying to,” Eli said with a chuckle as Alec struggled to grab and tame his eager hands.

“You’re v-very nice, b-but we just met!” he shouted, his voice climbing an octave as Eli attempted to slide his hand down the front of his pants.

“Stop it, Eli!” Ilsa commanded. “Leave him alone!”

He ignored her.

“If you like me, show me,” he said, capturing Alec’s attention once again with those eyes of his.

The proximity was unsettling. Eli smiled wickedly, looked down at Alec’s lips, and kissed him. Alec stopped struggling immediately, his head swimming. Ilsa checked her mirror and, seeing no one behind them, hit the brakes. Eli was thrown off Alec and slammed into the back of the front seat. Laughing hysterically, he crumpled to the car’s floor coming to rest at Alec’s feet.

“You all right, Alec?” Ilsa asked.

It took a few moments for his head to clear. “I’m f-fine,” he managed.

He looked down at Eli—humming happily to himself now—and took comfort in the fact that he would not remember any of this. Unfortunately, Alec would. His pants had grown painfully tight in the crotch, and he hoped the darkness of the back seat prevented Ilsa from seeing how red he'd gone. *Okay, I want you, but not like this—not broken-hearted and drunk.* He sighed and went back to watching London pass outside his window.

CHAPTER 8

“RIGHT in here,” Ilsa said as they entered Eli’s bedroom.

She flicked on the light with the cane as Alec followed her with Eli, whose arm was flung over Alec’s shoulder while Alec gripped him tightly around the waist. Unconscious and practically dead weight, Eli was no longer so easy to carry. Alec moved him awkwardly to his bed, deposited him there, and then immediately collapsed in a nearby chair, fighting to catch his breath. Ilsa placed Eli’s cane against the wall at the head of the bed so that it would be easy to find in the morning or in the middle of the night if needed.

“Thanks for your help,” she said as she vigorously kicked off her painful shoes and sat on the bed beside her unconscious friend.

“You’re welcome,” Alec said, yawning. He rubbed his eyes and thought about how good his bed would feel when he was finally able to climb into it.

Ilsa stared at Eli for a few moments before leaning over and brushing a lock of hair away from his eyes. She sighed and began undoing the buttons of his shirt. Alec watched until her hands moved to Eli’s belt, at which point he stood and quickly crossed the room to a collection of shelves on the far wall.

As much as he wanted Eli, he didn’t feel right checking him out when he was in this condition. Instead, he focused on a group of framed photos in front of him. In one, he saw Eli standing with a tall, handsome, blond young man. *Must be Bennett.* His gaze slowly

traveled across a few others.

He saw them at a formal function, posing with several other men and women. Eli looked good in a suit and much younger than his years when clean-shaven and smiling. There was a striking picture of Bennett lounging on a beach, basking in the sunshine. He was one of those golden boys illuminated by God Himself. He was holding up a tall drink with a tiny umbrella in it and smiling brightly.

Alec suspected Eli had been on the other side of the camera. He glanced back at Ilsa but turned away quickly because she was tugging violently on Eli's jeans and they threatened to drag his boxers right along with them.

"You look like you've done that before," he said as he focused more intently on the collection of photographs. Eli's life with Bennett was chronicled in them.

"You bet, sugar. Over the past four years I've undressed and tucked in every man in this house." She folded Eli's jeans. "Of course, they did the same for me when I was at my worst."

Alec looked at the beach picture again. "How long were they together?" he asked.

"Who?" Ilsa asked before looking up at him and understanding. "Oh, five years," she said. She expertly rolled Eli under the covers and fluffed his pillow. Alec felt it was safe to turn around and returned to his chair. "I met Bennett at NYU. He was finishing up his degree in architectural design," she continued.

"And Eli? When did he enter the picture?"

"About a year later, I think," she said. She placed Eli's shoes together neatly beneath the bed and then balled up his socks and skillfully made two points in the hamper across the room. She grabbed his jacket and shirt and carried them to the closet. "We, Bennett and I, were at a meet and greet for people of our particular persuasion and Eli turned up. We were playing that party game. I don't know if we had a name for it, but you see a stranger and make up a story about them. Who do you think they are? What do they do for a living? That sort of thing."

"What was your take on Eli?" he asked with a smile.

“We didn’t get the opportunity to scrutinize him.” Ilsa paused in the closet as she recalled that night. “The moment he opened his mouth to introduce himself, he was swarmed.”

“The accent,” Alec said.

“You got it,” she said, winking and pointing at him with a clothes hanger. She finished, closed the closet door, and went into the bathroom. She flicked on the light and began going through the vanity.

Alec was beginning to get dizzy from her movements and allowed his eyes to travel to Eli’s prone form. He looked peaceful. There was no errant twitching or talking in his sleep. If not for his chest rising and falling gently, he would think Eli was dead.

“Could you go to the kitchen and grab two bottled waters for me, please?” Ilsa asked as she turned on the bathroom faucet full blast.

Alec hopped up and went to the kitchen to get the waters. When he returned, he found Ilsa by the bed with a mop bucket. It had a few inches of water in it and some pine-scented cleaner, if he could trust his nose.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you, sugar,” Ilsa said, taking the two waters, opening one, and placing both on the bedside table. She placed the bucket on the floor by the head of the bed, and then she opened the bottle of aspirin and also put it on the table. “Let’s go,” she said as she turned the table lamp to its lowest setting. She tossed Eli’s neatly folded jeans into the chair by the bed and switched off the overhead light as they left the room.

Fifteen minutes later, he sat at the kitchen table as Ilsa filled his cup with scalding coffee. “Ice?” she asked, offering him a tray of cubes. He took one and dropped it into his mug.

“Thanks,” Alec said. Ilsa took a seat across from him, slowly stirred some sugar into her coffee, and took a sip. They sat in silence for a while. “So... um, let’s see... Eli was surrounded by accent whores and Bennett came to his rescue?”

Coffee nearly squirted from Ilsa’s nose as she tried not to laugh. “Something like that,” she said wiping her mouth. “You have to

remember, he'd never been to America and suddenly found himself a bit overwhelmed. New Yorkers can be a bit pushy. He looked like a deer in headlights."

"How did Bennett break it up?"

"He went over and told them to break it up. 'Let the man breathe,'" Ilsa said, deepening her voice to imitate Bennett and sparking a chuckle out of Alec. "Bennett liked to get to the point whenever possible, and shortly after, he asked Eli out for a drink."

"He sounds like someone I would have liked."

"He was. Great sense of humor and a truly compassionate man. He put up with me, didn't he?" She chuckled quietly. "He was a damn good friend. Said he loved my creativity, and when I bailed on film school and tackled culinary arts, he was supportive."

"Was Eli equally fond of him in the beginning?"

Ilsa explained that it was love at first sight for Bennett, but Eli had taken a bit longer to fall. He appeared suspicious of someone like Bennett professing such a strong attraction to him. Bennett was a tall, strong hunk of an all-American boy; Eli was shorter, slight, and sported the very definition of an English pallor. It didn't make sense to him, but Bennett said love didn't have to make sense.

"Sure Eli was attracted to him, but I'll tell you what I think. Bennett came from this crazy family in upstate New York. They loved him beyond all reason, and Eli was drawn to that—that kind of unconditional love. I don't think he had that at home."

"Sounds like heaven to me."

"It's something a lot of us would cherish," Ilsa said. "They welcomed him completely. When we were visiting the Tuckers, Eli would look around like he was on some alien planet."

Alec was beginning to believe he'd missed something in not knowing Bennett. The man had obviously made a deep impression on his friends. Finally, he broached the subject he wanted most to know about.

"What happened, Ilsa?"

They sat in silence for a while as she gathered her thoughts. She

made several false starts and stopped to sip her coffee instead of speaking. She got up and refilled their cups, and when hers was properly treated with sweetness and cream, she spoke.

“I don’t know exactly when they became a couple. It seemed to happen quietly. They just were one day. Eli decided to pursue his signing certification in New York. When he was done, his temporary visa ran out and he returned to London.”

“That’s rough.”

“I think Bennett always intended to follow him, but I hadn’t given it much thought. When it sank in that I would be effectively losing my family—again—I found this property over here and came with him. Tony and Lyle moved in shortly after that.”

“Thereby completing your happy family?”

“One of our own making. We lived here happily for two years,” she said, looking around the kitchen and smiling.

The smile faded as she told Alec about the attack—what she knew of it from the police reports and Eli. He listened, never speaking. He felt his throat tighten as he struggled not to react to the details, as he imagined what Eli had witnessed and was powerless to prevent. He wanted to cry for him but didn’t.

“Me, Tony, Lyle and several other friends went to New York for the official funeral. I called every day to check on Eli. I didn’t want him to wake up with only his mother at his bedside. But he didn’t wake up for more than a month, so no worries there,” she said with a weak smile. The Tuckers had visited Eli while he was unconscious in the hospital. “I think they hoped he would wake during one of their visits and tell them about their son.”

She said that even though the Tuckers loved him and wanted to see him, Eli had not returned to New York for a visit. “They exchange holiday cards or sometimes talk on the phone but never for very long.”

“I’m guessing it’s too painful, or he doesn’t feel he has any right to them any longer,” Alec suggested.

“I thought it might be something like that.”

“He hasn’t been to Bennett’s grave?”

Ilsa shook her head. She told him of the special London service they had for Bennett after Eli woke from his coma. There were a lot of friends who hadn't been able to go to New York, and Bennett's immediate family came over to meet them.

"Eli sat with the Tuckers during the service, but I don't remember him speaking to anyone. He was still pretty weak." She said Tony, ever the artist, went around after both services and videotaped comments from everyone, hoping Eli would watch it someday.

"I take it he hasn't."

Ilsa sighed heavily and shook her head. "I was executor of Bennett's will because Eli wasn't in any condition to deal with it. I paid the hospital bills out of the money Bennett left him, but Eli hasn't touched a penny of the rest."

"Did they catch them? His killers?"

"Yes."

Alec felt choked up again as Ilsa described Eli's court appearance. "Those defense lawyers were hoping he wouldn't wake up in time for the trial," she said softly, "but he did. It made quite an impression on the jury when he was wheeled into the courtroom."

Eli had worn a dark blue suit, but all of his hair had not grown back and the surgical scar on his skull was clearly visible. His right leg was sealed in a large cast and stuck out rigidly from the chair. Several members of the jury glanced over at the defendants and took note of their size in relation to his slight frame. He testified, trying desperately to keep his voice steady as he described what he saw them do to Bennett. The defense tried to claim his head injury damaged his memory of that night, but the attorney faltered when Eli fixed him with his gaze, challenging him to continue along that road.

"The jury saw it; the jury felt it," Ilsa said. "All three of them received hefty sentences. Their leader was given a life term."

"It's been two years. Didn't he have therapy after it happened?"

"Yes, but the few sessions he sat through weren't enough. He stopped going and just shut down."

Alec had seen that behavior before, a trauma or loss too much to

process. It could feel overwhelming, as if it might swallow you whole if you let even a bit of it touch you. To avoid that, people would often shut it all off, like hitting a light switch. They would keep as busy as possible, keep moving to try to stay ahead of the pain. If Eli had been doing this for two years, he did need to talk to someone. Otherwise, he'd remain trapped in that cycle, unable to move on or grow or to heal.

“Has he been in any other relationships? Dated?” he asked.

“No, nothing,” Ilsa said with a sigh. “The first year was spent trying to heal physically. It was slow-going and painful. It took forever to get his strength and energy level back.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “After that, he just put himself on the shelf and won't talk to me about it. None of us bring it up, and we never mention Bennett.”

“Then last night's reaction to that painting was understandable,” Alec said. It made sense to him that Eli, suddenly being confronted by something he spent all his time and energy avoiding, would be traumatized. “He definitely needs to talk to someone.”

He emptied his cup, and Ilsa quickly refilled it before he could stop her. “That's why I asked you to move in here,” she said tentatively.

“What? I can't. I mean, I'm not the right person,” Alec said hastily.

She got up and pulled a homemade cream-filled pastry out of the refrigerator, placing it tantalizingly close to him. She grabbed two forks from the drawer and plopped back down next to him.

“You're exactly the right person,” she said as she dumped a fork full of pastry in her mouth. He began to protest, but Ilsa raised a hand for him to hear her out. “You have the right training. You and Eli don't have a history. You have no expectations based on the person he was before all this—no agenda. I can't honestly say the same; none of his friends can.”

Alec read the concern in her face and picked up his fork. “Look, Ilsa, in this business we talk a lot about healing and facing your problems,” Alec said as he sampled the pastry, “but you never truly heal. You know that, right? We are products of our experiences. The most we can hope to achieve is a new way to walk through this world.”

“You’re saying he’ll never be the same,” she said softly, her eyes on her coffee. She sighed. “I can accept that, but I want him to be able to move forward.”

“Do you think he’d be willing to try more therapy?”

“Oh no, he can’t know about it,” she said quickly. “He can’t know what you’re doing!”

Alec was stunned. “Ilsa, there’s no such thing as covert therapy. The subject needs to be a willing participant, he needs to want change.”

“Trust me. Eli cannot know what you’re doing. He’ll drop you like a load of bricks.”

“What have you told him?”

“That you’re here researching a book. I haven’t told him that you’ve already sold one, a very lucrative one at that.”

“Why me?” he asked after staring at her for a few moments. “How did you pick my name out of all the apartment ads in the paper? You didn’t remember me from school.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s not a problem,” Alec said. “I tend to be forgettable.”

“It’s not that,” she said. Ilsa wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I did it a bit backward. I wasn’t online looking for possible boarders. I was there looking into how people deal with loss and I found your name. I saw mention of your book; I researched you, found an article talking about your move to London, and that led me to the ad you posted online and—here you are.” Alec said nothing. Ilsa reached across the table and took his hand. “Just listen. Be his friend.”

He looked into her eyes. *I’m attracted to him. This isn’t right.* He considered telling her, but the words wouldn’t come.

CHAPTER 9

SOMEONE was singing. Somewhere in the house, somebody was happy. Eli tried to wrap his brain around this fact, but that only made his head throb all the more. His eyes wouldn't open at first. They were gummy and stuck shut, but he eventually managed it. He opened his mouth to take a deep, rib-stretching breath, but the air scratched its way across his lips, along his tongue, and landed painfully in his lungs. It was hardly refreshing.

The mystery singer skipped past the other side of his door as he sat up in bed. He looked down at himself, and seeing only boxers, wondered when he had taken off his clothes. He saw his jeans folded neatly in the chair near the foot of the bed.

He felt foul, had to pee, and the room was stiflingly hot. He grabbed the open bottle of water from his nightstand and gulped down half of it. It was warm and threatened to turn his stomach, so he paused for a couple of deep breaths before popping two aspirin in his mouth. He looked around the room but saw nothing out of place except that there was now a bucket by his bed. Eli smiled, realizing Ilsa had thought of everything. He drank the rest of the water and tossed the bottle in the bucket.

He was sweating, smelly, and queasy, especially now that the warm water was stretching his belly. It was this last, this threat of more bad smells and filth pouring out of him, that prompted him to grab his cane, got him to his feet, and sent him toward the bathroom.

On the way there, scratching absently at his furry abdomen, he

paused in front of the mirror hanging on the inside of his closet door. His hair was sticking up at all angles, his face puffy, eyes bloodshot, and beard in need of trimming. While standing there, he reached around and scratched his bottom, and then he started to chuckle at how truly repulsive he looked. The laughter made his belly shake and his head pound, which made his stomach turn. Eli walked on. *What the hell did Bennett see in me?*

He turned on the shower full force and relieved himself in the toilet. He then bent over it and emptied his stomach of its toxic contents. He flushed, hung his cane on the towel rack, and stepped under the now-hot spray, boxers and all. The shower pounded the tension out of his shoulders as he struggled to recall the previous night. His upper back was hurting near his left shoulder blade. What had he done to it? He took a mouthful of hot water to rinse the furry feeling from his tongue and thought about the last thing he remembered.

He remembered beautiful paintings, cheerful people, and meeting someone. The face floating in his memory was out of focus, so with his head continuing to throb, he sighed and decided that was enough for now. Eli was sure it would all come back to him as he shed his boxers, grabbed his shower gel and shampoo, and began lathering himself up from head to toe. The water stung as though it might take his skin off, but if it did not, the intensity of his scrubbing might.

He had told Bennett once that showers like these were a form of rebirth. It was a way to start the day brand new and perfect. He stretched his stiff muscles under the spray, paying particular attention to his right leg. He was probably driving Lyle nuts with this long soak, but that was just too bad for Lyle. He smiled slyly, and a while later, he shut off the water and stepped out into a fog-shrouded room.

The moisture hanging in the air threatened to drown him, so he flipped on the vent fan. Within seconds the fog had lifted enough for him to find the vanity. After toweling off and brushing his teeth, he found he felt a lot better. The pain in his head had receded to a dull ache; it was a mere ghost of the killer before it. He ran his fingers over the anemic beard he'd managed to grow, considered it for a moment, and then dug out his shaving kit.

A memory came to him as he shaved. It was vague at first, but the closer he got to his lips with the razor, the sharper it became. He paused

and touched his lips. He'd kissed someone. Ilsa? A kiss to congratulate Tony? *That must be it.* Eli went back to his shaving but paused again a moment later in confusion. *But I'm sure there was tongue.*

IN THE kitchen, Alec watched Lyle whistling happily as he went about his morning routine. The cheerful housemate had already made coffee, put in a load of laundry, and was trying to tempt Alec with eggs and toast.

"How was your first night?" Lyle asked.

"Good," Alec said. "Eventful but good." He covered his coffee cup to stop Lyle from refilling it for a third time.

"I bet it was," Lyle said with a laugh. He resumed his whistling.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

"I've got big plans today. Nothing I want to share just yet, mind you."

Alec nodded but did not pursue it. "I lost track of you last night," he said.

"I had to get to bed, I wasn't feeling well," Lyle said, the smile falling from his face as he glanced at the clock above the stove.

"Are you expecting someone?" Alec asked.

"Tony didn't come home last night. I like to know everyone is tucked in and okay. You know, since...." Lyle paused and Alec nodded. "I never want to get a call like that again. Ilsa told you?" Lyle asked.

"Yes, last night after we got Eli to bed." They sat quietly for a few moments, recalling the art show and the disaster with Tony's painting of Bennett.

"Tony felt so bad about that," Lyle said finally. "The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Eli, but we all had feelings about Bennett we needed to work through." He stood and took their empty cups to the sink. "Tony's an artist, so he painted through his." He turned on the

water to start the dishes.

“What about you?” Alec asked. “How did you deal with losing Bennett?”

“Me?” Lyle laughed as the bubbles began to grow in the sink. “I cleaned out the attic, managed three estate sales, and continue to clean up after everyone in this house.” Alec said nothing as Lyle turned and grabbed a skillet off the stove top to wash. “I like order, if you haven’t guessed.”

“Everyone deals with loss in their own way.”

“What are you doing here?” Eli asked, clearly surprised to find a stranger at his kitchen table. He stood in the doorway at odd angles as he leaned on his cane and balanced a heavy backpack on the opposite shoulder. His hair was still wet, his face pink and smooth. Without the beard, he looked like a teenager.

“Well, look at you all shiny and perfect!” Lyle said brightly.

Eli said nothing, but kept his gaze on Alec.

“G-good morning, Eli,” he said as he got to his feet awkwardly. They stared at each other. “We met last night at the gallery. My name is Alec Sumner.” Eli kept staring. “A few weeks before that, I saw you take down a punk on the street.”

“You had a... purse?”

“Yes, a green purse.” Alec smiled brightly, encouraged. “It belonged to my friend Mirabell.” Eli’s suspicions appeared to lessen, but he didn’t take his eyes off Alec as he walked in, dropped his bag and cane, and joined him at the table. Alec sat back down as Lyle put a coffee cup in front of Eli and quickly filled it.

“Would you like some breakfast, dear?” he asked, but Eli ignored Lyle, remaining focused on Alec.

“That still doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” he said.

“Be nice,” Lyle scolded. “Alec helped get you home and to bed last night.”

Eli looked sharply at Lyle. “Helped?” he asked.

“From what Ilsa told me this morning, you were wasted, my

friend,” Lyle said.

Eli attempted to remember more of the previous night. Alec watched him try to work it out, all the while praying he didn’t remember his behavior on the ride home.

“Casey and I got to the gallery and she made a bee line for Ilsa,” he began, his eyes focused on nothing across the room. “I had some wine, the paintings were spectacular,” he smiled at Lyle. “I congratulated Tony....”

He fell silent and Alec saw a cloud pass across his face. Eli did not resume. He reached for the sugar, added a teaspoon to his coffee, and began to stir lazily. Alec looked up at Lyle, who simply shrugged.

“This is our new boarder,” Lyle said.

“Welcome,” Eli said softly, never looking up from his coffee. Alec and Lyle glanced at each other, but Lyle only smiled weakly and went back to the dishes.

“Thank you, Eli,” Alec said. “I see you’ve taken off your beard.”

“I know,” Eli began. “I look five years younger.” Apparently, he didn’t feel up to talking because he rose from the table, grabbed his backpack, and limped toward the door. He hadn’t even tasted his coffee.

“No breakfast?” Lyle asked.

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry. I’ll probably pick up something on campus.”

“Campus?” Alec asked, once again trying to engage him.

Eli paused at the kitchen door and turned to look at Alec. “Thank you for helping get me home last night,” he said. “I wasn’t exactly myself. I hope you like it here.” He left the room, leaving the two of them on their own. Lyle grabbed his untouched coffee and poured it out.

CHAPTER 10

ELI and Lynette sat on a bench near the center of campus at the London School of Business. His stomach had settled by late afternoon and he was famished, so they picked up a couple of sandwiches after her first two classes. Lynette was one of only a few deaf students on campus this term. A few passers-by, not used to seeing it, stared at them as they signed.

Eli's attention was drawn upward as a breeze stirred the trees. It was getting cooler earlier in the day as fall approached. The last time they'd worked together was the end of the spring term, so there was much to discuss.

What he like?

Who?

New roommate... American... A-L-E-C.

Don't know... nice enough.

He tucked you in?

No. Helped me home. Not same thing.

Saw your goodies. Lynette grinned wickedly.

NO! I think Ilsa did. He smiled because it had not been the first time.

You think?

Eli did not respond because he remembered being in Ilsa's car, in the back seat, in the back seat with someone. Lynette waved her hand

in front of his eyes to bring his attention back to her.

How you feel?

Better... headache gone.

Thinking of him?

Eli almost choked on his soda.

NO!

A-L-E-C good looking?

He thought about this for a moment, recalling Alec's wavy black hair and handsome face, and then nodded.

Very?

Eli shrugged.

You know good looking when you see.

He smiled.

What he look like? Describe.

Hair: thick, black, wavy... long. Eyes: green or gray... maybe. Handsome... I guess.

Coy.

Eli made no comment.

Tall?

Taller than me.

Who not? They laughed. Smile?

Did not see... not sure... may be nice. Dimples.

Beard?

No.

Lips?

Yes.

Lynette rolled her eyes and Eli grinned as he finished off his sandwich. Something was tickling at the back of his mind. *Lips... lips and tongue.* His mouth fell open as his memory came back fully, in a flash. He looked at Lynette in astonishment.

What?

I... kissed... him.

WHAT?

He remembered it all now... in the back seat of Ilsa's car... wrestling... groping... nibbling. He'd kissed Alec. He'd kissed him good and hard.

You kissed?

Eli just nodded. Lynette doubled over with laughter. Her raucous guffaws turned a few passing heads.

NO MORE ALCOHOL FOR YOU!

Eli's face had turned bright red. He felt ashamed and appalled, and it only grew as he remembered what all he'd done with his eager hands. Why hadn't Alec said something? He guessed he was simply too embarrassed for him. Eli quickly got control of himself—largely because Lynette was enjoying it too much. He waved his hand in front of her face.

No problem. I will apologize.

She had tears in her eyes, but understood him.

Yes. You do that. She wiped her tears away and sighed.

That was that. He'd calmed down and selected a course of action. It was settled. He drained the last of his soda and began gathering their garbage. They stood, shouldered their backpacks, and walked to the nearest trash receptacle. As they neared the building where she had her international economics class, Lynette tapped Eli on the shoulder, and he turned to face her.

Was it good?

He turned away quickly, feeling his face grow hot again as she giggled mercilessly. He didn't meet her eyes as he held the door for her. She chose two seats right down front where she could easily read Eli and the board. After taking his seat and dropping his cane onto his bag, Eli considered her question. If he remembered correctly, it had been very good.

CHAPTER 11

ILSA was grilling chicken on the stove top. The intoxicating aroma wafted through the house with tasty promises for whoever came through the front door. Tony watched her, absently twirling the ice in his scotch.

“When did you get home?” she asked.

“Ken and I went for lunch, so I’m guessing two thirty.”

“Ken?”

“The guy I met at the showing last night,” he said with a swirl of his ice cubes. “He’s a fan of my work.”

“Well if he wasn’t, he certainly is now,” Ilsa said with a wink.

She placed a colander filled with dark lettuce in the sink and ran cold water over it. Tony seemed lost in thought as he contemplated the minute amount of alcohol remaining in his glass.

“Have you spoken to Lyle yet?”

“No,” he said, looking up at her innocently. “Why?” Ilsa gave him a scolding look over her shoulder and turned back to her salad preparations. “Need any help?”

“You can chop those carrots for me,” she instructed without turning around.

Tony twisted up his nose. “Oh.”

“What?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“I didn’t expect you to actually give me something to do.”

“Why did you ask?”

“You know me, Ilsa, I was being polite.” He left the room to refill his drink and, upon his return, he saw the carrots had been chopped. Ilsa had moved on to red cabbage and he sat back down. “So tell me about this boarder. What does he do?”

“He’s a psychologist and a writer. We took a couple of classes together.”

“So he’s a close friend?” Tony asked. “You’ve kept in touch over the years?”

“No.”

“How is it that he needed a place to live just when you decided to rent out the attic? You’ve been going back and forth on that for ages.”

“The planets aligned, what can I say?”

Alcohol made Tony curious and suspicious. It was a difficult combination. “Well, he had some great insights about my work, and he is quite the hottie, I must admit.”

“What about your new friend Ken?”

“Let’s just say I’m not a fan of his work.”

Ilsa snorted and Tony chuckled, but both quickly quieted when they heard the front door open and close.

“Ooh, what smells so good?” Lyle asked cheerfully as he entered the kitchen; but upon catching sight of Tony, his face fell. “Tony,” he said coolly.

“Lyle.”

The temperature seemed to drop in the room as Ilsa looked from one to the other.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

Lyle sauntered over and popped a couple of carrot slices in his mouth. “I was signing on with Bright and Sons.”

Ilsa stopped chopping suddenly and looked at him. Even Tony

paused before his next swig of scotch.

“You’ll be working for someone?” he asked. “I thought you prefer being your own boss?”

“That’s true, but I can’t really save anything that way.” He skipped over to the table and dropped into a chair. “With a company, I’ll have better connections, better pay, and private health benefits. I’ll be able to set money back and eventually get my own place.”

Tony sputtered a bit of his scotch onto the kitchen table. “You want to move out?” he asked incredulously.

“It’s not that I want to, Tony. I just think I might take a new path.” Ilsa and Tony just stared at him and he rolled his eyes. “Come on, you have to admit I spend a large amount of my time taking care of all of you and this house.” They just kept staring.

Tony looked at Ilsa and then back at Lyle. “We thought you liked doing that,” he said.

“Well, I do, but I need something for me—a life of my own—perhaps a partner to take care of?” He looked from Ilsa to Tony again. They didn’t respond. “Ilsa, dear, your chicken.”

“Huh? Oh! Shit!” She turned quickly and attempted to rescue their dinner, but Tony hadn’t stopped glaring at Lyle.

“What am I supposed to do, share a room with some stranger?” he asked indignantly.

“Why not? You did last night,” Lyle said lightly. Tony opened his mouth to protest. “Calm yourself, Anthony. You can have the room to yourself. You don’t actually need another boarder, do you, Ilsa?”

“Huh?” She was working quickly, pulling the chicken breasts from the grill. “No. Not necessarily.”

A door slammed somewhere in the house and was followed by the sound of someone rushing down the stairs.

“I could smell that all the way in the attic,” Alec said as he bounded into the room. The atmosphere in the kitchen was apparent, and his mood quickly shifted to match it. “Is something wrong?” No one said anything at first.

“Alec, could you set the table, please?” Ilsa asked. She reached into a lower cabinet and gathered cloth napkins as Alec found the plates. He left the kitchen with them and began setting the dining room table. The front door opened and closed again.

“That should be Eli,” Ilsa said, glancing at the clock over the sink. “He’s just in time.”

“Hi,” he said as he entered the kitchen. He saw Tony and Lyle sitting at the kitchen table, apparently not speaking to each other or anyone else.

“Hey, sugar,” Ilsa said. “Listen, your friend Casey has called here twice trying to get hold of you.”

“More likely she’s trying to get hold of you,” Eli said under his breath.

“What?” Ilsa asked.

“Nothing. I’ll give her a call later,” he said.

“She sounded worried,” Ilsa said, and Eli nodded.

“Have any of you seen Alec?” he asked, prompting Tony and Lyle to look at him with sudden interest.

“I’m in here,” Alec called from the other room. Eli glanced nervously at his three friends, and then walked into the dining room. He found Alec folding napkins for the place settings.

“Hello,” Eli said softly, hanging back in the doorway.

“Hello. How’d your day go?”

“No worries.” He stepped a bit further into the room. “I interpret for a finance student at LSB.” Alec didn’t look up; he continued folding napkins. Eli seemed unsure of what to say as he stood there with one hand on his cane, the other shoved in his jean pocket. “I’m s-sorry about this morning. I may have been a bit short with you.”

“I understood. You had a rough night.”

Eli went scarlet. “About that. I wanted to apologize for....”

Alec looked up expectantly; their eyes met.

“For?”

“My behavior in the car,” Eli finished, glancing back over his shoulder at his friends in the kitchen. They didn’t appear to be listening. He continued but lowered his voice. “When we were in the back seat.”

“Came back to you, huh?”

Eli smiled. “Yeah, around lunch time.”

Alec chuckled. “Don’t worry about it,” he said as he got up to distribute the place settings. “No harm done, Eli. You weren’t yourself.”

“No, no there’s no excuse for that, but you’re right. It wasn’t like me.” He stepped forward, took a couple of settings from Alec, and began placing them on his side of the table. “You must have wondered what kind of house you’d gotten yourself into.”

“I’ve come to the conclusion you’re an interesting bunch, if nothing else. Besides, I slept like a baby, and my room is beautiful,” Alec said, prompting Lyle to beam with pride. Ilsa smiled at him, but Tony continued to glare which wiped the smile from Lyle’s face. The three of them went back to eavesdropping. Alec said, “But if you really want to make up for your...”

“Yes?”

“... inappropriate familiarity, you might teach me to sign,” Alec concluded.

“Really? It’s pretty involved,” he said with a dazzling smile that nearly shattered Alec’s calm exterior.

“I understand, but I’d like to learn. I think it’s a beautiful language. I saw you with your friends at that café last month.”

“You were watching us?”

“You caught my attention, yeah.” They didn’t say anything for a few moments.

“I’m not trained as an instructor,” Eli began. “I just interpret, but I guess I could show you some things.”

“Great!” Alec’s smile was apparently contagious, because Eli returned it.

“Dinner’s ready!” Ilsa announced as she carried in the tray of chicken and placed it on the table. She was followed closely by Tony and Lyle, who each carried several well-laden serving dishes. Eli and Alec sat across from one another as they all took their seats.

“What’s the special occasion?” Eli asked.

“She’s trying to make us fat,” Tony said as he eyed the food suspiciously. “She doesn’t need an occasion.”

“I wanted Alec to have a proper family dinner,” Ilsa said, shooting Tony a dirty look, “to welcome him into our home. I couldn’t provide it last night, so we’re having it tonight.”

Ilsa went back into the kitchen and returned with a pitcher of iced tea and a bottle of wine. Tony and Lyle reached for the wine at the same time, but Tony deferred to Lyle, who went to work on the cork. He eyed Tony’s glass of whisky.

“You want wine as well?” Lyle asked.

“I can handle both,” Tony said indignantly. “You worry too much.” Lyle rolled his eyes and popped the cork. Tony grinned crookedly as he held out his wine glass to Lyle. “Fill ’er up, mate.” Lyle did as he was told, shaking his head in dismay.

The others drank iced tea with their meal—Eli, because he thought he might never drink again, Ilsa because she was a recovering alcoholic, and Alec, because he wanted to keep his wits about himself in Eli’s presence. He could easily imagine himself becoming as overly familiar as Eli had in the car.

They enjoyed the dinner. The food, as always, was delicious, and the conversation light, funny, and informative. Alec learned a lot about his housemates. Ilsa was pleased to see Eli more talkative than usual and not running for his bedroom. He and Alec laughed and chatted as he showed him the different signs for items on the table.

“But how would I make a sentence out of that?”

“Oh you’re one of those impatient types, huh?” Eli asked. “Vocabulary is important. You need a foundation to build from.” Alec nodded and smiled, properly chastised. “You have time. There’s an entire culture and history behind sign language that is very helpful to

understand.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t trying to rush you,” Alec began, and Eli smirked. “Okay, I *was* trying to rush you. I’m just eager to communicate, I guess.”

“I appreciate that.” Eli fell silent for a moment. “I guess I could mix things up for you. What did you want to ask?”

Alec sat up straighter in his chair. He looked around the table, suddenly at a loss. He glanced at Eli’s lips, but quickly moved on. Tony and Lyle remained unnaturally focused on their food while Ilsa watched Alec and Eli closely.

“Please pass the bread,” Alec said, prompting an intoxicated Tony to grab the bread basket and attempt to pass it down the table. Ilsa stopped him. Eli smiled and demonstrated the signs to use, but Alec appeared confused. “Why would bread come first?”

“Sign is a conceptual language. The sentence structure is inverted. So you state the subject, or what you want passed, first.” Alec looked uncertain and Eli grinned again. “I know it sounds daunting at first, but with practice, we’ll be conversing in no time, I promise.”

“Will it be Collette’s again on the fourth?” Tony asked suddenly. He’d finished off his third scotch and two glasses of wine, and he wasn’t aware of very much going on around him. He was especially unaware of the chill his question had just thrown over the table. Lyle and Ilsa stared at him in shock as Alec watched the light go out of Eli’s eyes. He forced a grin and stood to leave.

“Sugar?” Ilsa began.

“I’ll get the dessert,” he said as he headed into the kitchen. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s in the fridge,” Ilsa shouted after him.

She caught Alec’s eye and mouthed the word “Bennett.” He got it. The fourth was the second anniversary of Bennett’s murder. Alec’s gaze settled on the kitchen doorway as if he expected Eli to reappear at any minute. They heard the refrigerator door open and close, and then nothing; there was no sound from Eli and no sign of him. The resulting silence quickly became uncomfortable. Lyle looked at Tony and

severely kicked him under the table.

“Ow! Bloody hell!”

“You self-absorbed jackass!” Lyle hissed at him.

“What did I do?” Tony demanded as he looked around the table.

Alec got up and went into the kitchen. A chocolate mousse sat abandoned on the kitchen table. Eli was standing at the sink, looking out the window and onto the deck Bennett had insisted they build. The light on the back of the house illuminated the place where they used to have cookouts. It allowed him to see a bit deeper into the yard before the darkness swallowed it.

“Eli?” Startled, he turned to face Alec. “Are you all right?”

“I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“Collette’s.”

“Tony mentioned that. What is it?”

“It’s a small pub where we all used to hang, the five of us.” He sighed and grinned at Alec before turning back to the window. “We went there around this time last year and it looks like they want to go again.”

“But you don’t.”

Alec could see Eli’s grip tighten on the edge of the sink. “I’m sure Ilsa has told you about Bennett,” he said, and Alec nodded. “He was killed two years ago next Sunday.” Alec didn’t say anything. He just watched Eli and allowed him to find his words. “I used to think they went there because they wanted to keep me busy, keep my mind off certain things.” He turned to face Alec again. “Then I realized they want to remember. They want to reminisce.”

“And you don’t.”

Eli clearly wanted to say something but bit back his words. He moved to lift the dessert with one hand, but Alec quickly stepped forward and took it.

“I got it,” he said.

Eli lowered his eyes and followed him back into the dining room. Ilsa jumped up and quickly cleared away the other dishes, taking them into the kitchen and putting them in the sink. She returned with dessert dishes and spoons, quickly passed them out, and served the mousse.

“I think you’ll like this. I added something special to the mix,” she said as she passed a serving to Lyle. “Let me know if you can identify it.” They all dug in, except Tony. It wasn’t clear if he even knew where he was any longer.

As they ate, Alec kept stealing glances at Eli. His mood had darkened considerably since Tony’s question about their plans. He was not as talkative and barely touched his dessert. He also appeared anxious and agitated, as if he wanted to flee the room. It didn’t take long for him to notice Alec’s attention. Eli was beginning to squirm beneath the scrutiny.

“I’m sorry, but why are you staring at me?” he demanded suddenly, slamming his spoon on the table. Everyone at the table flinched except Tony, who simply jerked awake from an involuntary nap.

“I didn’t mean... Eli, I’m sorry,” he began. “I was thinking about asking you—”

“Asking me what?” he demanded, glaring at him. His face had changed so much, it was unsettling. Anger and resentment poured off him in waves.

“Eli!” Ilsa said, trying to intervene.

“I wondered if you might be able to show me around London some weekend, specifically some good music stores.”

The room fell silent again. The heat drained from Eli’s face and was replaced with confusion. Ilsa looked from one to the other as Lyle glared at a dozing Tony.

“What w-weekend?” Eli asked.

“Well I’m busy with my friend Mira this weekend, so maybe the next.” Eli stared into Alec’s eyes in disbelief. “I’m thinking perhaps a week from Sunday, if there’s nothing else you’d rather do, that is.” Alec grinned uncertainly at him.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I can show you,” Eli said quietly.

“Great. Maybe we can get some more practice in. We could make a day of it.”

Eli smiled gratefully at Alec and took a big bite of his mousse. He looked up at Ilsa, who was smiling broadly.

“Oranges. I taste oranges,” he said.

CHAPTER 12

LYLE and Alec helped Tony—who was close to sliding from his chair—to bed about an hour later.

“I don’t want you to think you’ll be helping drunks to bed every night,” Lyle said as they headed back downstairs.

“I won’t consider it a pattern until the third time,” Alec said with a chuckle.

They joined Ilsa and Eli in the kitchen for coffee. Eli sat at the table while Ilsa did the dishes. Lyle cleared the last few out of the dining room and put them on deck for a cleaning. Alec grabbed a towel to do the drying.

“Ilsa, honey, have a seat,” Lyle said, taking hold of her shoulders, turning her around, and guiding her toward the table. He quickly poured her a cup of coffee and then rolled up his sleeves and joined Alec at the sink. “We’ll handle the cleanup.”

“Absolutely,” Alec added. “That dinner was amazing.” Ilsa reluctantly took a seat as Eli raised his coffee cup in salute. Alec focused on drying the dishes. If he didn’t, his gaze would invariably travel to Eli, and he didn’t want a repeat of his behavior at dinner. He *had* been staring at him as Eli accused, but not for the reason he gave. That only came to him when he was cornered.

He was watching Eli at dinner because he liked looking at him. Eli was handsome and beautiful at the same time. *Those damn eyes, long lashes, lips, clear skin, strong jaw, and that dimpled smile.*

Though, it must be said, he didn't smile much.

He was feeling a bit trapped by Ilsa's expectations. Her agenda was complicated by this attraction of his. He could approach Eli with Ilsa's hopes in mind or with his own, but he could not attempt both. They were mutually exclusive.

He needed to make a decision soon. On the one hand, he was giddy at the prospect of spending an entire day with Eli. On the other hand, he feared a misstep would kill any romantic opportunity.

"Alec, exactly what is it you do?" Eli asked. Alec turned to face him, briefly catching a warning glance from Ilsa. He looked into Eli's eyes. They were pleasantly dreamy and filled with warmth. *Decision made.*

"I'm a psychologist."

Eli didn't appear to react as he calmly sipped his coffee.

"We had classes together in Baton Rouge during my psychology phase," Ilsa said quickly. "Then he deserted me for Chicago."

"Deserted? You moved to New York first!" Alec laughed. "You left me."

"And now you're in London," Eli said. "Why?"

"I've done some traveling: West Virginia, Louisiana, and then Illinois, but I've never been outside the US until now."

"What do you think so far?"

Alec smiled as he thought about it. "It's crazy busy and hectic like Chicago, but I haven't seen too many differences, except for the accents, of course."

"Yes! You Yanks love the way we talk. You think it's, um...."

"Sexy?" Alec asked.

Eli didn't say anything, only sipped his coffee, but Alec could see he'd given him pause. He'd surprised him.

"Personally, I like the Spanish accent," Lyle interjected. "Antonio Banderas and Javier Bardem are yum!"

"Lyle, you like those manly men," Ilsa laughed. "All tan, burly,

and macho.”

Lyle continued scrubbing the dishes, but smiled playfully. “So do you, Ms. Ilsa,” he joked.

She laughed. “I don’t think I’ve formed an opinion as to what type of man I like,” she said, giving it some thought. “I believe I favor a smaller man, a man about my size.”

“No big muscle-bound hunks?” Eli asked.

She shook her head. “I just don’t like the idea of being overpowered. I want my lovers to be physical equals.”

“You want a man you can take and a woman who can take you,” Eli offered.

“That’s not equal,” Ilsa corrected.

Lyle passed the last plate to Alec to dry and then started in on the dessert cups and spoons.

“What about you, Alec?” he asked.

“What about me?”

“What sort do you go for?”

He didn’t know why, but this question caught him off guard. He glanced at Eli but kept his eyes moving around the room and back to Lyle.

“I’m n-not sure what to say.”

“Just be honest,” Lyle said.

There was clearly more than one person in the room awaiting his answer. Alec cleared his throat. “I like a man who is intelligent and caring and who has a good sense of humor.” The room erupted in a series of loud groans, protests, and chuckles. Even Eli joined in.

“Everyone says that!” Lyle said. “Christ! We’re talking about animal attraction. Physically, what pumps you up? What makes your heart race? Seriously, I know a lot of men; I could fix you up.”

“N-no thanks, Lyle. No fix-ups,” Alec laughed, looking around the room nervously.

“Now, wait a minute,” Ilsa interjected. “I think we’re embarrassing him.”

“No, you’re not. I just... I don’t know. Physically? I guess I agree with Ilsa. I want a physical equal.”

“Hmmm, let’s see,” Lyle said looking him up and down. “So you want someone fit and gorgeous?”

He reached out to touch Alec’s abs through his shirt. Tickled and self-conscious, Alec pulled away and missed Eli and Ilsa exchanging smirks.

“For me, there has to be something about the guy that strikes me—grabs my attention and holds it,” Alec said, as he continued to dance out of Lyle’s reach.

“Yeah, a great arse!” Lyle said.

“Well, I can’t really imagine myself contemplating someone’s ass for very long,” Alec laughed.

“That’s right, Lyle,” Ilsa said. “You can’t write a poem about a person’s ass.”

“Speak for yourself,” he said with a giggle.

“Eyes,” Alec said.

“I’m sorry?” Eli asked looking up from his coffee.

“Eyes are worth writing about,” Alec said as he glanced at each of them, “because they can be more than beautiful or striking. Looking into someone’s eyes leads you deeper into them; it shows you who they are, truly... and that can be endlessly fascinating.”

Everyone fell silent, contemplating what he’d just said. Alec became somewhat uncomfortable under their gaze.

“Well spoken, sir,” Eli said suddenly as he rose from the table. “You are a true poet, and I am truly exhausted, so I’m off to bed.”

“Good night,” Alec said.

“We’re still on for Sunday. I’m yours all day.”

Eli left the room. *Mine all day.* Alec turned away from Lyle and Ilsa to fold his dish towel. He didn’t want them to see the grin he

couldn't quite pry off his face. Lyle headed off to bed thirty minutes later. After saying their "good nights" to him, Ilsa and Alec retired to the living room to finish their coffee.

"I guess I killed that party. Too serious, huh?"

"No, what you said was lovely, but you did have me worried for a moment there," she said.

"When?"

"When you told Eli you were a psychologist, I was terrified you were going to mention your book."

"I won't lie to him, Ilsa," Alec said flatly.

"I'm not suggesting you do; I'm just saying if he learns you're an author of a book on overcoming trauma, that's it! He'll shut you out, and you'll never be able to help him."

"I don't think I can do what you've asked. I can't be his shrink and his...."

"And his what?" she asked, looking confused.

"His friend," Alec said quietly. Ilsa gave him a look of sheer exasperation. "You need to let me handle this my way."

"Fair enough," she said.

CHAPTER 13

ALEC was exhausted by the time he climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He'd forgotten to open a window before heading down to dinner, and without air-conditioning in the attic, the room had become uncomfortably warm. He quickly remedied the situation by stripping off his shirt and opening the windows.

A strong breeze was building outside, and Alec took full advantage, sitting on the window seat to remove his shoes. The wind disturbed his hair as he paused to look out over his new neighborhood. The moon bathed the houses in soft light, and the air smelled of rain, but none had fallen yet. The clouds moved across the moon; it blinked off and on like a supreme being playing with some cosmic light switch. *Strange. I hoped you would look different over here.*

He heard a couple of dogs barking, and then they began to howl. He couldn't help but be reminded of *101 Dalmatians* when all the dogs broadcasted the news of the missing puppies clear out to the countryside. He sat there wondering what these mutts were saying to each other.

A tiny white stray on the street below caught his eye. It was some type of terrier mix, and it paused in its travels and looked up at him. It stared at him an uncomfortably long time.

"Hello," Alec whispered, and the dog started barking excitedly.

Startled, he leaned back away from the window for several moments; it was time enough for the mutt to stop making such a ruckus and move on. When he slowly peeked back out, however, the dog had

not moved and resumed its barking at his appearance.

He was getting that feeling again: as if London was yet another place he didn't belong. He moved from Huntington to Baton Rouge to Chicago, from Hank to Kyle to Samuel. Who would be next? Failed love affairs could eventually push him around the world. His thoughts went directly to Eli.

To avoid another disaster, Alec decided he must find a way to fill his time—something to distract him from this infatuation. He didn't need to work for a while thanks to the success of his book, but maybe a job would be a good idea. He stood and finished undressing and then threw himself onto the bed. He wanted to sleep, but his thoughts wouldn't shut off. He flipped over onto his back just as another welcome breeze blew across the bed and his chest. He stared up at the ceiling and didn't remember falling asleep.

THE days between that night and the anniversary of Bennett's murder passed uneventfully. Tony and Lyle were chummy one day and arguing the next, but Ilsa had given up trying to run interference between them. Lyle's job at the estate company was keeping him very busy, and the house was suffering for it. Eli kept his room clean, did his laundry, and his own dishes. Those things he could manage. Alec was the same; no problems there. Of course, Lyle was highly efficient in the art of cleaning, so in spite of his heavier work schedule, he always had fresh knickers to wear.

Ilsa and Tony were another matter, however. They'd both come to rely on Lyle for making their lives run smoothly. Apparently, he was no longer doing that, and neither of them knew which buttons on the washer did what. Ilsa's mother had done all her cleaning for her, and when she left home, she invariably dated someone who could keep her life properly organized.

In the middle of the week, Alec scheduled a tutorial on how to properly do laundry. Ilsa attended; Tony did not. He seemed convinced Lyle would not move out and would continue to look after him.

Several of Tony's paintings sold, including the one of Ilsa, but no matter how much she tried, she couldn't needle the identity of the buyer

out of him.

“It was an anonymous purchase. I have no idea,” he insisted. He used part of his windfall to buy an entertainment system for the house, including a flat screen television. “A gift for all of us,” he’d said. As much as everyone was thrilled with his purchase, Ilsa would have preferred that he grab a broom or a feather duster. Eli continued to practice signing with Alec whenever the opportunity arose, which wasn’t very often. He would quiz him when they passed in the front hall on their way in or out the door.

Alec was heading in and out quite often because he was helping Mirabell shop; she was a buyer for a women’s clothing chain. Originally, it was to be called Broad, which for Alec and Mirabell conjured images of strong, beautiful, intelligent, formidable women—but for the advertisers; a wholly different image arose. Therefore, the clothing brand was renamed Chick.

They frequented numerous independent street vendors in search of something special that she might deem a “discovery” and take to her bosses. It would mean money and clout for her and a shot at the big-time for the vendor. Alec tagged along on the pretense of helping, but he knew very little about fashion. Mirabell was fine with that because she needed him to carry what she found and keep records; he agreed because he needed a friend to talk to about Eli.

“So you’re in love again?” she asked as she picked through a table of handcrafted jewelry.

“Did I say love? I don’t remember saying love.”

“All right, you’re in like. It’s the same thing with you. I remember when we met in Chicago and you were mooning over... who was it?”

“Samuel.”

“Ah, yes. Sam the shutterbug. He broke your heart, love; he drove you out of Chicago and clear across the pond only to fall in like with Eli.”

“Well, yes. I like him, but—”

“But? My goodness, you’re living in the same house.” Mirabell pointed out. “You couldn’t have it any simpler.”

“Ilsa—you met her at the art show—”

“I remember nothing about that night,” she said flatly.

“Ilsa wants me to help Eli work through the loss of his partner, help him face some things.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t it illegal or, at the very least, bad form to bang your patients?”

“He wouldn’t be my patient. She asked me because she remembered me from LSU and I wrote that damn book.” Mirabell paused with a heavy beaded bracelet in her hand. She looked at him sternly.

“Don’t bash that book. It keeps you flush, love. You should thank heaven you wrote it,” she said. “Otherwise, you’d have to schlep through life like the rest of us.”

“Schlep?” Alec asked, smiling. “You hardly look like you’re struggling.”

“No, I don’t struggle, but I have to work.” She dropped that bracelet and picked up another, more delicate one. “I may love what I do, but it is still work.” She caught the vendor’s attention to make her purchase. “If I had your money, I’d be in the Bahamas right now, getting a tan and letting cabana boys rub me down.” She peered at him over her sunglasses. “If you know what I mean.”

Alec laughed and shook his head as he stepped forward to get the vendor’s contact information. They moved on. Mirabell had spotted some hand-dyed scarves in the distance.

“These are lovely,” she said, letting one spill over her fingers. “Nice use of color and material. Who wouldn’t love that?” she asked, holding it up to Alec.

He shrugged. “It’s nice. Shiny.”

She rolled her eyes. “Have you decided what you’re going to do to—sorry, I mean about—Eli?” she asked with a wicked smirk.

“We’re spending tomorrow together. He’s going to show me around Soho.” Mirabell purchased five of the scarves, and Alec stepped up to take the information again. He talked as he wrote. “I hope to get him talking.”

“Talking, huh?” she asked. “Talking to his potential lover or to his therapist?”

“His friend. I think that’s the best way to begin. I want to know him. I want to help him, if I can.”

“I know you, Alec,” she said, peering at him over her glasses. “What you want most is to love him.”

HE COULDN’T move, he couldn’t scream, he couldn’t breathe. He was dead. *Can’t be dead. It hurts too much.* On the other side of the alley, he saw Eli; a thug was grinding his knee into his back. They looked at each other, but then his vision grew darker. Eli was the last thing he saw as his eyes swelled shut. *Everything hurts, and I’m too broken to move.* He tasted blood and felt teeth loose in his mouth. He didn’t see the boot coming, but he felt it.

Eli woke shouting and nearly threw himself out of bed as he convulsed. He scrambled into a sitting position, kicked the covers off and backed himself into the top corner of the bed; his back was pressed tightly against the wall. His eyes tried to adjust, to see into the darkness of his room as he struggled to stop shaking. He was drenched in sweat. His boxers and T-shirt clung to him. The breeze through the window made him shiver all the more as his heart beat like automatic gunfire in his chest. He realized he was holding his breath and forced himself to exhale and then breathe in deeply.

He listened to the noises of the house, fearing he’d awakened someone, but there was nothing. He forced himself to get out of bed. Finding his cane by the headboard, he stood and stripped and then donned a new pair of shorts from his dresser and headed for the kitchen, barefoot and bare-chested.

The sun would be up soon, and the house would come alive with activity. Ilsa would be heading off to her restaurant, and Lyle to get a head start at his new job, but it was Eli’s plan to avoid all of them all day. Everyone but Alec, that is. He had mapped out a day in Soho for them. There were several music stores he could show Alec and some out-of-the-way places for coffee, lunch, and people-watching.

He gulped down a glass of water and waited for his hands to stop shaking. He gazed out onto the deck as Alec's comments from last Sunday floated through his thoughts. He'd liked what he'd heard. It had sounded to him as if physical perfection wasn't the end-all and be-all for their new housemate.

I think he likes you.

Eli didn't turn around. "I think you're wrong," he said.

No you don't. You hope it's true.

Eli continued to stare out the window and into the backyard. He thought about Alec's smile at dinner, about his gray eyes and thick, dark hair. He fit nicely into their home.

You like him.

"I love you."

I'm not here... haven't been for a long time.

Eli looked down at his chest and ran his fingers over the scars his ribs had made when they'd torn through his skin two years ago. He'd nearly lost a lung. He couldn't see his leg in the dark kitchen, but remembered how red and angry it had looked when he'd finally woken up. Of course, the scars were not as dramatic now, but the steel rods holding his leg together had left quite the road map.

Far above him in the house, he heard movement—sleepy, aimless movement, but movement nonetheless. In his rush to get back to his room unseen, his cane hit the floor, causing a loud clatter. Eli grabbed it up and froze, listening. There was only silence, as if someone had paused on the floor above for the same reason.

"Hello?"

It was Alec on the second floor landing. Eli hurried, as best he could, back to his room. His door clicked shut gently just as Alec reached the foot of the stairs and turned into the hallway. Eli stood just on the other side of his door and heard the floorboards creak as Alec passed slowly, heading for the kitchen.

CHAPTER 14

ALEC wasn't comfortable driving in London yet, so Ilsa gave him and Eli a ride into Soho on her way to work. She dropped them off on Wardour and, with a wave, headed off. Traveling light for a full day of activity, Eli had only his essentials: cane, wallet, and iPod.

Alec silently ran through the list of things he wanted to pick up: T-shirts, a couple of dress shirts, jeans, whatever CDs Eli recommended, and some other odds and ends. He had some cash, but the success of his book assured him a hefty account to draw from, so he planned to rely heavily on his bank card.

"You mentioned music shops," Eli said. "There's quite a variety around here, but I need to know what kind of music you like."

"All kinds, really, but I favor indie and alternative—lots of guitar, solid lyrics, melodies, and complex ideas," Alec said, looking at Eli to see if that was enough information.

Apparently, it was.

"Right, off we go," Eli said. They walked a couple of blocks, but as they approached Old Compton, Eli took a detour toward a coffee shop. "Mind if we stop?" he asked. "I'm knackered." Alec had no idea what knackered meant but agreed and followed him into the shop.

The employees were just getting things under way for the day, so there was only one person ahead of them in line. Soon the two of them were stepping back out onto the street, Eli with his caffeine and Alec with a banana nut muffin and skim milk. He was just taking a bite when

he realized he was standing right where he'd first seen Eli.

"Hey, this is where you took down that kid," he said, excitedly pointing at the very spot. Eli looked around, and a smile slowly spread across his face.

"You're right. It was so much busier at that time of day, I almost didn't notice."

A shop employee was beginning to set up the outside eating area, and the two of them grabbed the first table and chairs they could. Soon the traffic, both cars and foot, would pick up in volume. Alec sipped his milk and Eli his coffee as he explained a bit about the area.

"Soho lies within Oxford, Shaftesbury, Charing Cross, and Regent," he explained.

"How big is that?"

"Not very, considering all that's here. During the day, it's mostly television and fashion folk running about. At night, the tourists and Londoners crowd the streets. It used to be the vice district, but now it's sort of a center for the gay scene."

"Did you and Bennett spend a lot of time here?" Alec asked. He hoped it wasn't too soon, but Eli didn't flinch. He smiled and seemed to be lost in thought for a moment.

"Lord, yes," he said with a chuckle. "Whenever we got some time off, which didn't happen very often with Bennett's job at the design firm, we came down here. Before we found Collette's, we'd spend all night dancing with Tony and Lyle at Heaven or at The End."

"Sounds like fun," Alec said.

"It was. But those days are over, I'm afraid." Eli glanced at his leg. "You missed The End by just a few months; it closed in January after more than a decade."

"It doesn't sound like my sort of place, not at my age," Alec said.

"I don't know," Eli said with a smile. "Tony still gets in every now and then, and he's clearly beyond his late twenties."

He was looking up the street as he spoke. He went on about the entertainment available in the area: the live music, the comedy clubs,

the cinema, and the West End theaters. He was smiling brightly as he finished, but when he glanced over at Alec, the smile vanished and he looked away. He seemed embarrassed by getting caught up with his memories in front of him.

“Let’s get going, shall we?” he asked abruptly, and they tossed their garbage in a trash bin as they headed off.

Not wanting to rush him, Alec let Eli set their pace. He walked behind him, watching the ragged rubber tip on Eli’s cane strike the pavement. He wondered how much walking Eli could manage.

“The walking is good for me,” Eli said over his shoulder, as if reading his mind. He turned to face him. “It keeps my leg warm and limber.”

And limber they kept it by walking up and down Old Compton, back to Wardour, over to Brewer, then Sherwood, and after that, Lexington. For the next few hours, they visited two music shops, three clothing stores—including a sock shop that Alec could have spent all day in—and a gallery. Eli also pointed out a live music bar that wasn’t open yet.

They stopped for lunch around one thirty, ordering gyros from a little Greek place on Frith. They opted for the outside tables so that they could enjoy the energy of the crowds as they swelled.

“Would you like to stop by The Photographers’ Gallery?” Eli asked.

“Do you think I should?” Alec asked as he thumbed through a small assortment of brochures from some of the shops they’d visited.

“I don’t know what you have on your walls, but nothing caught your eye at the first gallery. I thought maybe you were more the photograph sort.”

“Oh, I see,” Alec said with a nod. “You might have something there. I haven’t done much with the room.”

“When you get it just the way you like, take a picture of it for me, will you?”

Alec put the brochures away and looked up at Eli. “Surely you could come up?”

Eli stuck his right leg out. “It’s a bit tough with this, mate,” he said. “And don’t call me Shirley.” Caught off guard, ice tea nearly squirted from Alec’s nose as he laughed. Eli smiled, apparently quite satisfied with himself.

“Yes, but maybe if you leaned on me,” Alec suggested after getting his giggles under control. Eli didn’t say anything; he just shrugged. “At any rate, I think I’d like to paint it a different color.”

Eli sipped his lemonade. “Remind me, what color is it now?”

“It’s a shocking blue,” Alec said, squinting as if he were experiencing the color at that very moment.

Eli grinned. “Are you more of the earth-tone sort?”

“Definitely,” Alec said with a nod. “But nothing too bland, nothing too beige.” He sighed, looking around. “I’ll know it when I see it.” They ate quietly and watched the people rushing by them on their way to something they believed important.

“Why are you really in London, Alec?” Eli asked, taking another sip of his drink. The question came out of nowhere, and they locked eyes for a moment.

“What do you mean?” Alec asked, trying to buy more time.

“Ilsa said you were here doing research for a book, but I haven’t seen any evidence of it.”

“Well, that’s true; I’m not here doing research. She must have gotten the wrong impression.” Eli was waiting, eyebrow raised and arms folded, for an answer. *When in doubt, tell the truth.* “I have a tendency to flee.”

“Flee?” Eli asked.

“Yeah, things didn’t end well with my last boyfriend, and my solution was to—”

“Move to another country?”

Alec laughed. “This time, yes.” There was more; there was the book, but that could wait. He could hear Ilsa’s voice in his head warning him against mentioning it. Eli was watching him, waiting for more. When it didn’t come, he prompted him.

“Have you always been that way?”

Alec nodded but rushed to explain. “I don’t plan it like that; it just sort of happens. I get this urge and take off.” He went on in detail about his first boyfriend at seventeen—Henry. “He preferred Hank because he thought it made him sound tough.”

They were together—closeted and together—for a year and a half in Huntington, West Virginia, which wasn’t the most welcoming toward alternative lifestyles.

“Why did it end?”

“Hank couldn’t face it. He broke it off with me and started dating a girl... what was her name?” Alec’s eyes searched the skies briefly. “Alisha Beeker. That’s it.” He glanced at Eli before focusing on his hummus again. “I’m surprised I remembered it.” He fell silent for a few moments as he toyed with his chickpeas. “They got married.”

“I guess I don’t need to ask if you were at the wedding.”

“Oh, I was there,” Alec added excitedly. “I had to be. Remember, our families thought we were best friends.”

“You weren’t the...”

“Best man,” Alec finished for him, nodding emphatically. “You betcha!” Eli’s mouth fell open in shock. “Besides, I needed to see it happen, actually happen.”

“Then you fled? Where to?”

“Louisiana. That’s when I began my studies at LSU.”

“That’s where you met Ilsa?”

“Yep. A little while later I met Kyle.” Alec sighed. “He was lovely.” A grin spread across Alec’s face, and his eyes unfocused. Eli waited. “He was a theater major.” They both rolled their eyes and laughed. “He was almost too beautiful to look at, and for the longest time I wondered why he pursued me so.”

“Did you figure it out?”

“Not then and not for a long time after, but I understand it now.” Their waiter approached and cleared their plates. They each ordered coffee and pastry. “Kyle couldn’t have someone outshine him,” Alec

continued. “He had to be the center of attention and focus of the action.” Eli was nodding; he understood. “I was perfect for him. I adored everything he did. I put up with his temperamental crap. I was grateful he wanted me.” Alec laughed, suddenly remembering something. “He was also selfish in the sack.” They laughed together at this.

“What ended it? Did you smarten up?” Eli asked.

“No, I’m ashamed to say. Kyle found someone who outshone him and discovered he liked it after all. Clay was his name, I think.” Alec paused for effect. “Eli, my God! This man had to be from another planet! No one can grow up that beautiful, and he was an arrogant son of a bitch.”

“Some people win the genetic lottery, Alec. The rest of us just get by.”

He looked out at the busy street and watched a woman struggling with her bratty child. He smiled as the little girl slapped an ice cream cone out of her mother’s hand, demanding a different flavor. The waiter returned with two servings of baklava and their coffee. He turned back to Alec.

“Where’d you go next?” he asked as he sliced a piece off his pastry, picked it up with his fingers, and popped it in his mouth where—Alec was positive—it promptly melted. His face grew warm as he watched Eli suck the sticky sugar off his fingers.

“C-could I get some ice water, please?” he asked a passing waiter before continuing with his story. “Um, I went to Chicago to finish my degree,” he continued quickly. “I took an extended break between boyfriends. I wanted to get it right the next time. Four years in Chicago and...”

“You met?”

“Samuel. A photographer. He thought I was lovely or amusing. I can’t remember which.”

“How long were you together?”

“Nearly five years. I thought I was done.” Neither one of them spoke for a while. The waiter returned with Alec’s water and Eli

watched intently as he gulped it down. “As to what happened, I guess he got bored with me. He went in search of another subject and found him.”

“And here you are in London,” Eli said.

“Yep,” Alec said with a sigh. “The house was in his name. He moved his new man in but was kind enough to offer me a room until I got my own place.” He looked at Eli and smiled. “I declined.”

They didn’t look at each other as they finished off their desserts.

“Maybe you’ll meet the right one here,” Eli said with a sigh. “It shouldn’t be all that difficult.” Alec grinned doubtfully at his assertion. “I know some blokes who’d consider you quite the catch.”

“You think so, do you?” Alec asked. Eli nodded and chuckled a bit when he noticed him blushing brightly. “Well, thank you for saying so, but you won’t mind if I don’t hold my breath?”

“Let’s look at the facts, shall we?” Eli said. “You’re intelligent, articulate, a good-looking chap, and a doctor.” He paused, grinning at Alec’s ever-growing embarrassment. “You also appear to have put away a few quid.”

Alec couldn’t stop smiling. “Eli, you make me sound damn near irresistible,” he said and the two of them laughed loudly enough to turn a few heads.

Soon after that, they left the waiter a massive tip and continued their exploration of, and Alec’s introduction to, Soho. Eventually, they made their way to the gallery Eli had mentioned and spent more than an hour in there contemplating the work. Alec was losing hope of ever finding something to grace his walls when Eli called out to him.

“Check this out!”

He walked over and was stunned to see Eli standing proudly next to the largest framed photograph he had ever seen.

“How big do you think my walls are?” Alec asked as he began laughing. “There’s not a wall in the house that will support that!” He doubled over in hysterics, and Eli, upon taking another look at it, joined in.

“Now that you mention it,” Eli said between fits of laughter, “it is

bigger than the new flat screen.”

Alec imagined the photo being delivered to the house and everyone struggling to get it up two flights of stairs. He continued laughing so hard, it brought tears to his eyes. “If it fell off my wall it would come through the floor!” he said.

Heads in the gallery were beginning to turn their way and a saleswoman rushed over.

“May I help you, gentlemen?” They looked at her and laughed even louder. It was Alec who finally got control of himself.

“W-we’re sorry, miss. I’m looking for a piece for my attic bedroom,” he said glancing at Eli who was wiping tears from his eyes and trying to breath. “I like the graphic representation in this one, I just need something similar and... uh...”

“Smaller!” Eli shouted, and he was off again with Alec following close behind.

“Of course, sir; I believe I can help you,” the saleswoman said. The corners of her mouth had begun to turn up, and she shook her head vigorously to retain control. “This way, please.” Alec followed her, but the stitch in his side caused him to walk at a strange angle. He turned to find Eli hanging back and looked at him questioningly.

“I need to sit for a bit,” he said. “You go ahead.” Alec nodded, glanced at his leg, and disappeared into another room while Eli took a seat on a bench against the wall. Settling in to wait for his housemate, he popped in his ear buds and flipped on his iPod. He tugged his ball cap down tight on his head, folded his arms, and breathed deeply as Franz Ferdinand filled his skull. Periodically he would giggle when he thought about the massive photograph.

Alec reappeared quite a while later but just in time because Eli’s bladder was beginning to complain. He was suddenly there, tapping Eli on the shoulder. Startled, he lifted the bill of his cap, yanked out his headphones, and looked up at him.

“I picked out something,” Alec said. “Come see.”

Eli went to get up, but found his leg stiff. “Go on, I’ll meet you at the purchase desk,” he said. He began to massage his leg, pressing deep

into the muscle. It became agreeable again fairly quickly, and he joined Alec at the checkout. “What did you get?”

Alec made a grandiose gesture toward the saleswoman who held up an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch framed, black and white photo of a very old man’s face. His skin looked like leather and his eyes appeared to have witnessed the creation of the heavens and Earth. Eli held it together until he glanced at the saleswoman, who had tears running down her face.

“It’s called *Geezer*,” she said, her voice cracking and lips trembling as she fought to maintain proper decorum for the gallery. Eli nearly fell over laughing, but he didn’t think he could take another fit. His bladder definitely couldn’t.

“It’s so tiny compared to the first one,” he laughed.

Alec put his hand on his shoulder to calm him. “I also got this one,” he said, pointing to the saleswoman as she held up a more moderately-sized piece. It was visually striking, showing a man in silhouette standing on a fog-shrouded highway overpass at night; the interstate lights appeared to hang in the air above him like spaceships. It was a lonely image.

“I’ll have this wrapped and delivered to your address tomorrow, Mr. Sumner.”

“Thank you, I’ll carry the other.”

“Of course; let me get you a bag.” She turned toward the back room but paused. “Would you like a couple of larger bags to consolidate your other purchases, sir?” she asked. “It could make them easier to carry.” Alec and Eli looked down at their growing collection of bags and both nodded eagerly. The saleswoman vanished into the other room.

“Where to next?” Alec asked.

“First, I have to pop in the loo,” Eli said. “After that how about a shoe shop?”

“Excellent,” Alec said.

Eli returned from the bathroom just as the saleswoman reappeared with padding and a couple of big shopping bags with handles. She

passed one to Eli and then carefully wrapped and placed Alec's photograph in the other.

"Come again," she said as she passed the bag to him. When he tried to take it, however, she held onto it and looked deeply into his perplexed eyes. "Anytime," she whispered. She smiled brightly and released the bag.

Eli watched this exchange wide-eyed. Alec took the bag and held it close to his chest as he backed away from her with a silly grin on his face. Once outside, Eli let him have it.

"Mate, she wants you bad," he jeered. Alec just smiled.

They crossed the street to the shoe store but didn't see anything they liked. They left and window shopped all the way to a burger place near Sutton. Eli caught a hint of the aroma wafting from the eatery and realized he was starving.

"I'm peckish," he said, but Alec just stared at him. "Sorry, hungry. Let's get something portable and eat at Soho Square."

"Lord, you must have the metabolism of a rabbit," Alec said. "Any ideas?"

Eli pointed to the restaurant, and in they went. The large bags they'd gotten from Alec's admirer proved very useful. Alec was able to manage his purchases as well as the food, while Eli carried their drinks in a cardboard tray. The square was spotted with stone benches and a patchwork walkway of cobblestones. They chose the first bench they came to and straddled it facing each other. Eli set their drinks down as Alec spread their bags out between them.

They ate quickly enough to cause heartburn but didn't seem to care. The air had become nicely crisp, if a bit chilly. Alec glanced up at the sky and noticed the sun was on its descent. Then his gaze fell back on Eli.

"What about you?"

He looked up with a mouthful of fries. "Huh?"

"I told you how I came to London. How did you come to Bennett?"

Surprised by the question, Eli stopped chewing for a moment. He

recovered quickly, finished, and swallowed with difficulty. He took a long, slow sip of his orange drink as he stared out across the square. Alec was about to accept that he wasn't going to answer when Eli spoke.

"He always thought he was my first," he began softly. "He wasn't. Stevie Pike was. He grew up with me in Essex."

"How long were you together?" Alec asked.

"We weren't together," Eli scoffed. "We were only fourteen or fifteen, kind of like you and Henry. Everyone just figured we were best friends, and we were. I mean, we'd known each other since we were three or so. Our moms were best friends, and our fathers hung out at the pub together."

Eli explained that their relationship changed around the time all the other boys in their class began noticing girls as something other than targets to annoy. He and Stevie were strangely uninterested. One day his best friend showed up at his house with a magazine he'd snatched from his older brother. It had pictures of men and women having sex, kissing and touching each other.

"I knew something was up," Eli said, grinning as he remembered. "He was sweating and holding his jacket closed as we hustled off to my room."

"What did you think?"

"I had some idea about it, but I didn't want to touch those women in the pictures. I wanted to touch Stevie, and happily, he wanted to touch me." Alec smiled at the thought of Eli's first sexual experience. "That was very exciting, let me tell you," Eli said as he flashed Alec a most dazzling smile before gobbling down the last of his burger. "We didn't think too deeply about it or what it might mean, and we went on like that for months, kissing and rubbing each other. We could always find some secluded spot by the shore. We rationalized it by saying, 'We don't have girlfriends. What's a boy to do?'"

"Of course," Alec agreed jokingly. "You had to practice."

However, there was one activity they'd seen in the magazine that they hadn't tried. Alec had an idea what it was but waited to see if Eli would continue. He did, explaining that Stevie had been hesitant to be

first, so Eli went down on him and then Stevie returned the favor.

“After that, he became a bit distant. I think he was scared of what it all meant.”

“He didn’t go scare up a girlfriend, did he?”

“Yes!” Eli laughed. “For about a month. I don’t remember her name, but eventually he came back to me, and we couldn’t get enough of each other.”

“How did it end?”

“Horribly.” Eli fell silent for a moment as he remembered. “About a year later, my dad caught us. Actually, that was probably my first encounter with irrational hatred.”

“Hatred? I can understand shock and anger, but—I’m guessing he walked in on...”

Eli nodded. “Stevie putting a smile on my face.”

“Well, that would upset any father, don’t you think?”

“Upset, yes, but if it had been a girl, you and I both know my father wouldn’t have tried to kill her. He probably would have been proud of me.”

“Your dad tried to kill him?”

Eli nodded. “Stevie was terrified—bloody hell, I was terrified, but I wasn’t about to let my father hurt him.” Alec feared how this story would end. “I stood between them and held him off until he got control of himself. I shouted at him that this is who I was and that Stevie hadn’t done anything to me that I didn’t want.”

“And?”

“He punched me; he knocked out one of my teeth.” At this Eli opened his mouth wide and tilted his head back to show Alec the missing tooth on the left, top side of his jaw near the back. “Then he punched me again; he broke my nose.”

“Good lord!”

“Yeah, for a few moments I thought Stevie might have to save me.” Eli looked lost in thought. “The look in Dad’s eyes...” His voice

trailed away and he focused back on Alec. “We were never that close, but things were even colder after that.”

“What about Stevie?”

“Never saw him again,” Eli said sadly. “His parents sent him off to live with relatives in America, hoping to get him away from my evil influence.” He laughed. “Last my mum told me, he was living happily with his partner in San Francisco.”

Eli had been sent to live with his crazy, deaf aunt in London for a few years until time for university. Communicating with his aunt sparked an interest in sign language, and when he found he had an aptitude for it, he decided to make interpreting professionally his goal. He worked hard and saved up some money, but instead of heading off to school, he took a gap year.

“I went to New York and met Bennett on the NYU campus. We were together for a year there.” During that time, Eli began work on his signing certification, worked two jobs, “and learned about being fabulous, but it didn’t take,” he laughed.

“I wondered how you got interested in signing,” Alec said.

Eli laughed. “My Aunt Madge is quite the character and a wonderful teacher. I picked it up quickly.”

“You’re a pretty good teacher, yourself,” Alec said. “I appreciate your patience with me.”

“Thanks. I enjoy it. I like that you’re eager to learn.”

“I guess that does help,” Alec said with a chuckle. “Why’d you leave New York?”

“Visa ran out.”

Eli flew home to finish up his training in London and found his mother had walked out on his father, having had enough of his tyrannical behavior. She and Eli got a flat in the city until Bennett showed up with Ilsa in tow. Ilsa bought the big, old house they were currently living in.

“Mum remarried and lived happily ever after.”

“Without you?”

“I know she loves me, but I think she just wanted fewer complications in her life,” Eli said with a sigh. “I believe you’ve already heard about my second encounter with irrational hatred.”

“Your mom took it better than your dad?”

“Slightly; don’t they always?”

“Nope,” Alec said, and Eli realized things had gone differently within the Sumner family.

“She didn’t knock my tooth out,” Alec said. “When I was growing up, we were very close, but now she focuses all her love and attention on my sister. I don’t exist, which is fine by me.” He sounded less than convincing. “The funniest bit is my sister wants nothing to do with her because of the way she treats me. She’s effectively lost both her children because she’s an obstinate jackass.”

“What about your father?”

“We lost him when I was seven or so. Car accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. He was a good guy. At least, that’s what I remember.” Alec grinned slightly and his gaze left Eli’s. “Less than a year later, my mom married my Uncle Levi, Dad’s oldest brother.” The straw of Eli’s drink paused right before touching his lips, and Alec met his gaze sheepishly before rushing on. “I think Levi had been in love with my mom, but Dad snatched her up first.” Eli’s lips closed on the straw; he sipped and nodded.

“How did he treat you?” he asked after drinking his fill.

“He was great to me, as an uncle and a father... until I came out.”

“Couldn’t handle it?”

“I think he could, but he didn’t—doesn’t have the backbone to stand up to my mom.”

“And she most definitely couldn’t handle it,” Eli said. Alec nodded.

“Mom loves having someone to take care of, someone who does as he’s told.” Alec paused, thinking. “Levi has always done as he’s told.”

They finished eating, gathered their bags, and dropped their garbage in a trash bin.

“What next?” Eli asked.

“Gosh, I’m kind of pooped... uh, knackered.”

Eli grinned, charmed by his English vernacular coming out of Alec’s Southern American mouth. “Yeah, let’s head home. Tony has everything hooked up. We can stop and grab a couple of DVDs to watch, maybe make popcorn?”

“Excellent idea!” Alec said.

“Ah, more food,” Eli said wistfully. “This day shall heretofore be known as ‘The Day I Gained a Stone’!”

Alec laughed and Eli tried to work out the quickest way to the Tube.

CHAPTER 15

IT WAS dark when they got home. They entered the house in an exhausted rush, struggling with their packages at the door.

“Hello?” Alec called. There was no response. The house was still. He set his bags down by the stairs. “Let’s turn the sofa to face the TV,” he suggested. “It’ll be more like a theater.”

They moved the coffee table and each took hold of opposite ends of the sofa—Eli with just one arm—and swung it easily into place. They looked over the positioning and silently agreed that pulling the sofa back a bit more would be just right.

Alec glanced down at his bags and reached in, retrieving a small plastic bag with two CDs that Eli had purchased. “Listen, I have to wash this city grime off me and I might as well take my stuff upstairs.”

“Good idea,” Eli said, taking the bag. “I’ll meet you back here in thirty minutes.”

Alec agreed, grabbed his purchases, and ran up the stairs. Eli watched him take the stairs two at a time before heading to his room. He dropped his bag on the bed and headed for the bathroom where he broke a record taking a shower. Afterward, they met back in the living room.

Alec appeared wearing slippers, navy pajama bottoms, and a T-shirt. Eli was also comfortably dressed in plaid boxers and, instead of slippers, bright white socks. Alec was eager to get a peek at his leg, but the hallway was too dark and Eli managed to keep his body turned a

certain way to prevent him from catching a glimpse. Alec had the feeling he was practiced at it.

They microwaved two bags of popcorn and dumped them into one of Ilsa's huge mixing bowls. Wherever Eli moved in the kitchen, he confounded Alec's attempts to get a better look at his leg. He could imagine all sorts of horrors suffered from the injuries Ilsa had described, but his housemate obviously wasn't willing to let it be seen. Alec finally gave up, fearing Eli would catch him trying to see it.

They left the kitchen. Alec went ahead with four beers while Eli grabbed the popcorn bowl. He paused as he entered the living room to flick off the light and then joined Alec in front of the TV.

"Which first?" Eli asked.

Alec looked through the selections: *One Man's Poison*, *Transformers*, *Aliens*, and *All About Eve*. He looked quizzically at Eli, who had plopped down to the right of him on the sofa.

"We've got two Bette Davis," Alec said.

"What's your point?"

Alec smiled and got up to put in *All About Eve*. They'd seen all the movies before, so they made comments occasionally.

"Do you remember her from *The Ten Commandments*?" Alec asked.

"Moses, oh, Moses," Eli said in a perfect impression of Anne Baxter as Nefertiti, which set Alec to chuckling. Next, they watched *Transformers*. In the middle of *Aliens*, they took a bathroom break, and Alec returned with two more beers.

"I don't know if I should drink too much around you," Eli said as he took the bottle. "You know what happened the last time." Alec paused and stood blinking down at him for a couple of seconds. Eli was slouched on the sofa, his socked feet propped up on the coffee table. *I do remember, thank you very much.*

Eli glanced at the clock as Alec dropped back down on the sofa next to him. It was a little past midnight, and they had one and a half films left to watch. He stretched languidly, yawned, and, not for the first time, Alec was rapt.

“Tired, huh?” he asked and Eli nodded. “We don’t have to watch the rest, you know?”

“I know. Why don’t we just skip ahead to the last Davis film?” he asked and Alec nodded in agreement. Eli smiled sleepily. “I had such a good time today,” he sighed.

“So did I.”

“I’m guessing the others are at Collette’s.”

“Do you regret not joining them?”

“No,” Eli laughed before taking a gulp from his beer. “I feel lousy all year; I hardly need a night set aside for it. Today was fun and silly and....”

“And?”

He turned to look at Alec. The light from the TV made his eyes appear even brighter and Alec felt his stomach quiver as he looked into them.

“Like life used to be.” They were quiet for a while, and then Alec got up and traded *Aliens* for *One Man’s Poison*. He pushed play and settled back in next to Eli, a little closer this time, it must be said. “Alec?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for today, mate.”

“You’re welcome.” They tapped their bottles together in a toast. “Thank you for showing me around town.”

“I’m sorry I was such a twat last week at dinner. I caught you staring and thought....”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought you were staring at my scars.”

“Eli, no one can see your scars except you,” he laughed.

“I know,” Eli said, grinning. “I just get self-conscious sometimes and I didn’t really know you and—I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven,” Alec said. He watched Eli for a few moments.

He was terribly aware of Eli's proximity. Eli's bare, hairy leg was resting against him, and Alec could detect the faint scent of Eli's skin, clean from the shower. Alec made a decision and gulped down the last of his beer before hitting the pause button on the remote.

"Did you change your mind?" Eli asked, turning toward him. "You prefer *Aliens*?"

Alec set his empty bottle aside. "Eli, I need to tell you. I wasn't staring at you hoping you would show me around London," he said. "I came up with that because I was on the spot." Eli didn't say anything. He just watched Alec through sleepy eyes, forcing Alec to lower his gaze. He didn't believe he could look Eli in the eye and say what he wanted to say. "I was staring at you because I like looking at you. I mean, I'm attracted to you, Eli."

Before he lost his nerve, Alec reached over and, wrapping his arm around Eli's waist, he pulled him in tightly for a kiss. Eli's body stiffened as their lips met, and Alec knew he had surprised him. He didn't know if it was a good surprise or bad until he felt Eli relax against him. Encouraged, Alec held him tighter and parted Eli's lips with his tongue.

Their breathing quickly grew heavier, their kisses deeper and more passionate. Eli's beer bottle dropped to the floor with a dull thud as he reached up and tangled his fingers in Alec's hair. Alec found it difficult to believe he had him at his fingertips after so long and was eager to touch Eli all over, eager to memorize the feel of him.

He gently pushed Eli onto his back and stretched out on top of him. He could feel Eli's arousal through the thin material of his shorts, and Alec was sure Eli was aware of him in the same way.

Forcing himself to slow down, Alec's kisses became softer and more lingering. His busy hands slowed as they traveled over and down Eli's body, prompting him to moan against Alec's lips. Eli moved on to Alec's neck and nibbled gently at his ear.

Desperate to get their clothes off, to feel skin on skin, Alec ran one hand under Eli's shirt, playing his fingers through the dark fur on his abdomen. Eli clawed at his back and ground his hips against him as Alec relished the feel of Eli's hard, fit body beneath him.

Both of Alec's hands discovered the scars at the same moment. Alec's fingers stuttered over the rough, uneven, cratered skin of Eli's leg and the small puckered marks along his ribs. Eli went rigid in his arms, breaking their embrace and struggling free of him.

"H-hang on!" he gasped as he smoothed his shirt back into place, quickly putting distance between them. Breathless, Alec watched him through half-open eyes and tried to recover from this abrupt ending.

"Eli, I—"

"I'm sorry. I can't," Eli said, shaking his head emphatically but not looking at him. Alec scooted closer, but Eli grabbed his cane and got up, moving out of his reach. "We've known each other—what, a couple of weeks?" he asked.

"Much longer than that," Alec insisted. "You've been on my mind since the day I saw you on the street."

Eli wasn't listening to him. "I'm not... I don't..." He stopped talking and seemed to be trying to calm himself and choose his words carefully.

Alec sighed. "I understand," he said. "You don't like me that way. It's okay."

"That's not what I'm saying!"

"You do like me that way?" Alec asked, unable to hide the hope in his voice.

Eli didn't speak. He looked like a man searching, struggling to explain himself. As he waited, Alec glanced at the TV screen and saw Bette Davis glaring at him as if he'd done something wrong. *Too soon*. Frustrated, he met her accusatory glare.

"You're obviously an attractive man, a very attractive man..." Eli was saying softly. He still wouldn't look at Alec and nervously ran his fingers through his hair. "I mean, I'm attracted to you, but it won't work." Alec got up and closed the distance between them. Eli held up his hand, silently shouting at him to keep back, and he stopped advancing. "I'm broken, mate. Not just my body,"—he indicated his leg—"but everything inside me." He met Alec's gaze. "I can't give you anything you need or deserve."

“I know you miss Bennett, but he can’t be all that you miss! Don’t you miss this”—Alec placed his palm on his own chest and started to close in again—“this kind of contact?”

“I’m used to things the way they are,” Eli said, shaking his head. “I feel—”

“Safe?” Alec asked, but he didn’t answer. “You’re scared of needing someone—needing them and losing them,” he continued as Eli circled the sofa, keeping it between them.

“No! I’m not!” Eli shouted; his voice was thunderous. Stunned, Alec stopped advancing and fell silent. “Don’t analyze me!” That anger he’d seen at dinner that night was back. “Don’t tell me how I feel!” They stood there for a few moments, pulses racing, looking everywhere but at each other, and calming down. Their breathing slowed and the silence began to hang more heavily. “I’m s-sorry,” Eli said softly.

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed,” Alec said. Eli smiled weakly and looked at him. “I heard how you feel, and I should have left it at that.”

“I don’t want to be the man who drives you away from London,” Eli said sadly.

They stood there in the darkened room for what felt like a long time. The house was silent until they heard the refrigerator kick on. They could hear the living room clock ticking, and Alec thought he detected a low hum coming from the TV screen.

Eventually they sat back down—at opposite ends of the sofa. Eli looked up at Bette on the screen. He seemed mesmerized, as if her image was burning onto his retinas, but Alec knew he was lost in thought and probably didn’t even see her.

“It’s funny.”

“What is?” Alec asked.

“Those men, Henry, Sam and Kyle—” Eli began.

“Oh, uh, it had to be Sam-u-el,” Alec quickly pointed out, raising his finger. “The whole name or he wouldn’t acknowledge you.”

He smiled sweetly and Alec was grateful to see it. “Samuel,” Eli amended. “They walked away and you fled, never wanting to see them

again.” Alec nodded in agreement. “If you’d stayed, you probably would have kept running into them.”

“True. We traveled in the same circles.”

“When someone is taken from you,” Eli said, “all you want is to see them again.”

“But you can’t.”

“Ironic, huh?”

“Do you still want to watch the movie?” Alec asked.

“Sure, if you do. I’m wide awake now,” Eli said and they both laughed. Alec pressed play, and they settled in again to watch Bette do her thing. Alec felt an empty ache in his chest, and all he wanted was to look over at Eli, but he didn’t. He focused on the television screen and remembered none of the movie.

A LITTLE more than two hours later, their housemates returned. Ilsa had done the driving and watched protectively from the bottom of the staircase as Lyle and Tony helped each other unsteadily ascend the stairs. When they were safely in their room, she went to check out the strange light emanating from the living room and found Alec and Eli asleep in front of the TV.

Each was curled up at opposite ends of the sofa and surrounded by a litter of popcorn kernels and beer bottles. She quietly removed the bottles and her mixing bowl, taking them into the kitchen. She returned and placed a small throw from the downstairs closet over Eli and a pillow under Alec’s head, which was resting at an odd angle.

Lastly, she switched off the TV and flicked on a small table lamp, so they’d know where they were if they woke during the night. As she headed off to bed, Ilsa was thankful, once again, she’d decided not to have children.

CHAPTER 16

“GO OUT with me.”

“What?”

“Go out with me when I get back,” Mirabell suggested. Alec shook his head and returned to reading his sister’s letter. “Why not?”

“I just don’t feel like it, Mira.”

She watched him reading for a while before her gaze drifted back out over the park. There seemed to be more people out and about despite the colder weather. It had rained earlier, and she was surprised to see so many meandering around with their scruffy dogs and filthy children. She looked back at him as he turned another page of the letter.

“I’m surprised your sister didn’t simply send an email.”

“She likes writing letters,” he said, not taking his eyes off the page. “She thinks it’s more personal—more thoughtful.” Alec held up his letter for her to see. It was neatly, beautifully written on decorative lavender paper. “She has an extensive collection of stationery and thinks hand-written letters are becoming a lost art.”

“So I see.” Mirabell said sarcastically. “What does she say?”

He looked surprised but shared the contents.

“She says their dog had puppies and they’ve managed to find homes for all but one. Also, her husband got the promotion he’d been after, and the kids are doing well in school.”

“Things sound fab back in the States,” Mirabell sighed, completely uninterested. She began watching a girl and boy fighting over a toy truck. The girl was winning. *Good girl*. She smiled as their mother tried to separate them. They were all getting very muddy. Alec continued to read in silence. When he was done, he put the pages back in order, folded them, and put them in his pocket.

“What next?” he asked.

“Good question. Have you heard anything about that teaching position?”

“I had one interview, but they won’t make a decision for at least two months. I’ve been researching their psychology department, though. It’s solid.”

“Listen, Alec I have this friend—”

“No. Thanks.”

“It’s not what you think, you wanker! I’m not trying to fix you up, although I do think you should be out there dating.”

He rolled his eyes. Ever since telling her how disastrously things had gone with Eli, Mirabell had been relentlessly urging him to “get out there and get back on the stud.” She failed to notice that, despite her best intentions, it was getting old.

“I know what you think I should be doing, Mira.”

“This friend has a small local talk show and is interested in doing a segment on your book.”

“No. Thanks.”

“Jesus! You need to snap out of this funk.” Mirabell shouted.

“It’s not a funk. The book isn’t slated for release here, not yet, anyway. There would be no point in promoting something that may never happen.”

“Promotion is always a good idea, love.” She paused again, watching him. “Come out with me, dance with some beautiful boys, and get drunk. Forget all about Eli.”

“Forget about him?” Alec leapt to his feet. He began pacing and gesturing wildly. Mirabell lit a cigarette and began to puff calmly. She

settled in for the duration of his rant, folding her arms, crossing her legs, and twirling her foot absently as it hung in the air.

“I live with him. Sure, I’m on the top floor and he’s on the main, but I see him every damn day. We’re buddies,” he said sarcastically. Mirabell saw several parental heads turn in their direction, and she glared at them, daring them to say something. “We practice sign language and discuss our days. We have some meals together. We’re painfully polite but forever distant. I can’t help knowing him better and wanting him even more. It’s maddening!”

“Isn’t he getting to know you?” she asked calmly.

“What’s your point?”

“Maybe this decision of his isn’t etched in stone. He’s living with you, spending more time with you, learning about the man you are. I’m sure he’s probably rethinking his refusal at this point.”

He just stared at her. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“I suggest you test it out.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. You’re the psychologist,” she said. “I’d think you’d be more creative.” Alec simply kept staring. Apparently, nothing was coming to mind. Mirabell sighed. “Ask him to a movie or a play. Isn’t there a concert in the park soon? I thought I read that somewhere,” she said as her eyes drifted back out across the park. She saw the little girl was now alone and playing with the truck in the mud. Mira smiled.

“We do stuff together as a group all the time,” Alec said. “There’s either three of us, or four or five, but never just the two.”

“Well, it has to be something just the two of you can attend.”

She watched him briefly consider it, but then shake his head. “No, Mira. It’s not like he’s just playing hard to get. He wouldn’t do that. I think I’ll just stick with respecting his wishes.”

She sighed. “And going mad?”

He had run out of steam and dropped back onto their bench, completely dejected. “I’ll get over it,” he said quietly. They sat in silence for a while longer as Mirabell finished her cigarette. She

dropped the butt and snuffed it out with her foot. “I hear Australia is nice,” Alec said softly to himself as he closed his eyes and began massaging his temples.

Mirabell ignored him. “Come out with me when I get back,” she said again. “I’m heading to New York tomorrow, but the moment I get back I’ll call you, and we’ll make plans, yes?”

“Okay,” he said. Mirabell smiled. They got up to leave, but Alec paused, knelt by the bench, retrieved Mirabell’s cigarette butt, and tossed it in the trash bin.

“You’re looking better already,” she said. “I’ll bring you something nice.”

“Please don’t buy me any clothes, Mira,” he pleaded.

She ignored him. “Do you need anything else for your room?”

“Lyle’s going to help me paint it when I finally decide on a color.”

“Let’s go do that,” she said. “I’ll help.” It was Alec’s turn to ignore her as he took in her chaotic ensemble: lime-green pumps, a deep purple dress, and orange leggings, all topped off by a metallic, neon-green raincoat. “I want some chocolate,” she said. “Let’s eat some chocolate—loads of it.”

“Okay,” he said, apparently now in a more agreeable mood.

“SUGAR, when are you and Alec going out again?”

“Out?”

“Like three weeks ago when you went to Soho,” Ilsa said. “You couldn’t have seen it all in one day.”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t asked again,” Eli said.

He sat at the kitchen table watching her cook. He’d been doing that a lot lately, trying to fill his day. Lyle was working more, Tony was painting in the basement and couldn’t be bothered, and Alec was job hunting. Eli had thought about picking up a few more clients. He’d

posted a call for them on several university bulletin boards but hadn't gotten any nibbles yet.

"You might suggest it."

"He might get the wrong impression," Eli said.

Ilsa stopped stirring her stew and looked at him.

"It won't be the wrong impression. He'll get the idea that you like him, and you do," she said. He didn't respond to her evaluation. "I thought something weird was going on between you two." She shook her head as she stirred seasons into the pot.

"Not weird; it's just been a bit awkward, but we're already past it. We're fine."

He was trying to convince himself more than Ilsa. They weren't fine. Last month, when he'd woken up on one end of the sofa and seen Alec on the other, he had to smile. He'd sat there for a long time watching Alec sleep. However, when his thoughts strayed to that clinch and kiss Alec had laid on him, Eli fled to his room, pausing only to cover his friend with the blanket. *He is my friend... that's enough... better not to think about it.*

Unfortunately, that's all he was thinking about: how good Alec had felt pressed against him and how badly he wanted more. He'd thought about waking Alec with a kiss that night. He'd thought about running his fingers through that thick mop of black hair again, but he had suppressed those feelings and was sticking by his decision.

It simply wouldn't work. Eli wasn't one for casual sex, and he didn't believe he could offer Alec anything beyond that. He remembered what he'd said: "I'm broken." What he had failed to mention was, "I'm scared."

There was a ruckus at the front door as Alec entered.

"Thanks, Mira! I'll see you when you get back!" he shouted. "Be safe!"

Eli remained seated as Ilsa checked and removed her bread from the oven. He was determined to show her that they were more than comfortable with each other.

"Mmm, what smells so good?" Alec asked as he entered the

kitchen.

“Beef stew and homemade bread,” Eli answered. Alec smiled at him, and he returned it. Ilsa ran the tip of a stick of butter across the top of her loaf as she watched the two of them.

“Dinner’s ready when you are, Alec,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Busy day job hunting?” Eli asked.

“Not really. I was out shopping with Mira. I’m still waiting to hear on the university position.” Alec reached over the counter to pinch a bit off the hot bread, but Ilsa slapped his hand. Eli smiled as he sipped his coffee. “It’ll be a while before they decide anything because it’s not the fastest process.”

“What was all that clatter at the front door?” Ilsa asked.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Alec said. “We also picked out some paint for my room.”

Ilsa paused in her preparations. “Ms. Boot doesn’t look like the painting type.”

Alec laughed at that image. “No, she’s not into labor. Lyle’s going to help me paint.”

“And the color is?” Eli asked.

“It’s a coffee-with-lots-of-cream brown.”

“Is that the name on the can?” Ilsa asked, smiling.

“No,” Alec said, chuckling. “I think it’s called Pennywise, but I think it will look great with white trim.”

“Sounds lovely, sweetie,” Ilsa said. “I take it your friend will be supervising, then?”

“Mira? Nope. She’s in charge of fun only,” Alec said. “She wants to take me out when she gets back from New York in a couple of weeks. We’re going clubbing. She’s been after me for a while now. I think she misses me living with her, but don’t tell her I said that.”

“Your secret is safe with us,” Eli said.

“She seems like the type who’s more than capable of clubbing on her own,” Ilsa said.

“Oh, she is. She just wants me to get back out there, ya know, start dating.” Eli looked at Alec, but he remained focused on Ilsa and continued. “She figures if I’m going to stay in London, I might as well enjoy it.” No one said anything for a long, awkward moment, so Alec changed the subject. “You know, Ilsa, it always amazes me that you cook all day at the restaurant, then come home and cook for us.” She smiled brightly and took a short bow. It didn’t work. An awkward silence fell again. “Just let me take this stuff upstairs and wash up a bit,” Alec said and turned to leave.

“What else did you buy?” Eli asked quickly.

“Uh, it’s just an outfit Mira picked out for me. Be right back,” he shouted over his shoulder. Eli watched him go. Ilsa took notice of his lingering attention and sighed.

“Eli, before he gets back, there’s something I want to suggest.” He looked at her but said nothing. “You have to promise not to get angry with me.” He twisted up his face. “Swear it,” she commanded.

“I swear I will not get angry,” he said and smiled wearily. She reduced the flame under the stew and joined him at the table.

“When you first came home from the hospital, you were so withdrawn. There were times that I was tempted to put a mirror under your nose to make sure you were still with us.” He smiled. “Now since Alec has been here,” she continued, “I’ve seen that smile of yours more often, and when I found you two on the sofa together that night....” Her eyes narrowed and a smile spread across her face.

“Nothing happened,” Eli insisted. “It’s not like we were naked and wrapped around each other.” He suddenly felt a bit lightheaded from the image he’d conjured for himself. They had actually come fairly close to being just that.

She laughed. “I know, sweetie, but it’s clear to me that you’re attracted to him, and I think he just might like you. I want you to give him a chance.”

“There’s no point to it with me leaving the country.”

Ilsa's demeanor chilled visibly. "We're back to that, are we?"

"Yes, we are. He's going out, hopes to meet someone. Why would I want to gum that up?"

Despite his assertions, Eli couldn't pretend he was thrilled with that news. Something inside him didn't like the idea of Alec out at some club with a crowd of eligible, good-looking young men who didn't need to use a cane. He'd be surrounded by men with considerably less baggage, men who hadn't seen a partner murdered right in front of them.

"But you probably won't go," Ilsa said hopefully. Eli raised an eyebrow. "I mean you haven't heard back from Bobbi yet, have you?"

"Applications take time. I'll be working with kids, and she warned me that her group had a new sponsor this year. They might do things differently."

They heard Alec coming down the stairs, and Ilsa glanced nervously toward the hall.

"You're going to leave it at that?" she asked quickly. Eli nodded. "Well, that's your decision, but I think you should give him a shot."

"I appreciate what you're saying, but I'd only disappoint him. It's better not to try," he said softly.

Alec entered the kitchen, rubbing his hands together furiously and abruptly ending their conversation. Eli kept his gaze lowered.

"I'm starved. Should I set the table?" Alec asked.

"That would be great, dear, thank you," Ilsa said. She looked at Eli, but he wouldn't look at her.

"Is it just the three of us tonight?" Alec asked.

"Tony is on a painting marathon in the basement," Ilsa said as she caught Eli's eye, "and Lyle is cataloging an estate in Sussex." There was another awkward moment of silence as Alec looked from Ilsa to Eli and back again.

"So it's three," he concluded as he took down the correct number of dishes.

"No," Eli added suddenly as he rose from the table. "It's just the

two of you tonight, mate.” He headed out of the kitchen, giving Alec a faint grin as he passed him. “I’m not hungry.”

Ilsa lowered her eyes and shook her head. Alec watched Eli leave as he slowly put one dish back on the shelf and then glanced quizzically at Ilsa. She smiled at him and began slicing the bread.

CHAPTER 17

“READY for the second coat or do we have time to refuel?” Alec asked as he entered his room carrying four sandwiches and four cans of soda. Lyle was on his knees in the corner, slowly stirring a second can of paint.

Always efficient, he had shown Alec how to prepare the room properly. They covered the floor with drop cloths borrowed from an estate warehouse and moved Alec’s furniture to the center of the room; then they taped to protect the trim and crown molding. Both men were dressed in ball caps and expendable clothes: Alec in old sweats and a T-shirt and Lyle in coveralls, no shirt.

Lyle got to his feet and joined Alec on the window seat. “It needs to dry a bit more first, so pass me some of that,” he said. He wiped his hands on a towel hanging from his side pocket before catching the can of soda Alec tossed his way. He had a few spots of paint on his chest and arms, and both of their faces were freckled with brown from using the rollers.

Tony had breezed through when they first began and commented on the color. “It’s grocery-bag brown,” he’d said disdainfully. Lyle had assured him it would dry darker, richer, and warmer before he shooed the artist back off to the basement.

“You didn’t have to make me lunch.”

“I didn’t,” Alec said before he tore a bite out of his sandwich. “Ilsa made it right before taking off for work.”

“God bless that woman,” Lyle said with a sigh.

They ate in silence for a while, gazing out the window at the street below. It had rained earlier, but it was still warm out. The sun would appear briefly every once in a while, causing the wet streets to twinkle up at them. They ate one and a half sandwiches rapidly and downed a can of soda each before slowing and sighing contentedly. Alec belched loudly, and Lyle chuckled before offering up a tiny burp himself.

“Did you happen to see Tony puttering around down there?” he asked.

“No, but I heard music coming from the basement,” Alec said.

Lyle nodded and looked out the window again. “He must be feeling inspired. I’m afraid he’ll be living down there until the creative fever breaks,” he said with a chuckle. “He might come up for food or sex.”

Alec grinned as he picked over the remainder of his sandwich. “I’ve haven’t been down there yet. What’s it like?”

“It’s nicer than you’d think, but I wouldn’t recommend ever going down there,” Lyle said.

“Why not?”

“Tony commandeered the basement shortly after we moved in four years ago.” He smiled wryly. “It is most definitely his space. He had the lighting improved and he’s set up a little reading nook and a cot to sleep on when he’s in one of these moods.”

Lyle went on to explain that Eli never went down there because of the stairs, Ilsa only went to get her gardening supplies, and he only entered the artist’s domain to clean up or collect laundry that Tony hadn’t bothered to bring upstairs.

Alec popped open another soda. “You take good care of him.”

“Always have,” he said, holding out his hand. “Pass me another, will you?” Alec gave him their last soda, and Lyle popped it open.

“Honestly, Tony and I haven’t really talked,” Alec said. “He rarely stays in the room if I enter it. I hope I haven’t done anything to put him off.”

“Don’t worry. It takes him a while to warm up to people,” Lyle said, grinning. “I hate to paint a harsh picture of him, but he’s used to being the center of attention, and you, my friend, are clearly taken with a certain other housemate.” Alec didn’t respond; he simply choked on a bit of soda. “Tony loved your insights about his paintings, but I suspect he’s having difficulty understanding your pursuit of Eli over him.”

“Pursuit? I’m not—”

“Save it. We’re not blind. We’ve all been through it at one point or another.”

They didn’t say anything for a few moments as Alec chewed on this information.

“How long have you and Tony been—”

“Best friends?”

“Okay,” Alec said, blinking slowly.

“We met in Cardiff when we were just boys.”

“Cardiff? I didn’t know you two were Welsh.”

Lyle grinned broadly. “I am. Tony’s not. He’s born and bred in London.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “I worked hard to lose the accent once I got to university.”

“How old were you when you met?”

“Um, about ten or eleven, I think. His parents had relatives there and a vacation home. They would visit every season, throw a huge party, and promptly deposit Tony in that big old house before jetting off to Mazatlan or somewhere.”

“They left him?”

“A family member would look in on him periodically, and the staff kept him fed and clean.”

“Why not take him along?”

“Couldn’t be bothered, I guess.” Lyle went on to explain that his father looked after the property in the off season, got it ready for occupancy when they needed it, and handled any maintenance problems that came up. Tony had taken to following the man around as

he worked. “He thought he was being sneaky about it, but dad knew he was there.” The elder Davies had brought Tony home to dinner one evening. “He never wanted to leave,” Lyle said with a chuckle.

“You’ve been stuck with each other ever since?”

Lyle nodded. “Yup, best friends—more like brothers—for decades now.”

“I don’t know how you manage it,” Alec said. “You’re so different.”

“I know, but opposites attract.” Lyle immediately went pale, realizing what he’d just said. “I m-mean my sense of order compliments his chaotic self-destructiveness.” He looked out the window, clearly seeking a topic change, but Alec wouldn’t relent.

“He needs you,” he said softly and Lyle smiled at him.

“Let’s check the paint, shall we?” He hopped up and quickly examined various points in the room for tackiness. “Good to go,” he announced before switching on Alec’s CD player to forestall any further discussion.

It took them another two hours to finish painting the walls and trim. While removing the covers from the furniture, something caught Lyle’s eye as it fluttered to the floor.

“What’s this?” Lyle asked, bending to retrieve one of three brochures Alec had left on his dresser.

“Oh, I picked those up when Eli and I went to Soho. That sock shop is amazing, by the way.”

“I know,” Lyle said with a laugh.

“Anyway, they have some items available online only and the web addresses are in those.”

“Excellent,” Lyle said, putting the pamphlets back in place before the two of them scooted the dresser back against the wall. “Let me have a look when you’re done with them, okay?”

“You bet.”

They gathered up the remaining drop cloths and removed them, the paint cans, trays, and tools to the backyard. Alec hunkered down by

the deck and began cleaning the brushes. He could hear Nine Inch Nails' "Happiness in Slavery" blasting out of the basement window and tried to imagine what Tony must be creating this time.

"I have to get a shower!" Lyle shouted over the deck, but before Alec could respond that he would handle the rest, Trent Reznor was cut off in mid growl. Both of them looked toward the window, but no further sound emerged. Lyle gave Alec a smile, rolled his eyes, and headed upstairs for his shower. A few moments later, Reznor resumed.

CHAPTER 18

“ALEC, grab another, please,” Ilsa said.

“We really need two of them?” he asked as he steered the shopping cart toward her. She didn’t look up from her shopping list.

“You bet. We’re buying a month’s worth of groceries for four hungry men and one big babe.” She glanced up at him and smiled. “Plus we have Last Blast on Saturday.”

Last Blast was a massive farewell to the outdoors their community held each year. It was the biggest cookout of the year with several hundred people participating. “We completely take over the campground at Louan,” Ilsa had explained. The housemates hadn’t participated last year, but Lyle and Tony had pressed for it this time and everyone agreed to take part, even Eli. They decided it would be good for Alec to meet some people beyond the walls of their house.

Alec looked over his shoulder and smiled at Eli, but he was reading the shelves as he slowly followed with his own cart. He leaned on it for support, his cane hooked on the side. The two of them dutifully followed Ilsa through the store as she loaded up their shopping carts. She had made a menu for the next month and was purchasing all the ingredients. Alec noted a couple of experimental meals were in her plans.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Eel,” Ilsa said without looking up from her list. Alec turned a frightened face to Eli, who was grinning.

No worries, he signed.

“Eli, you take Alec and get the standard fare for the house, please, while I concentrate on the burgers and hot dogs for the Blast. Oh, and don’t forget the alcohol.”

“Right, come on, mate,” Eli said. Alec shoved his cart into Ilsa’s hands and followed Eli to the cereal aisle. They stood side by side looking over the abundant choices.

“What’s your favorite from back home?” Eli asked after grabbing a couple of different brands and tossing them into his cart.

“Clusters, but I don’t see it.”

“What’s it like? I’m sure we can find something close to it.”

“Bran flakes with clusters of nuts and oats.”

Eli scanned the boxes before him and located two that resembled what Alec had described. He handed one to him.

“This will do,” he said, giving Eli a smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s head to the frozen section.”

“I would have thought Ilsa wouldn’t favor that.”

Eli laughed. “She doesn’t, but she can’t always cook for us, and sometimes we want something simple and quick. We’re in and out of the house so much.”

They loaded up their cart with a lot of instant and microwavable meals—the easier to prepare the better. They collected the bread and Tony’s favorite brand of muffins. Eli explained to Alec that the artist wouldn’t allow them back in the house without them.

“How does payment for all this work?”

“Part of our rent is set aside for the monthly shopping, and Ilsa budgets it all out in her meal plan. Anything special or extra we’d like—such as Tony’s muffins—we pay for ourselves.”

“Sounds easy enough, I guess,” Alec said.

“It’s worked for four years.”

Alec continued to trail along behind Eli as he shopped. He tried to

make a mental note of the items he pulled off the shelf to better understand the household and everyone's likes and dislikes.

"Is there anything special you like, Eli?" he asked. Alec had to grin as Eli blinked at him several times before fully comprehending the question. He was blushing a bit when he answered.

"Uh, I like chocolate-covered peanuts. Sour cream and onion potato chips."

"I hope not at the same time."

"It depends on what sort of day I'm having," he said with a chuckle. They'd reached the ice cream. "Oh, and I must not forget my cookie dough ice cream," Eli said as he snatched a quart from the freezer and tossed it in the cart.

"*Your* cookie dough ice cream, huh?" Alec asked.

"Well, yeah." Eli looked up at him innocently. "Ilsa doesn't like ice cream, Tony is afraid it will make him fat, and too much dairy gives Lyle stomach monkeys." Alec laughed out loud. "But don't worry," Eli said. "I'd share my cookie dough with you." He tossed Alec a look that he'd never seen on Eli's face, and it stopped him dead. He stood there blinking at him with an uncertain smile on his face; if he didn't know better, he'd think Eli was flirting with him.

They arrived at the beer and looked at each other.

"Load her up," Eli said. "And don't let me forget the wine coolers for Lyle."

An hour later, he was helping Eli load up the trunk of Ilsa's car while she returned their shopping carts to the store.

"Listen, Alec," Eli began. "There's a debate or lecture thing on UK immigration policy at the Carr theatre on Tuesday night. It should be interesting, if you'd like to go."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that," Alec said calmly.

"Great. Everyone else is busy that night, and I thought with Mirabell out of town, you might be at loose ends."

"Yeah, I will be. No plans."

"It might even help you with your signing practice," Eli said.

“How so?”

“I’m one of the interpreters for the lecture. Didn’t I say that?” Eli slammed shut the trunk.

“Uh, no, you didn’t.”

Eli was shaking his head. “Sorry. Uh, I’ll be on the side of the stage signing. There will be three of us, I think.” He paused to think by the car door. “Yeah, three.”

“Why so many?” Alec asked. “Do you each sign for a speaker?”

“No,” he said as he climbed into the passenger seat and Alec slid into the back. Ilsa returned and hopped behind the wheel as Eli turned in his seat to look at Alec. “We have to trade off. It’s tiring signing an event like that and we need breaks, so we take turns.”

“I wonder how much I’ll be able to read.”

“You’ll do fine. Your vocabulary is much larger now, but I have to practice some new words for it.”

“You? I thought you knew it all,” Alec said, teasing.

“Hardly,” Eli said, chuckling. “It’s a special subject. My two partners are coming over the night before to practice.”

Alec leaned forward eagerly. “Do you think I could sit in on that?”

“Sure,” Eli said and smiled brightly.

Ilsa glanced in the mirror and grinned at the apparent delight on Alec’s face.

CHAPTER 19

EARLY on Saturday morning they struck out for Louan Campgrounds. The picnic site was on part of a farm owned by a member of the gay community in London. Louan Bishop and her partner had been hosting the event for nearly eight years.

Alec rode with Lyle and Tony to the celebration while Casey followed with Eli, Ilsa, and a car packed to the roof with two tents, six sleeping bags, and loads of food to transport. Of course, Casey's main motivation for offering to drive was a long, quiet trip with Ilsa. Casey kept stealing glances at her in the rearview mirror as Ilsa slept in the back seat.

The drive out to the countryside took almost two hours, and Alec nearly dozed off several times as he slouched in the front passenger seat and watched the sky. They couldn't have chosen a more perfect day to say goodbye to pleasant weather. When they left London, the morning had a chilly bite to it, but by the time they reached the country, the temperature had climbed dramatically. The clouds were white and puffy; the sky was clear and blue.

Sunshine sparkled through the trees at Alec, and he felt utterly relaxed and happy. As they neared the site, he perked up and straightened in his seat. Stretched out before him across a wide expanse of grass was a massive gathering of people, tents, and shelters with picnic tables and grills. Already, he could smell the food cooking.

They parked in a large graveled lot and began to unpack the cars. Alec, Ilsa, Lyle, and Casey made quick work of unloading everything

and carried it to a shelter they had reserved for their group. It was near a small body of crystal blue water, so as soon as Ilsa dropped her gear, she dropped her shorts and dove in, wearing only her T-shirt and panties. Casey's mouth fell open as she watched her go, and Eli chuckled at Casey's speechlessness.

While Ilsa swam, Alec moved the burgers and hotdogs over to the grill in their shelter. He unpacked the charcoal and began work on getting it started. Tony was already on his second beer and looking beyond their area at the bounty of new faces spread out across the campground. He snatched Lyle's camera from the table as soon as Lyle unpacked it.

"I must mingle," he said as he wandered away.

"Tony, please be careful with my camera," Lyle said as the artist strolled away.

"I gave it to you last Christmas!" Tony shouted over his shoulder. "I know how to work the damn thing better than you do!"

"I know you did, jackass," Lyle muttered under his breath as he tossed Tony a look of utter exasperation. "You also gave me a video camera one year. Where the hell is that?" He continued to mutter, "Probably left it in some strange man's bedroom," as he set out plates, other utensils, buns, and condiments in an assembly line motif.

After he finished, he sighed and smiled at his handiwork. Next, Lyle grabbed a couple of beers, taking one to Alec by the grill; the other he handed to Eli, who sat at the end of their table watching the crowd. Casey sat next to Eli, but her eyes were glued on Ilsa as she cut through the water.

"She's good, huh?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Ilsa. She's a good swimmer."

Eli looked on as Ilsa made another lap, and then he smiled at Casey's wistful expression. "Why don't you join her?" he asked.

"I might dip my feet in later," she sighed. "But I can't swim." She looked into his eyes. "And never have I regretted it more than at this moment." They both chuckled at her pitiful situation.

“Maybe she could teach you,” Eli suggested. Casey thought about it but didn’t move. Apparently her fear of the water was stronger than her attraction to Ilsa.

“That lake is beautiful,” Alec said as he joined them.

“It’s actually an old quarry,” Eli said. “The water is so clear out in the middle you can almost see the bottom.”

Alec sat down with them. “Any idea how deep it is?” he asked.

“I’m guessing a hundred to one hundred and fifty feet.” Eli looked up and pointed to a tall outcrop of rock high above them. “I’ve jumped off that too many times to count.”

“You’re joking,” Alec said, thinking he might swallow his tongue at the thought.

“I’m serious,” Eli said with a laugh. “We would run from the bushes up there and leap as far out into the quarry as possible. It was great.”

“When you say ‘we’, do you mean you and Bennett?”

Eli nodded and sipped his beer. “Of course, it took a bit of convincing to get him to try it. He wasn’t fond of heights.”

“How did you convince him?”

Eli began to laugh.

“What?” Casey asked.

“I grabbed him and jumped in with him,” Eli said. “He was up there watching me and a bunch of other people jumping. He planted himself on a boulder and wouldn’t move. I think he had to know something like that would happen, but he was still angry.”

“How angry?” Alec asked, still smiling.

“He took a swing at me—almost bloodied my nose.”

“Blimey, Eli!” Casey said.

“No worries, I was too quick for him; besides, I was a bit out of line.”

“What made you do it?” Casey asked.

“I heard some blokes were going around the camp looking for victims to toss in. When they found out he was a Yank and had just moved to England, they zeroed right in.”

“So you did it yourself,” Alec said.

“I figured if he was going in, I’d better be the one to do it. Me, he’d forgive,” Eli said with a sigh. “One minute we were snuggling on his boulder, the next we were airborne. I guess he felt betrayed. I had lulled him into a false sense of security with a good snog.” Eli chuckled wickedly. “It wasn’t exactly easy, either. He was a bit bigger than me and not too keen to go.”

Alec was laughing hard enough to cry. “How long before he forgave you?” he asked.

“About an hour,” Eli said. “By the end of the day, we were competing to see who could jump out the farthest. I never had so much fun or screamed so loud.”

“Do you still swim?” Alec asked.

“Not as much as I used to. I swim a bit for physical therapy but not so much for fun.”

Casey perked up as Ilsa exited the water and came over to grab a towel from their gear. She dried her hair and tied it up on top of her head before toweling off and slipping back into her shorts.

“I’ll get the food going,” she said.

“Charcoal’s ready,” Alec said.

“Thanks, sugar.” She walked over to the grill, passing Lyle who was sucking down a wine cooler and watching the crowd for Tony. “What does everyone want?” Ilsa shouted. “Burger?”

Alec’s and Lyle’s hands went up and they both shouted, “Well done!”

“Hot dog?” Ilsa asked. Eli’s and Casey’s hands shot up, and then Casey hopped up and took the cook a bottle of water. “Thank you, sweetie,” Ilsa said as she took it.

“You’re welcome.”

“Why aren’t you out in that crowd mingling?” Ilsa asked. “Eli

said you weren't seeing anyone. Was he wrong?"

"Nope, I'm single, just not much on mingling, I guess," Casey said softly.

Ilsa glanced over her shoulder at the crowd. "I don't know how long I could keep away from those lovely ladies out there." Her eyes twinkled as she grinned at Casey. "Present company included, of course." Casey went pink.

"How about some music?" Lyle asked. He could hear The Beatles wafting faintly through the air from across the campsite.

Eli got up and switched on the CD player they'd packed.

"What do you want to hear?" he asked.

"Bowie," Lyle said.

Eli looked through the selections he'd brought and selected *Let's Dance*. His favorite tune from the album, "Cat People," was soon blasting throughout their shelter.

Alec nodded. "Nice choice."

"Glad you approve," Eli said as he took his seat again.

"Good Lord, don't you people have anything more recent?"

They were startled by the arrival of a tall, gorgeous man with flawless dark brown skin, a shaved head, and a smile that could stop traffic.

Eli leaned closer to Alec's ear. "Remember when I mentioned winning the genetic lottery?" he asked, and Alec nodded. "Dray is an excellent example."

Alec had to agree, because the man was stunning and apparently knew it. He came up behind Ilsa and swept her up in a bear hug, kissing her neck fiercely and causing her to giggle uncontrollably.

"How is everyone today?" he asked as he greedily grabbed a handful of potato chips from a bowl on their table and gobbled them down.

"We're good," Casey said as she glared at the two women who had arrived with him. "How are you?"

“Fine as ever, glad to say.” His large dark eyes landed on Alec. “Who’s this raven-haired gent?” he asked as he quickly approached.

“Dray, this is Alec,” Eli said with a sigh. “Alec, this is Dray Jenkins.”

They shook hands.

“Nice to meet you, Dray.”

“Agreed. You’re a Yank, eh? How are you liking it here? Do you play sport?”

Alec blinked at the onslaught of questions. “Yes, fine, and some. Why?” he asked.

“We’re getting together a game of football, soccer to you, on the pitch yonder,” Dray said pointing across the camp site. “You’re welcome to join in.” Alec hesitated and Dray picked up on it immediately. “Unless I’m interrupting something between you and Erby.” His eyes darted back and forth between Eli and Alec as a smile played across his lips.

“Erby?” Alec asked.

“No, not at all,” Eli said a bit too quickly. “You should play, Alec. We’ll come and watch; we’ll cheer you on.” Eli slapped him on the back. Alec looked around at the other members of his group. Ilsa was busy flirting with one of Dray’s friends, but Casey and Lyle agreed enthusiastically.

“You go on with Dray,” Lyle said. “Be sure to warm up, though. They’re very competitive.”

“I’ll warm him up, never fear,” Dray said.

“I haven’t played since high school,” Alec said.

“Excellent,” Dray said, taking Alec’s arm and leading him away. “Give us ten minutes; the guys are still marking the field. After that, you lot come on over,” he shouted cheerfully over his shoulder.

Eli watched them go and then went to help gather some food for the hike across the grounds. By the time they reached the small set of bleachers by the pitch, Dray’s team had already scored a goal.

Casey helped Eli navigate up the bleachers to a seat before sitting

next to him with a sullen expression. Her eyes drifted toward Ilsa, whose attention was now focused elsewhere. One of Dray's friends, a young woman with a buzz cut and large green eyes, had become the center of her world, so Casey decided to concentrate on the game. Lyle searched the crowd for signs of Tony, whom he had not seen since he walked away from their shelter.

"Where's Alec?" Eli asked as he scanned the pitch.

"He's playing for the skins," Casey said and pointed to the far right of the field. There Alec stood: no shirt, dripping sweat, and looking.... Eli's mouth went dry. He couldn't look away as Alec sprinted up the pitch with the ball. He was fast, and the spectators were cheering; even Ilsa began to watch. Alec wove deftly through his opponents and neared the goal, but it was not to be.

Dray came out of nowhere and stole the ball. Alec went down hard, but no foul was called. However, the crowd roared when Alec rolled, got right up, and went after Dray. He caught up to him and they battled over the ball for a few seconds until one of Alec's teammates sped by, received the pass, and took it in for a goal.

The crowd had been steadily growing since the game started, and now they were on their feet. The uproar had drawn the attention of those engaged in other activities throughout the camp. All over the property, people stopped what they were doing and looked toward the pitch.

"Did you see that?" Lyle shouted, stomping his feet and laughing.

"Brilliant!" Eli said, applauding madly.

He looked back up the pitch for Alec and froze. It appeared that he and Dray had gone down in a tangle after their struggle for the ball. Dray currently had Alec pinned beneath him and was kissing him passionately. Eli wanted to shout something immensely profane, but his voice wouldn't come; he only managed to sputter incoherently. Luckily, the referee caught sight of things and ran over.

"Dray, let the Yank up, now!" he said, blowing his whistle. Dray relented and allowed Alec to breathe. He hopped up and helped Alec to his feet.

"Sorry 'bout that, mate. Shouldn't have taken the liberty. You all

right? I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked.

Alec glared at Dray as he dusted himself off. "I'm fine."

"That you are," Dray said, smirking.

"Are we still playing, gentlemen?" the referee asked.

"I'm done," Alec said as he limped off the field. Dray shrugged at the ref and ran after Alec. They were quickly replaced and the game continued.

"Hang on, mate," Dray said, catching up to him. "Let me buy you a drink to make amends." He grabbed Alec's arm and spun him. "Please." As usual, Dray didn't wait for an answer. He dashed over to a shelter and grabbed a couple of cold beers from someone's cooler. "Here you go," he said, popping the top off one and holding it out to Alec. Eli watched from his seat on the bleachers as Alec hesitated for a moment and then accepted the beer.

"I'm really sorry," Dray said, looking into Alec's eyes. Thinking he saw a glimmer of remorse in the man's eyes, Alec tapped his beer against Dray's, and they walked back to the shelter together. A knot began to develop in Eli's stomach as he watched them go.

BY THE time the game ended and they returned to the shelter, there was no sign of Alec and Dray. Eli looked around for them while Ilsa cranked up the grill again. Her new friend had come back with them, and Lyle had managed to locate Tony.

Casey went over to Eli, who was standing by the quarry.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just wondering where Alec is," he said. "He walked back this way with Dray a while ago."

"I don't think you really want to find him right now, do you?" Casey asked, pointing to a small pile of clothing and sneakers on the ground by the shelter. "They looked sort of chummy."

The color drained from Eli's face as he whirled on her, suddenly

feeling an even stronger urge to find Alec. Just then, an ear splitting shout echoed above them as Dray jumped from the outcrop and landed near the center of the quarry, sending up a shower of water. Eli looked up in time to see Alec emerge from the bushes above them and leap through the air. He hit the water like a missile and disappeared below the surface.

Eli was positive he had gone deep enough to touch the bottom with his toes. Alec shot back up and broke the water's surface with a yelp of pure joy. He and Dray quickly swam to shore and climbed onto a dirt path that lead up to the outcrop again. Alec paused on the bank, turned, and waved at Eli and Casey before disappearing up the path.

"Hey, Erby!" Dray shouted before vanishing up the path behind him.

"Looks like there are no hard feelings, eh?" She glanced over her shoulder at Ilsa. "At least someone is having a good time."

Eli sighed. "Beer?" he asked.

"Beer," she said, and they retreated to the shade of their shelter.

ALEC and Dray leapt into the quarry twice more before taking a break. The water below them was terribly cold, so Alec collapsed on his back in a patch of sundrenched grass while Dray sat on the edge and looked down at the quarry and the shelter. Dray could see Eli occasionally peek out of the shelter and glance up at them.

Alec had left his shirt and shoes by the shelter where he'd changed into a pair of cutoff sweatpants he'd packed. Changing had been a bit uncomfortable for him because even though Dray had quickly agreed to turn his back, Alec was convinced the man had predatory eyes in the back of his head. Dray turned and slowly looked Alec over, taking in the way his impromptu swim shorts clung to every inch of his lower body.

"You seeing anyone, Alec?" he asked.

Alec sat up quickly. "Not really."

“Not really?”

“I mean, there’s someone I’m interested in,” he said as he crawled over next to Dray and lay on his stomach. He rested his chin on his hands and peered over the edge at the blue water below.

“Does he know?” Dray asked as he tossed a rock into the water. Alec nodded. “So what’s the hold up?”

“He....”

“He’s in love with someone else?” Dray asked.

“In a way.”

“My, but you’re being cryptic.”

Alec glanced at the shelter but could only make out Eli’s feet at a table. His cane rested beside him, and he held a beer in his lap. Alec couldn’t see his face, but he appeared to be chatting with someone and watching the other campers. He heard the Arctic Monkeys wafting through the air as he watched Ilsa bring over another plate of food. Alec smiled and thought maybe she really was trying to put some weight on her housemates.

Dray had been watching him closely. “For the love of all that’s holy, tell me you are not interested in Erby!”

Alec sat up and faced him. “Well, yes, I am... very interested. And what’s this Erby business?”

“His initials: E.R.B.—Erby.”

“What does the R stand for?”

Dray ignored the question. “And he knows how you feel?”

“He knows, but—”

“But what?” Dray snapped.

Alec was quickly growing less fond of his tone. “I think he needs time,” he said.

“Time? He’s had enough!” Dray shouted, but his expression quickly softened. “You know about his partner?” he asked, and Alec nodded. “Burke hasn’t been next to anyone since Bennett was killed.”

“Forgive me, Dray, but it’s not really our place to say when enough time has passed.”

“Hey, whatever you want, mate,” Dray said as he stood and walked back into the bushes in a huff.

“Wait,” Alec said. “What does the R—”

“Ask him about Africa,” Dray shouted as he rushed by Alec, shot through the air, and pierced the water’s calm surface. Alec stood and followed him in by simply stepping off the outcrop. They swam to shore and climbed out of the water near the shelter.

“You boys hungry?” Ilsa asked.

“Starving,” Alec said.

“I’ll pass, love,” Dray said. “I’ve got food waiting on me back at my camp. Thanks anyway.” He turned to Alec. “Listen, it was good to meet you.” He shook Alec’s hand. “Are you planning to stay the night, by any chance?” Dray asked, looking sideways at Eli and suddenly throwing his arm over Alec’s shoulder. He pulled him close to whisper in his ear. “Because if you are, maybe I could see you later.”

Alec politely disengaged himself from Dray. “As flattering as that is,” he began, “I told you, I’m interested in someone else.”

“That doesn’t mean you and I couldn’t have a little fun, does it?” he asked as he slid his arm around Alec’s waist.

Alec wriggled free of him again. “Yes, that’s exactly what it means.”

Dray looked at him sternly and sighed. “Well, in that case, I guess I can tell you that the object of your affection has been watching us like a hawk for the past hour.”

Alec involuntarily glanced back at the shelter and saw Eli turn away quickly, but not quickly enough.

CHAPTER 20

ILSA and Lyle put up the tents with a little help from Alec. There were to be three people in each, but which three in which tent had not been decided. On top of that, the numbers of their group were in a state of flux. Ilsa and her new friend looked as though they were making romantic plans for the evening.

When the sun went down, the temperature dropped like a stone. Eli shivered as he went about wrapping and putting away the food for the night. He wanted nothing more than to wrap himself up in his sleeping bag. Casey was on garbage duty. Lyle and Alec put Tony to bed in one of the tents because he had reached complete intoxication shortly after returning to the shelter.

A bonfire had been erected in the center of the campground, and people were beginning to gather around it. Lyle, Ilsa, and her cuddle buddy for the night made their way over there after everything was made ready for sleeping at their camp. Casey watched them go, completely heartbroken.

“Are you going to the bonfire?” Alec asked.

“I think I’ll hang around here,” she said sadly.

“There are a lot of people over there, Casey. You might meet someone.”

She fixed him with a wicked grin. “I could say the same to you, Alec.”

He shut his mouth and smiled. “How about a dip in the quarry?”

he asked.

“Can’t swim.”

“You can hold onto me. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looked at him for a long moment, glanced over at the bonfire and then at Eli. He was over by the tents and looked like he was getting ready for bed.

“Okay,” she said, giggling nervously.

Alec removed everything but his boxers and jumped into the cold water. He resurfaced with a pained yelp at the temperature.

“I don’t know how long we’ll be able to stay in here. It’s freezing!”

He floated near shore and waited for Casey, who eventually came out from behind a bush. She tentatively approached the water’s edge in only her bra and panties. Alec held his arms out to her, and she took his hand.

“D-don’t let me go,” she said, shivering.

“I promise.”

At night, the water looked black and impenetrable. Casey winced when her toes touched it, but Alec wrapped his arms around her and slowly pulled her in. Her blue eyes went wide, darting around them in panic as they sank in up to their necks.

“Shush, now. It’s okay,” he said softly, holding her close to him. He couldn’t tell if her shaking was due to the cold or fear as she clung fiercely to him. “I won’t let you go.” His voice was soothing, and she quieted a bit and looked at him, ashamed.

“I’m sorry I’m such a nutter,” she said, laughing nervously. “I should have learned this years ago.”

“Have you always been afraid of the water?”

Casey nodded, still looking around as though something was going to emerge from the darkness and snatch her below the surface.

“As long as I can remember. I don’t know if something happened when I was a child, or if this lunacy comes from a past life or something.”

“Most people don’t like the feeling of being out of control,” Alec said. She agreed silently. “But once you learn how to move in this stuff, how to right yourself if needed, you’ll feel more confident.”

“I know what you’re saying makes sense, but can we just float here for a while?”

“Absolutely.”

They floated there for a long while, Alec gradually moving further from shore. When Casey could no longer touch the bank with her feet and realized Alec couldn’t either, she began to panic.

“We should go back now,” she said shakily. “We’re too f-far out.” She looked at the bank longingly like a much-loved teddy bear she wanted to embrace.

“Look at me, Casey,” he said softly. She looked into his eyes. “I am certain that I am fine, and because I’m okay, so are you. Do you know why?”

The sky above them was clear and eternal. The stars shone brightly away from the lights of London. It was also strangely quiet except for the occasional shout or laughter from the bonfire far across the campground. Casey never took her eyes from Alec’s.

“Because you’re not going to let me go.”

“That’s right.” He smiled and so did she. They moved back to the shallows where she could once again feel her toes brush the bottom. “I think we’re just about frozen, but I’d like to try something before we get out for the night,” he said. She looked at him curiously. “I want you to dunk your head under the water.”

Alec expected a panicked fit, but Casey surprised him. She dug her fingers into his arms, took a deep breath, and submerged herself. She stayed down for nearly a minute. She didn’t release her grip until she came back up, frantically wiping the water from her face. Casey was thrilled and laughing out loud.

“Well done!” Alec shouted. They climbed out of the water, and he finally released her. Casey threw her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth.

“Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome, but you did all the work.” Even as he said this he could feel his arm muscles stiffening. Holding her securely for that long in that water was going to have a price. Casey’s fear was the kind that could capsize rowboats and drown lifeguards; it could erase all evidence of a reasoning mind.

She couldn’t stop laughing. “If there’s ever anything I can do for you, just ask.”

“Actually, would you happen to know Eli’s middle name?”

She looked surprised, and then a smile slowly spread across her face. “Oh, I don’t know. Eli hates his middle name,” she teased. “But I guess giving you a clue wouldn’t betray—”

“Here, you’d better take these,” Eli said, suddenly appearing with two wool blankets. “I saw you two nutters go in and thought you would need to warm up pretty quickly when you got out.”

Alec took one with a smile and a nod of thanks as Casey wrapped herself in her blanket and stripped off her wet underwear.

“You were right,” she said, her teeth chattering, “but I thought you were sleeping.”

“Not too tired yet.” He looked back at Alec. “I made some coffee, then came over and waited for you to get out.”

They collected their clothes and followed him back to the shelter where they talked and laughed for hours. The coffee warmed them right to their toes. Eli had a small bottle of whisky on the table in case they wanted to stoke their fires a bit more.

Ilsa eventually returned with her friend, and they retired to the tent that didn’t contain Tony, but Casey didn’t appear to notice. When the three of them were ready for bed, Lyle had not yet returned, and not wanting to share a tent where Ilsa was getting busy, Alec, Eli, and Casey crowded in next to an unconscious Tony. By accident or design, Casey ended up between Eli and Alec. She was a wild sleeper who alternated between snuggling her new hero or her long-time friend.

ELI stood on the edge of the outcrop and looked down at the black

water. He couldn't see any stars above him but did see a faint light emanating from their campsite. There were no people milling about and no sound of music from the shelter.

"Eli!" a voice below him shouted.

He peered into the darkness but couldn't make anyone out, though he could hear movement in the water.

"Jump!" a different voice shouted.

Eli stepped back from the edge, terrified. The thought of leaping into that void made his heart stutter in his chest, but as the voices fell silent, he slowly stepped forward, closer to the edge.

"I'm here! You can hold onto me!"

The moon moved out from behind the clouds and revealed Alec treading water below him. He was smiling, and Eli smiled back but didn't jump. He was no longer a strong swimmer and didn't trust that he wouldn't simply slip below the surface.

"Come on, love, jump!"

It was Bennett's voice and he could see him now as he swam closer to Alec under the moonlight. They waited for Eli, looking up at him expectantly. He took one confident step to the very edge of the outcrop and stepped off into the darkness. Just as he began to think he would be falling forever, the icy water hit his skin like knives. He sank below the surface, but someone quickly grabbed his arm and hauled him up. It was Alec. He wrapped his arms around him and kept his head above water.

Alec's skin was warm against Eli's even in the cold water. In fact, his body seemed to radiate heat. They floated there, smiling at each other as Eli's eyes traveled over the contours of Alec's face, and he relished the sensation of their bodies pressed together.

His gaze traveled to Alec's lips and lingered there, but before he could kiss him, a hand closed around his ankle and pulled him under again. Eli tried to scream, but the water silenced him. He kicked and fought hard to free himself, but it was no good. His chest ached to breathe.

"It's all right, love," a voice whispered. "Look at me."

Eli opened his eyes and saw Bennett floating right in front of him. He stopped thrashing immediately, instead sliding in close to him. They held each other tightly, and as he looked into Bennett's eyes, he took a deep breath.

Eli's eyes shot open, and he found himself looking into Casey's worried face. "Are you all right?" she asked, hovering over him, but he couldn't speak right away. He just blinked at her.

"I-I'm okay, n-nightmare," he managed, but then they both froze, falling silent as Alec stirred on the other side of her. He soon settled and began breathing evenly again, and Eli tried again to reassure his friend. "It's fine. There's nothing to worry about," he whispered.

She looked into his eyes for a few moments. He was still a bit out of breath, and she knew if she placed her hand there, she'd feel his heart pounding rapidly in his chest. His shirt was damp from his fitful sleep, and she began tugging at it.

"Here let's get you out of this," she said, but Eli pushed her hands away.

"I'm fine," he hissed. "Please, just let me be!" He turned away from her roughly. She was startled at first but slowly snuggled in against his back anyway. He didn't object when she wrapped her arms and a blanket tightly around them. Casey didn't fall back to sleep until her friend had drifted off again.

EARLY the next morning, Ilsa took off to whip up a massive breakfast on a neighboring propane grill. She returned with scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, French toast, and coffee.

Lyle strolled back into camp as everyone was finishing up their meal.

"Where the hell have you been?" Tony demanded.

"I met a new friend at the bonfire last night, so I stayed with him," he said smugly. Tony could not hide his shock, and Lyle grinned. "We've already had breakfast."

"What's his name?"

“Topher.”

“What the fuck kind of name is Topher?”

“Let’s pack up, people,” Ilsa said, putting a stop to what she knew would be an escalating argument. There was no way she was riding back with those two if she could help it.

AN HOUR later, Alec was waving to Ilsa as she gazed at him longingly out the back window of Lyle’s car. She looked trapped, and Alec could just make out the headphones she wore and suspected her iPod was turned up full blast. She was not a happy woman, but Alec was a happy man. He had Eli with him—well, Eli and Casey. Casey was asleep and sprawled across the back seat while Eli sat on his left, staring out the window. The trees were beginning to fade into a more urban landscape.

“How did you like your first Blast?” Eli asked. He leaned forward and found a decent tune on the radio.

“It was great fun.”

“All of it? Even Dray?”

Alec laughed. “I have to admit, he came on a bit strong.”

“He does that with everyone,” Eli said. “N-not that he wasn’t really attracted to you,” he amended quickly. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s okay, Eli,” Alec said with a smile. “I understood you, and I suspected as much.” He watched the road carefully and kept checking his mirror. He was more than a little nervous about driving in England. It took a bit of getting used to, and he was thankful for the light traffic on the rural road. “I know I was just new meat to him.”

On the drive they talked about past, present, and future gatherings in London. It seemed Alec had a lot to look forward to in the coming year.

“Be forewarned,” Eli said. “Dray will more than likely be at all of them.”

Alec rolled his eyes and sighed. “I’m going to have to start working out. He’s a big guy.”

“Don’t worry. It is possible to resist his advances. You just have to be firm.”

“You sound as though you’re speaking from experience,” Alec said.

Eli sighed. “Well, there is some complicated history there.”

“What, he put the moves on you?”

“Not exactly,” Eli said, glancing at Alec. “Wait, that’s not true.” Alec smiled and waited. “He did put the moves on me, but only to land Bennett.”

“Huh?”

“Dray was interested in Bennett,” Eli said, smiling brightly and looking at him out of the corner of his eye. “As he’s demonstrated, he has a bit of a thing for Americans.” Alec felt his face grow hot but said nothing. “Dray believed if I cheated on Bennett with him, then Bennett would be open for business, so to speak.”

Alec was horrified. “What—how did you handle that?”

“I knew exactly what he was up to, so I told him no thank you and that if he went near Bennett, I’d gut him.”

Alec chuckled. “Did he stay away?”

“Of course not, but Bennett wasn’t interested.”

“By the way, I asked him about the Erby thing.”

Eli was quiet for a few moments. It was his turn to blush. “He started calling me that to prove he’d gotten close enough to Bennett to get my middle name out of him.” Eli sighed. “It’s his way of saying, ‘almost, Eli... almost’.”

“Forgive me, but he sounds like a dick.”

“He is, but most people are too distracted by his looks to care.” Alec didn’t say anything and Eli glanced at him again. “Did he happen to tell you?”

“Hmmm?”

“My middle name? Did Dray tell you?”

“No. I only know it begins with an R,” Alec said. Eli appeared pleased by this. “I could probably guess it fairly easily.”

“You think so?” Eli asked and Alec nodded. “Okay, I’ll give you three guesses. If you can’t do it in three, however, that’s it. You give up. Deal?”

“Deal.” Alec mulled over what he knew for a moment. “Casey told me last night that you hate your middle name, so I’m guessing it’s not something common like Richard or Robert.” He glanced at Eli.

“Oh, I’m not helping you,” he said, grinning and shaking his head.

“Fair enough, so, let me think. What goes well with Eli?”

“Elias.”

“What?”

“My full first name is Elias.”

“I thought you weren’t going to help me.”

“That’s not help; it’s just... making sure all your information is accurate. It’s only fair.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Eli continued grinning. He appeared confident Alec would fail.

“Rhinehold,” Alec said, and Eli’s eyes open wide in shock. “Ha! That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, I’m just appalled at the suggestion,” Eli said.

“Fine,” Alec said. “I need to think about this for a bit longer.”

Eli grinned at him “Of course,” he said.

“Oh, Dray told me to ask you about Africa,” Alec said suddenly, and Eli stopped smiling. “What’s that about?”

He didn’t answer right away, and when he began to speak, Alec could barely hear him. “An interpreter friend of mine worked with a small group last year that helps educate deaf children in Ethiopia,” he said. “I’ve applied to join her on the next trip, you know, just for something different.” Eli glanced nervously at Alec, but he was unreadable. His eyes were focused on the road. “I think I could be of some help.”

“I’m sure you could,” Alec said flatly. “When would you leave?”

Eli sighed. “First of the year, but I’m still waiting to hear from my friend.” Eli squirmed a bit in his seat. “She’s been a bit difficult to pin down of late.”

“Well, if it’s something you really want, I hope it works out for you,” Alec said softly.

Eli smiled uncertainly at him and then turned to look at Casey sleeping in the backseat. “She’s really wiped out,” he said.

“Yep, she had a big night, I guess.”

“You were very kind to her last night,” he said, turning to face Alec again.

“It wasn’t difficult to read the look on her face when Ilsa walked away with that other woman.”

“She’s been pining after her for nearly two years,” Eli said. “I’m not sure how to help.”

“Are you seeking suggestions?” Alec asked. “Because I’m not sure I’m the right person.”

“Sure you are. You’re a professional,” Eli said. “What do you recommend?”

“Let her come to it on her own.”

“That’s a lot of time wasted.”

“It would be difficult for me to tell her to give up.”

“Why?”

He looked into Eli’s eyes. “Because I don’t give up easily, either.”

Alec turned back to watch the road, and Eli quickly did the same. In the back seat, Casey was smiling.

CHAPTER 21

AFTER Alec's second interview for the teaching position he was after, he joined the search committee for a late lunch. Things were looking good for him. However, during the meal, all he could think about was Eli's signing practice—that and Africa. The house was crowded but silent when he finally got home Monday evening.

When he walked in, he found Eli sitting on the sofa next to an older woman. Their faces were attentive as they watched another man standing in the center of the room. He was signing too fast for Alec to follow. Eli glanced down at a sheet of paper he was holding and told the man to stop.

“Not industry, industrialized,” he said. “Try it again.” The man went on with his signing. Alec heard someone in the kitchen and walked down the hall toward it. He found a young woman intently watching a bag of popcorn grow larger through the window of the microwave.

She had long dark hair pulled into a ponytail and was holding one of Ilsa's large mixing bowls.

“Hello,” he said, but she didn't respond.

The popcorn finished, she removed it carefully from the oven and dropped the steamy hot bag in the bowl. Catching sight of Alec out of the corner of her eye, she shouted in surprise and dropped the bowl. Luckily, Ilsa only bought the good stuff, so the bowl didn't shatter.

“Sorry, I'm sorry!” Alec said quickly, but she was laughing and

waving him off.

She signed to him, but he was too shaken to read what she'd said.

"What happened?" Eli said as he entered the kitchen.

He startled me.

I understand.

He turned to Alec. "This is Lynette," he said, signing at the same time. "She's the friend and client I work with at LSB." He turned back to her.

Lynette, this A-L-E-C.

She nodded.

Nice to meet you.

Alec paused to get his signs straight in his mind.

Nice to meet you, L-Y-N-E-T-T-E.

She smiled broadly at Eli.

He smoking hot!

Alec didn't catch it, but he saw Eli go red. "I can see this is going to be tough to follow tonight," Alec said. "What did she say?"

"Um, she's impressed with your signing skills," Eli said—but didn't sign.

Lynette emptied the bag of popcorn into the bowl and brought it to the living room while Alec grabbed beers for everyone. Eli introduced him to their other guests as Alec shed his tie and jacket. He recognized the older woman immediately from the coffee shop on Old Compton. Her brilliant white hair was secured in a tight, neat braid and tough for Alec to forget.

"This is Bobbi," Eli said. Alec shook her hand. "She's the friend I'm going to Africa with."

"N-nice to meet you," Bobbi said, struggling to keep a smile on her face.

"Hello," Alec said coolly. "So Eli's in, huh? He's definitely going?"

"Uh, actually, I told him earlier that I don't know yet, but I will

soon,” she said as her eyes shifted from side to side. She didn’t seem to want to look Alec in the eye. She turned from him and quickly moved to retake her position on the sofa.

The other interpreter’s name was Keith, and he gave Alec’s hand a brisk shake before resuming the practice session. They spent the evening working through the text for the lecture while Alec watched. He was surprised by how well he understood them by the end of the night. Eli smiled down at him a couple of times during his turn before the group. Alec was nearly hypnotized by his hands; their grace and speed was, at times, dizzying.

Two hours later, at the end of the evening, Eli walked the others to their car while Alec helped Lynette on with her jacket. She pulled her long hair free of the collar, began buttoning up the coat, and smiled brightly at him. Her smile practically telegraphed her thoughts.

You like him?

Alec hesitated before glancing over her shoulder at Eli talking by the car. He hadn’t worn a jacket out and was shivering a bit.

Very much.

Lynette glanced at Eli.

He has much pain, but beautiful soul. Alec looked confused and Lynette grinned as she spelled out *S-O-U-L*. He smiled at her in understanding.

Yes. Beautiful.

She leaned in and kissed Alec on the cheek.

Take care of him.

I will try.

Nice to meet you.

Alec held and squeezed her hand as he kissed her cheek.

“What’s this snogging on my front step?” Eli asked, suddenly appearing next to them. Lynette winked and kissed Eli on the cheek.

Thanks for lecture. Good night.

She dashed down the front steps and into the waiting car. Eli and Alec watched them drive away and then went inside. They paused

when faced with their wreck of a living room. There were popcorn kernels, empty chip bags, beer bottles, and rearranged furniture. They looked at each other and, neither wanting to brave Lyle's wrath, dove in and began cleaning.

"Where is everyone tonight?" Alec asked as Eli filled a waste basket with the beer bottles.

"Tony is painting downstairs. Lyle is asleep already, which wasn't a problem." He looked at Alec with a crooked grin. "It's not like we were making any noise."

"True. What about Ilsa?"

"She's working late at Peaches for her secondary." Eli looked at the mess they'd collected. "You know, we should probably just bag all this up and take it out to the alley. Bin day—uh, rubbish pick up is tomorrow and we shouldn't leave it for Lyle."

"I'll get a bag," Alec said as he headed to the kitchen.

"Where were you earlier?" Eli asked when he returned with the bag, broom, and dustpan. "I expected you a bit sooner."

"Had another interview for that teaching position."

"That sounds promising. Are you excited?"

"Nope," Alec said as he squatted to sweep popcorn kernels and errant chips into the pan.

"Why not?" Eli asked.

"I try not to get my hopes up." He stood and emptied the pan into Eli's trash bag with the other refuse. "Here I'll take it." Alec took it from him and tied it off.

"I need to show you where it goes, mate."

On the way down the hall, Alec stopped at the closet and grabbed a jacket for Eli. "You were shivering earlier. Better put that on."

"Thanks," Eli said as he took the jacket and slipped it on.

Alec turned without another word and headed for the back door, but Eli lingered back and watched him. He zipped up his jacket and followed quickly before Alec noticed. The light on the deck came on automatically when they stepped outside into the cold, moist air.

“Follow that walkway to the left,” Eli said as he pointed with his cane. “The bins are at the very end of it.”

Alec skipped quickly down the deck steps and was swallowed by darkness as Eli looked on. A few moments later, he heard the can lid being raised and lowered, and then Alec strolled back into the light and hopped onto the deck. Eli made to go back in the house, but Alec stopped him.

“Your friends seem nice,” Alec said.

“Thanks. They’re a good bunch,” Eli said. “You’ll have to forgive Keith. He’s all business and a nervous wreck.” He giggled a bit. “This practice was mostly for him.” Eli stared down at the deck as he scraped the toe of his sneaker back and forth along the slats. “He doesn’t think well on his feet, and I pray no one strays from the text when he’s signing.” He looked up at Alec. “He has a tendency to freeze.” Alec grinned, and Eli couldn’t stop himself from smiling wickedly at the possibility of disaster.

Eli gazed into the night sky. “As for the other two, Lynette’s a riot. But Bobbi? Bobbi’s been strange lately,” he said, frowning his brow. “I can’t seem to get a straight answer out of her about the trip.” Alec didn’t say anything and allowed Eli to continue uninterrupted. “There are shots, inoculations I’ll need before going. There’s a lot to do, to prepare for.”

“What do you think the problem is?” Alec asked as he faced the yard and moved toward the deck steps.

“Don’t know,” Eli said. “I tried to call her earlier this week but never heard back. And tonight we just got right to work... didn’t have time to talk about the trip, but she told me we’d talk soon.”

“You know, I haven’t had a chance to look at this set up you guys have out here,” Alec said, hoping the subject change wasn’t too abrupt. He’d had enough of contemplating Eli’s departure for the night. His eyes traveled over the chairs and their barbecue that was already covered for the winter. He looked at Eli. “What are English cookouts like?”

“Much like yours,” Eli said. “Actually, a lot like yours thanks to—”

“Ilsa?”

“And Bennett,” he said as he moved to the steps and sat down. Alec quickly joined him. “He was the one who insisted we build this onto the back of the house,” Eli said as his hand traveled lovingly over the smooth wood of the railing. “It took no time at all with the four of us working on it.”

“Four?”

“Tony supervised from his lawn chair.” They smiled at each other. “We’ve had some great ones back here.”

“What did Ilsa make this year?” Alec asked.

Eli frowned. “Well, now that I think of it, we haven’t really done it for....” His voice trailed away.

“Two years?”

He looked at Alec, but he wasn’t angry. He appeared shocked at the time that had passed without him noticing. Alec could see his breath rising into the cool night sky. Eli smiled as he stared off into the yard.

“Yes, funny how it seems to go so quickly. Those cookouts used to mark our summers, and here it’s been two years, and it never crossed my mind.”

“You were preoccupied.”

Eli snorted with laughter at that massive understatement. He looked at Alec and continued smiling until his gaze fell to Alec’s lips. Eli’s smile faltered and he looked away.

“What did you think of our little session tonight?” he asked.

“I was fascinated.”

“Really?” Eli asked. He hadn’t heard that before and was surprised. “How so?”

Alec thought for a moment. “Well, it’s weird, but I remember it as if I heard a conversation.” Eli was nodding. “Isn’t that strange?” Alec asked. “I mean, no one said a word.”

“I think I understand,” Eli said. “I’m sure it has to do with you becoming more skilled at reading sign. I mean, think about it. Someone signs to you, in your head you match those signs to words, and then

your brain translates it again into the sentence structure you've always known." Alec was watching how enthusiastically Eli spoke about what he did, and it made him smile. "I'm not surprised that you remember our session tonight as a spoken conversation."

Eli looked at him and was silenced by how intently Alec watched him. He smiled nervously and suddenly looked a bit self-conscious. Alec feared he might bolt for the back door, but instead Eli maintained eye contact. He wasn't running for the house; he seemed to be leaning closer, and Alec closed his eyes in anticipation.

"Where the hell is everyone?" Tony shouted from the kitchen. Alec felt as though he'd been slapped and opened his eyes to see Eli getting to his feet.

"We're here, Tony!" Eli shouted.

Alec's new least-favorite artist on the planet poked his head out the back door.

"What're you doing out there?" He didn't wait for an answer. "It's freezing, and you left the door open." He disappeared back in the house. Alec could hear him conversing with himself about how "it's a good thing I came up to get coffee," how "all the heat in the house had escaped through the screen door" thanks to them, and something about "if another batch of my paints gets delivered to the neighbor's, I'll..." His voice faded, and Alec heard the basement door slam.

Eli was waiting by the door for him. "We should probably get out of this weather," he said. Alec jumped up and caught him before he went in the house.

"Let's go to a movie Wednesday night," he said.

"What movie?" Eli asked.

"Something that requires no thought and will teach us nothing."

"It's a date," Eli said with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 22

ALEC was surprised at how heated the discussion became following the lecture. The floor was opened to questions, and Eli, along with the other interpreters, had to work very hard to keep up. Several times during the event, when he wasn't signing, Eli glanced out at the audience in search of Alec. He was the second interpreter up but hadn't managed to locate Alec before his turn. It wasn't until after Eli was done that he spotted Alec in the fifth row on the right. They exchanged smiles and periodically caught each other's eye during the event.

Afterward, Alec joined him and his signing partners for a late dinner. Even a few of the deaf attendees, having benefitted from their skills, joined them for celebratory drinks. There was a lot of laughter, discussion, and rather forceful signing. Alec even learned a few rude signs, much to his delight.

It was late by the time the taxi dropped them off. They stumbled through the front door and into a dark and silent house. The only light came from the kitchen and drifted down from the second floor hallway. Alec tripped over his own feet and started laughing.

"Shush!" Eli hissed and then promptly fell over.

It seemed the stealthier they tried to be, the more ruckus they made. Alec kicked the door closed and knelt to help Eli up.

"Here," Alec said as he wrapped his arm around Eli's waist. "Lean on me." He grabbed the cane, and they staggered toward Eli's room. He struggled to hit the light switch but missed it, and they simply

stumbled through the dark and onward to the bed. “This was a lot easier when Ilsa was helping,” Alec said, laughing as they fell onto the bed together.

“She takes care of us,” Eli mumbled.

“I should... I’d better....” Alec began as he stood unsteadily and almost fell backward. “I have to get the bucket.”

Eli was amused but protective. “Alec, you’re drunk. Come sit,” he said, reaching out, finding Alec’s arm, and steering him to the bed. Alec dropped down next to him.

“I think I should lie—is it lay or lie?” he asked, but fell backward before he could get an answer. Alec was unconscious in seconds.

With some difficulty, Eli repositioned Alec so that he could stretch out properly. Feeling his way in the dark, he dutifully began removing Alec’s shirt, unbuttoning it and placing his hands underneath the cool cotton to slide it up and off his shoulders. Alec’s skin felt so warm in contrast to his shirt that Eli wondered briefly if Alec had a fever. His chest was a bit hairy but well-defined, firm, and lean, not bulky. Eli suddenly stood up straight when he realized his hands had been lingering on Alec’s torso and exploring.

He was feeling a bit too warm himself. Eli chuckled nervously and continued undressing his unconscious friend. He carefully pulled Alec’s arms free of his shirt and then fumbled at the waist of Alec’s pants, unbuckling his belt and unbuttoning his jeans. When he tugged gently on the zipper, Alec stirred and mumbled something, prompting Eli to freeze and stare toward the head of the bed. He relaxed after a few moments of Alec’s steady, deep breathing.

Eli grinned and continued. He wasn’t sure what he had expected to happen. Would Alec have misunderstood, coming awake violently, blindly grabbing hold of him in the dark, and pulling him into the bed? Maybe he would then pin Eli down and have his way with him. *I’ve got to stop watching Hollyoaks with Tony and Lyle.* After removing Alec’s shoes, Eli wriggled the jeans free of his legs and tossed them into the chair by the bed. “Done,” he sighed.

Despite the chilly room, he was sweating a bit from his efforts. He laid his cane against the wall at the head of the bed and stripped to

his boxers and socks and then carefully climbed into bed next to Alec. He tossed the comforter over the two of them and lay there for a long time, unable to shake the knowledge that Alec's face rested mere inches from his. But after listening to him breathe for a while longer, Eli turned to face the wall and quickly fell asleep.

THE next morning he woke to find himself facing and tangled up with Alec. His head rested against Eli's chest, and his arms had a grip on him that Eli wasn't sure he could break, not that he was eager to escape. Warmed by the sunlight leaking in through the blinds, Eli closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and ran his fingers through Alec's hair. He had almost forgotten what it felt like to wake up like this.

Sounds of the world outside his room slowly came to him: Ilsa cooking in the kitchen, the phone ringing, and Tony shouting about something Eli couldn't quite make out. He didn't hear Lyle's voice and wondered where he was this early in the morning. He heard someone walking through the hall outside his door and lifted his head a bit to see a shadow pause on the other side of it. Ilsa was probably listening for some sign of life from his room. The shadow soon moved on.

"It's time to wake up, Alec," Eli began softly. Nothing. He didn't move. "Alec?" He tried to free himself, but couldn't manage it. "We need to get up and go," he said again as he stroked Alec's hair.

Alec moaned and slowly began to come awake. But instead of releasing Eli, he tightened his grip, changing his position enough so that his face—or more importantly, his lips—now rested against Eli's neck, and his right thigh pressed deliciously between Eli's legs.

Eli's eyes rolled back in his head, and his breathing deepened as he responded to the contact. However unintentional it might be, it was definitely working for him. He brushed his fingers along Alec's face, smiling at the stubble already sprouting since yesterday. His fingers traveled down Alec's neck, along his arm, and rested at his waist. They were pressed skin to skin, and Eli became intoxicated with the sensation.

Seeking a better vantage point, Eli tried to pull back to examine

Alec's features more closely. With him asleep like this, Eli could gaze all he wanted without giving the wrong impression. "The wrong impression?" he whispered as he absently drew his fingernails across Alec's back and smiled, staring up at the ceiling.

His housemate groaned and shifted position again, drawing a delighted gasp from Eli. He could feel Alec stiffening against his leg, and Eli responded in kind. For Alec, it was typical, meaningless morning arousal; for Eli, it was much more. He was wide awake; he knew where he was and with whom. He closed his eyes. "Jesus, this is s-so wrong," he whispered as he began to grind slowly but insistently against Alec's leg.

It would be quick because it had been so long. His bad leg began to ache a bit, but he ignored it as his breathing quickened, and he clung tightly to Alec. Eli suddenly wanted him awake, aware, and looking at him, kissing him. He wanted to gaze into those gray eyes of his as they moved together.

"Alec," he moaned. "Alec, look at me."

"Sugar?" Ilsa called as she pounded on his door. Alec came awake so suddenly he threw himself off the bed, hitting the floor with a loud thud that brought Ilsa into the room immediately.

"Eli, are you all—" Her voice died in her throat when she spotted Alec sprawled on the floor. His hair was in his face, obscuring his vision. It was clear he had no idea where he was.

"Close the door," Eli said hissed. "I don't need to hear Tony's mouth about this." She stepped back into the hall without a word and closed the door. Eli crawled out of bed and quickly slipped into a T-shirt and a pair of sweats he found on the floor at the foot of the bed. "Alec, are you okay?" he asked.

Alec parted his hair and looked up at him. His eyes were bloodshot and his complexion a bit off. "I don't know," he said hoarsely.

"What the bloody hell is going on up here?" Eli could hear Tony shouting as he ran up the basement stairs. "I'm trying to work down here," he yelled at Ilsa as she stood outside Eli's door.

She had apparently reached her limit. "Tony," she said firmly. "I

don't know what's crawled up your ass lately, but calm down, or I'll get my spray bottle!"

Eli waited, but the only response he heard was the sound of the basement door clicking softly shut and Tony's much softer footsteps in retreat.

"Eli," Ilsa said quietly from the hall. "I've made a big breakfast." She fell silent and waited for a response. None came. "We've got scrambled eggs and sausages or, if you'd prefer, I could whip up some French toast? You could have your choice of maple or blueberry syrup."

Alec turned a deeper shade of green and looked at Eli with wide frightened eyes.

"In there," Eli said, pointing to the bathroom. Alec ran for it and Eli watched him go with a small smile playing on his lips.

"It'll be waiting for you when you're ready," she concluded.

Ilsa's answer to everything: delicious, fattening food. "Thanks, Ilsa," he said to the door.

"DO YOU have something to tell me?" Ilsa asked as she and Eli did the dishes.

She'd kept quiet during breakfast about finding Alec in his room, but now that Tony was otherwise occupied in the basement and Alec was unconscious in his own bed, it was time to talk.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Eli said as he dried a plate, "but sex would have been impossible on this plane of existence. He passed out shortly after getting to my room."

"Forgive me, but was sex the intent?"

"No!" He looked at her in shock. "He... he was just helping me," Eli said, taking the last plate from her. "Or I was helping him." He shook his head. "We were both pretty drunk."

"I noticed he didn't eat very much of his dry toast," Ilsa said.

Eli laughed as they went over to the kitchen table with their coffee. “I think he’ll be fine later. The aspirin and bottled water should have him up and around in time for the movie,” he said without thinking. He was instantly sorry he’d mentioned their plans.

“Movie?” Ilsa asked with a broad smile.

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Look, Alec asked if I’d like to see a movie, and I accepted. Simple.”

“Things aren’t so awkward anymore, huh?”

“No. We’re fine.”

Ilsa sipped her coffee thoughtfully. “I’d say you’re a bit more than fine, sugar,” she said. Eli remained silent. “I’m just glad to see you’re giving him a chance.”

CHAPTER 23

“I HAVE no memory of getting home,” Alec said as their taxi wove its way through West End traffic. “But I remember the lecture and going to dinner with you and your friends.”

“That’s all?” Eli asked.

“Why?” Alec’s eyes narrowed and Eli chuckled.

“Let’s just say you had me in quite the clinch this morning,” he said and glanced at their driver’s face in the rearview mirror. He was obviously listening closely to their conversation.

Alec had gone red. “I’m sorry, Eli.”

“Don’t sweat it, mate. No harm done,” Eli said with a smile. “It was actually a very nice way to wake up.”

They pulled up in front of the cinema. Alec paid the driver and joined Eli in staring up at the marquee.

“Something mindless?” Eli asked.

“And we mustn’t learn anything,” Alec added.

They had arrived a bit early but filled the time drinking their sodas and sharing a ridiculously large bucket of popcorn in the back of the theater.

“You think all that grease is going to be good for your stomach?” Eli asked.

“I’m fine now,” Alec said quickly. “The dry toast did the trick.” He sighed and patted his tummy as though satisfied. Eli laughed.

They sat in silence for a while as more people filed into the theater and took their seats. Alec was bursting to find out if Eli had softened his opinion on their chances as a couple, but he was afraid of the answer if he asked. Things certainly felt different. There was a new energy between them—more relaxed. Maybe Mirabell had been right about Eli changing his mind. He took a few more moments to screw up his courage and ask him outright if he thought they could give it a go.

“Alec, when is Mirabell due back from New York?” Eli asked before he could open his mouth, completely catching him off guard.

“Uh, next Tuesday, I think. Why?”

“I guess you’ll be clubbing with her that weekend?” Eli never looked at him. He just sipped his soda, examining the straw intently.

“I guess so,” Alec began slowly. “Although, I’m not too keen on the whole clubbing idea.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Eli said lightly, “if you go out, you might meet someone.” He looked at him finally. “Someone new.”

Alec looked into his eyes for a long time.

“Eli, I think you know I’m not interested in meeting someone else,” he said. “You’re the man I want.”

The lights in the theater went out at that instant, and Alec couldn’t see if Eli was still looking at him, let alone smiling or not. The screen flickered to life as the trailers began and he could again see Eli’s face in the dim light. He was looking at him and smiling. They looked at each other for a couple more heartbeats before Eli leaned closer and kissed him. Alec happily kissed him back, and for a change, both were stone sober and willing. Neither of them remembered much about the film.

AFTER the movie, they walked up the street to a favorite coffee shop of Eli’s. It was an old brick building that had been renovated to house a café and bookstore. One half of it was the store with shelf after shelf of books. An archway on the right led into a large lounge area. This room had walls of exposed brick and black fans spinning from a high, red ceiling. There were several small tables with chairs and a couple of comfy black leather chairs for those contemplative types who simply

wanted to be alone with their books.

At the back of the room was a black iron spiral staircase which led to a second floor and more books. At the front facing the street was a picture window with a long bar where people could sit on wooden stools, sip their coffee, and watch the world walk by.

“This place is gorgeous,” Alec said as he looked around. He’d bought his favorite banana nut muffin and skim milk.

“I know. I love coming here between classes with Lynette,” Eli said as he blew on his large coffee to cool it down. “It’s got great atmosphere.”

“There’s a table,” Alec said just as a large man and his girlfriend tried to push by them. The man collided with Eli, almost causing him to spill scalding coffee on himself.

“Hey, careful!” Alec said to him as he put his hand protectively on Eli’s shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” the woman said quickly.

“I’m okay,” Eli said.

“Accident, pal,” the man said raising his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry. You two on a date or something?” He laughed at his little joke, but his girlfriend was not amused and tugged fiercely on his arm. The man smelled of alcohol and staggered away as Alec watched. They disappeared deeper into the bookstore.

He and Eli sat down at a table against the far wall. From this angle, they could look out the picture window as they talked. The streets seemed unusually busy, which Eli chalked up to early holiday shopping.

“Can I ask what made you change your mind about me?” Alec asked suddenly.

Eli stirred his coffee and thought about it.

“I guess I just needed time to get to know you,” he said, smiling at Alec. “Time to consider the possibilities.”

“It’s been a long time for you, hasn’t it?”

“I haven’t been with anyone since Bennett,” Eli said quietly. “That’s true.”

“But you’ve thought about it, surely?”

Eli shook his head. “All my thoughts were of him. Any energy I didn’t manage to spend getting better was used wishing he was still here,” he said as he stared into his coffee. “I didn’t know how to function in this world without him and I didn’t want to try, not really.” He smiled. “And don’t call me Shirley.”

Alec chuckled. “I’m being serious.”

“I know, and I wish you’d stop,” Eli said.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, but I don’t really want to talk about it anymore.”

“Sometimes talking about it helps,” Alec said.

Eli’s gaze traveled beyond Alec and out the picture window. He saw men and women rushing by in groups, pairs, and alone. They were burdened with packages, colorful bags, and bundled up against the biting wind.

“You sound like my therapist,” Eli said.

“I don’t mean to,” Alec said.

Eli toyed with his coffee cup. “Remember mentioning your habit of fleeing?” he asked. Alec nodded. “Let’s just say that’s all I’ve thought about since getting out of the hospital two years ago.”

“Is that what Africa’s about?” Alec asked, but Eli didn’t respond. “How would you feel if I told you that I don’t want you to go?”

Eli grinned. “Alec, you remember what I was like when we first met?” he asked and Alec nodded. “It becomes worse as September approaches, but that urge was always there, to isolate myself, to shut everyone else out. That’s who I was”—Eli locked eyes with him—“until you moved in.”

“And now?” Alec asked hopefully, but before Eli could answer, his cell rang. They kept looking at each other. It rang again. “You’d better get that,” Alec said softly.

Eli flipped open his phone, “Hello... Bobbi, I was just going t—” he fell silent and listened. “Wait, are you crying?” Alec shifted nervously as he watched Eli’s changing expressions. “B-Bobbi... it’s okay, tell me... what...” Alec was holding his breath but didn’t realize

it, and then Eli smiled broadly.

“What?” Alec whispered, utterly confused.

One moment, Eli signed. “You’re joking!” he shouted, his eyes going wide. Eli began to laugh hysterically. “No, no, sweetie. I’m not disappointed.” He continued laughing. “It’s all right, love. I’ll talk to you soon.” Eli shut his phone and grinned at Alec.

“What?” Alec demanded. “Tell me!”

“They don’t want me.”

“Who?”

“Bobbi’s group. They turned down my application.”

“What? Why? What happened?” Alec asked. He felt strangely insulted on Eli’s behalf.

“Bobbi hand-delivered my paperwork and proceeded to emphasize how important it was that I have this opportunity. She told them about Bennett and that I was eager to throw myself into something I could really believe in, talked about what an asset I’d be to the group.”

“That sounds great,” Alec said.

“The funding for the project is provided by a Christian mission group or, rather, the family who runs it.”

“Don’t say it.”

Eli smiled again and nodded. “They didn’t feel it was a good idea for someone of my... proclivities to be around impressionable Third World children.”

“You’re joking!”

“Nope,” Eli said. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling. “Bobbi’s known about their decision for weeks but couldn’t bring herself to tell me, poor dear.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“Oh, I’m livid,” Eli said, continuing to nod and smile in delight. “But....” He shrugged.

Alec reached across the table and took his hand. “So you’re staying?”

“I’m all yours,” Eli said quietly, giving Alec’s hand a squeeze. They smiled at each other and quickly finished their drinks. “Where to next?” Eli asked.

Contemplating the shortest distance between the coffee shop and their home, Alec’s gaze wandered to the archway where he could see some of the activity in the bookstore. He saw a young saleswoman wheeling several large boxes to the back of the store on a dolly. The bulky drunk who had bumped into Eli appeared and slammed into her, sending one of the boxes crashing to the floor.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, bitch!” the man said.

Several heads turned toward the ruckus just as the man’s girlfriend reappeared and tried to usher him from the store. He resisted. Like a bull in a china shop, he pulled out of her grasp and she fell backward. The man laughed, and Alec was up and headed toward them before Eli even noticed the commotion.

“Are you all right?” Alec asked as he put out his hand to help up the woman.

“Yes, just pissed and frustrated,” she said as she got to her feet. “Thank you.”

“Is he a relative or a boyfriend?” Alec asked.

“Boyfriend, why?” she asked.

“Because it’s more difficult to shed a relative,” he said with a smile. They both laughed out loud.

“Get your filthy hands off her, you faggot!” the man bellowed. Alec ignored him as did Eli when he joined them. The man sneered, “Oh look, here’s your boyfriend.”

The fallen box had burst open and Eli knelt to help the saleswoman right her dolly and restore a number of books to the box. Alec turned to face the belligerent drunk.

“Perhaps you should head home now. It seems your partying is over for the night.”

“You don’t tell me what to do, queer boy!” he said as he repeatedly poked Alec in the chest. The man was a head taller and about fifty pounds heavier than him, so Alec didn’t relish the idea of a

fight. He liked his nose right where it was.

“I’ve called the constables, sir,” the manager said as he ran up to them. “I suggest you leave before they arrive.”

“I’ll leave after I’ve taught fairy boy here a lesson!” the man said, poking Alec in the chest even harder and causing him to stumble back a bit.

“You really should work on your insults, love,” Eli said from behind him. “They’re a bit outdated.” The man whirled on him angrily and drew back his fist.

“No!” Alec shouted as he stepped forward. But Eli had it under control. He hit the man in the balls with the tip of his cane and quickly hooked the curved handle around his left ankle, yanking his foot out from under him.

Alec stared in amused disbelief as the man went down like a sack of shit. He lay on the floor clutching his balls and trying to recapture the air that had been knocked from his lungs. The constables arrived shortly thereafter and placed the drunk in their car. They began taking statements from witnesses, the main one being Alec.

Eli finished putting the books back in the box but paused when something caught his eye right before the saleswoman resealed it.

“Thanks for your help, sir,” she said as she made to push her dolly and the books to the back of the store.

“Hang on,” Eli said. “What books do you have in there?”

“There’s a variety,” she said as she opened the box again. “What were you looking for?”

“This one,” Eli said as he reached in and pulled out *Surviving Trauma and Loss* by Alec Sumner.

“Oh, that one’s new. Came today,” she said cheerfully. “We’re doing a small display with those tomorrow, but you can buy it now if you like.”

Eli slowly turned the book over in his hands. He opened the back cover to find Alec’s picture and a short biography on the sleeve.

“You know this book?” he asked softly.

The woman nodded. “Yes, sir. It’s a bestseller in America. Would

you like to buy it? It's not in our system yet, but I'm sure the manager could make arrangements for you after all you did tonight."

Eli wasn't listening to her. He glanced up at Alec who was shaking hands with the police as they prepared to wrap it up. He felt himself go cold all over as his mind connected too many dots and began to replay every conversation they'd ever had. The officers walked over to speak with the manager. Alec turned to Eli and smiled, but it fell from his face when he looked in his eyes. They had turned to stone.

"What—"

Eli flew at him. "What is this?" he asked shaking the book so violently in front of Alec's face that he couldn't make out what it was.

"Wait, let me see," he pleaded as he steadied Eli's hand. When he read the title, the color drained from his face and he looked at him with guilty eyes. "Eli, I-listen—"

"You wrote this?" His voice shook with anger.

"Yes," Alec said softly.

The saleswoman had been watching them and removed another copy of the book from the box. She checked the picture in the back and went to her boss to show him that they had the author in their store.

"What was all this, then?" Eli asked gesturing wildly.

"All what?"

"You moving in and chatting me up, what was that?"

Alec was dumbfounded. "You can't think—"

"I'll tell you what I think! You would have told me about this book unless you were trying to keep it a secret and why would you do that, Alec? Why?"

Eli's raised voice stopped the officers in their tracks as they prepared leave. They turned back to look at the escalating argument.

"Eli, I—"

"Why did you move in with us of all the flats in London?" he demanded as he began to shake the book in Alec's face again. "I'm told this is a bestseller," he said gesturing toward the saleswoman. "Surely

you could afford any flat you wanted. Why us?"

Alec grabbed Eli's hand and stopped him from shaking the book in his face. "Are you going to let me answer or just keep shouting at me?" he asked, his voice rising in anger. The officers took a few steps closer to them. Eli lowered the book and fell silent, but the fury on his face was immutable. Alec could sense the thoughts of betrayal flying behind Eli's eyes as he looked at him.

"Ilsa didn't want me to mention the book to you," he began.

"Why?"

"She thought I could help you work through some things, things surrounding Bennett," Alec said. Eli eyes slammed shut as though he'd been hit in the gut. "But I didn't know that until after the night at the gallery," Alec rushed on. "She told me what she was hoping for that night after we'd put you to bed."

"And what was your response?" Eli asked. He didn't look at him.

"I already wanted to know you, Eli—"

"And?"

"And I did want to help if I could," Alec concluded softly.

"All those questions you asked about me and—" His voice failed him as his throat constricted. The store was silent now as Alec waited for him to continue. The store manager, saleswoman, and officers looked on, also waiting. Eli said nothing as he turned and walked away from Alec and out the door.

"Wait!"

"Excuse me, sir," the manager said as he blocked Alec's path, "but someone needs to pay for that book."

"Book?" Alec asked as he tried desperately to keep Eli in sight. He didn't want him to disappear.

"The one your mate just walked out with."

CHAPTER 24

ILSA dragged herself through the front door and into a very quiet house. She was tired down to her marrow after working extra shifts at the restaurant to allow some vacation time for her secondary chef.

She dropped her backpack by the door and her keys on the hall table, where she began going through her mail. The silence of the house drew her attention, however, and she actually looked around for the first time since coming home. She kicked her shoes off by the stairs and wandered deeper into the house in search of Lyle or Tony, Eli or Alec.

“Hello?”

There was no answer. The light above the sink was on in the kitchen and Ilsa made her way toward it. Her stomach was a bit uneasy and she didn’t understand why. She looked around the kitchen, first checking the bulletin board by the door.

According to two notes there, Tony had gone out with some new man and wouldn’t be home until tomorrow afternoon, no surprise there. Lyle was out of town organizing an estate sale and wouldn’t be back for a couple of days. There was nothing from her other housemates, but they were probably still on their date. Ilsa had to smile when she thought of it.

Her smile faded, however, when she caught sight of something in the center of the kitchen table. She walked over, took a seat, and picked up a copy of Alec’s book. Her heart began to beat a bit faster as she opened the front cover and read the inscription.

“Eli?” she shouted, rising from the table in a panic.

She went to his room and pounded on the door. There was no answer, so she went in and turned on the light to look around. She didn’t know what she was looking for, but simply allowed her eyes to scan it. Nothing looked out of place. All his things were there, all but... she didn’t see his duffle. She stepped into the room and looked behind the door. No duffle. Just then, the front door flew open.

“Eli?” Alec shouted.

Ilsa stepped into the hall to face him and he stopped in his tracks.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“Is he here?”

“No. What happened?” she asked again.

“We don’t have time for this. We have to—”

“Tell me, Alec.”

He read her resolute expression and gave in. He tried to calm his heart, all the while thinking that Eli was getting farther and farther away from them.

“We were at a bookstore,” he began, speaking at a frantic pace. “I didn’t know my book was out here, Ilsa. I didn’t know. My publisher didn’t say anything. I was thinking maybe next year, but....” She nodded but said nothing. “Any ideas where he might be?” he asked.

“His duffle is gone. He could be anywhere,” she said handing the book to him. It was open to the inscribed page. Alec read it and felt his stomach turn.

To Ilsa: How could you do this?

P.S. Alec should go out with Mirabell on Friday.

CASEY rolled over and fumbled for her clock radio. She opened one eye and tried to read it. “One seventeen, my ass!” she hissed as she

threw her covers back and went to kill whoever was pounding on her door. She had to be at the hospital in four hours to start her shift.

As she staggered to the door, she began to wonder how many years she'd actually get for homicide. Surely the jury would find it justifiable. She unlocked the door and yanked it open. "What the f..." Her voice failed her as Ilsa pushed past her into the apartment.

"Is Eli here?" she asked, but Casey couldn't speak. Ilsa blinked at her and then began looking through the other rooms.

Casey spoke up. "He's not here, Ilsa. Why would he be here?" she asked as she followed her from room to room.

"Because he's upset with me, and you're his friend." Ilsa moved toward the living room and searched for the light switch.

"Wait!" Casey shouted, but the light was on, and Ilsa was frozen to the spot by the sight of Tony's painting of her hanging above Casey's fireplace.

It was mounted perfectly. It even had art lights trained on it from below to illuminate every inch of the canvas. Ilsa stared at it for a moment before turning to look more closely at the tiny nurse.

"I spent my Greece money on it," she said softly.

"Greece?"

"I've been saving for eighteen months to visit Greece, but when I saw you, this painting of you, I wanted that more."

Ilsa looked into Casey's eyes long and hard but then shook her head. "If I weren't so worried about Eli right now, we could talk about this, but I have to find him."

"He's not here, and I haven't seen him. What happened?" Casey asked. "Is this about Africa?"

"No. Well, sort of," Ilsa said, wringing her hands and looking around the room. "It's about my incessant need to control and maintain my family." She sighed heavily. "But I'm sorry, Casey, I don't have time to go into it." Ilsa fell silent and started massaging her temples. "I tried calling you."

"I switched off my ringer so I could sleep. Sorry."

“Messages?” Ilsa asked.

Casey’s eyes widened and they rushed deeper into the living room to check her machine. They went through several messages, including three increasingly irate ones from Ilsa. She looked at Casey apologetically. Then Eli’s voice spilled out of the speaker. It was breaking and shaking as if he was cold. He sounded very much alone.

“Casey, w-where are you? I need to... I need to t-talk to you... to s-someone.”

The call ended and there were no more from him. Casey and Ilsa looked at each other, trying to work out their next move. Ilsa sat down on the sofa and began to cry.

“I did something stupid, and now he’s gone,” she said looking up at her. “I hurt him, I have to find him. He’s... he’s... my family.” Casey sat down beside her and moved in close. She took Ilsa in her arms and held her for a long time, all the while whispering that they would find him, that everything would be fine. “You have to say that, you’re a nurse,” Ilsa mumbled against her neck. Casey smiled. She was glad to hear Ilsa still had her sense of humor.

“Ilsa,” she asked, “what about his passport?”

“Huh?” she sat up straight and wiped her eyes.

“Did you find Eli’s passport at the house?”

She immediately went to Casey’s phone.

BACK at the house, Alec sat in the hall with the cordless phone in one hand and a cold beer in the other. He was taking a swig when the phone rang, and he nearly choked.

“Eli?”

“Alec, you should check Eli’s room for his passport,” Ilsa instructed. He struggled to his feet and entered Eli’s room.

“Where do I look?” he asked as his eyes searched the room.

“Dresser against the wall between the bed and the bathroom.

Look in the top drawer on the right. It's dark red or maroon."

He searched quickly through Eli's drawer but found no passport. "It's not here, Ilsa. You think he's left the country?"

"Yes." She heard Alec groan. "Don't worry, sugar," she said as she looked at Casey and tried to smile. "I have a feeling that everything will be all right." She hung up and looked at the clock on the wall before she started dialing again.

"Who are you calling?" Casey asked.

"It's 8:40 p.m. in New York," was all she said.

CHAPTER 25

HE TOOK his time because his sneakers kept slipping in the snow. There was a good inch or more on the ground, so periodically he had to stop and rest as he made his way down from the office. He'd tug his ball cap down tightly on his head, wipe the sweat from his cane handle, and continue on.

Eli glanced again at the map he'd gotten when he arrived and turned left. There, in front of him on a raised section of ground reserved for the Tucker family, he found Bennett's grave. The marker was simple—no angels or flowery scrolling. It was accurate and to the point:

Here lies
Bennett Dale Tucker.
Beloved son,
Brother, Friend

He removed a small bottle of whisky from his duffle pocket before dropping the bag to the ground and sitting on it. He took a deep draw from the bottle. It burned a path to his stomach and warmth spread through him right out to his fingertips.

"I'm sorry I haven't been sooner," he began quietly, "but I've been a bit out of sorts." He looked around at the view from the raised plot. "It's a nice spot they've got for you. I bet the sunsets are nice from here." He sat quietly for a while, sipping the whisky. Not really

knowing what to say, he opted for small talk.

“Everyone’s fine; you don’t have to worry,” he began. “Ilsa’s doing well at the restaurant, although she still hasn’t swayed them on the sweet slaw issue. Tony had a very successful show this year and made loads of money. He’s in the basement now preparing for the next one.

“Oh and Lyle. Lyle is working for an estate company. He’s rarely home anymore, so we’ve had to start taking care of ourselves.” He laughed as he took another long swallow from the bottle and shivered a bit. He looked down at his sopping wet sneakers.

“I’m sorry to say I don’t know how your parents and sister are doing, but I did get a card from your brother with pictures of your nephew.” His throat tightened slightly. “You’re an uncle,” he whispered. “He’s about eighteen months now and his name is Ian Bennett Tucker.” Eli suspected it was the whisky making his eyes water.

“I’m sorry I haven’t kept in touch with them, but I do get holiday cards and your mom still sends me a birthday card every year.” Eli fell silent and looked at his surroundings. The silence and isolation made him feel secure. There was no one to chat with, no need to be sociable. They had picked the perfect place for Bennett.

“She—your mom—has invited me to visit, but I’m ashamed to say I haven’t.” He waved his hand dismissively. “But I’m sure they keep you filled in so that you know all about it.”

He slid off the duffle and onto his knees. With his bare hands, he carefully began to brush away the snow covering the grave; he gradually exposed the still-green grass. When he was done, he unzipped his jacket and pulled out a small bunch of wildflowers he’d purchased and positioned them neatly on the grave. He sat back to admire his handiwork but noticed that he’d missed a few inches of snow at the base of the headstone. Eli leaned forward to scrape it away and uncovered more lettering:

Brother, Friend

And Partner.

We miss you always.

1980-2007

Tears came to him in a flood. He remained on his hands and knees, unable to do anything but weep. Eventually he found his way back to his duffle bag and his whisky. He wiped his eyes fiercely, took another gulp, and then shook his head to clear it.

“I haven’t told you about me, have I?” he asked, breathing deeply to regain control of himself. “I met someone. He moved into the attic room. You know how Ilsa was forever talking about renting it out? Well, she finally did it.

“He’s a psychologist and, it turns out—an author,” he added bitterly. “He’s a bit shorter than you with thick black hair and gray eyes. Oh, and get this,” Eli said excitedly, “he’s also an American. Can you believe that?” He began laughing to himself. “His name is Alec, and he’s from the South. I quite like his accent. I had an eight-hour layover in Atlanta this morning, and everyone around me sounded like him.

“I liked him a lot, but as it turns out....” Eli paused as his words began to fail him. “He just w-wanted to help me; help me move past things, after... after you....” His voice trailed away, catching in his throat.

“It was Ilsa’s idea. I tell you, I’m so mad at her I could spit!” he shouted. “She had no right to interfere in my life like that. Just imagine how fucked up I’d have to be for her to do that. I thought I was doing okay, that maybe this bloke might really want....” Eli hiccupped and momentarily lost his train of thought.

A large burgundy car pulled to a stop in the lot far below the Tucker plot, and a man and a woman got out, leaving the car running. They glanced up at the hill and began to climb.

“When he first put the moves on me I stopped him, Bennett. I told him I couldn’t. I told him.” There was a tiny bit of whisky left in his bottle. “I thought I believed it when I said it, but as we got closer, I started thinking maybe I’d been wrong. Maybe we could have something, Alec and I. Or is it Alec and me?” He took one last swallow

before pouring the rest on the grave. “But it turns out I’d been right. I mean right about us being wrong for each other, not right about... oh, bollocks!” Eli tossed the bottle aside and reached into his duffle to pull out another.

“I miss you,” he whispered. “Things would have been a lot simpler if we’d both gone that night. I wouldn’t be feeling all this... this...” He stared at the headstone for what felt like a long time, and then—remembering the bottle in his hand—he twisted off the cap and put it to his lips.

“Give me that!” a tall woman with short, sandy blonde hair said as she snatched it from his hand and tossed it clear down to the car lot below where it exploded on impact.

“We found him, Mom!” a man shouted as he waved his arms above his head. Eli recognized Carmony and Arthur, Bennett’s younger sister and older brother.

“Good Lord, look at your shoes, Eli,” Carmony said as she squatted down in front of him. “Do all Englishmen walk about in the snow in sneakers?”

She began to gather his things, and Arthur helped him to his feet. Eli leaned on him as they tried to navigate the steep side of the hill.

“How the hell did you get up here?” Arthur asked. Eli swung his arm wildly and pointed back over their shoulders to the office which sat on a lot above them.

“Taxi let me off up there, and I came down to Bennett,” he said thickly. “I had my walking stick. I took my time, was careful.”

“Well, Sis has it, and we’re in a rush,” Arthur said. “Let’s slide, shall we?” And down they went on their bottoms so fast that Eli began to giggle.

Carmony, on the other hand, had a wide, confident stride and was almost graceful as she came down the hill in the snow with his duffle over one shoulder and his cane in her hand. She didn’t lose her footing once. They reached the car, and their mother opened the back door and scooted over quickly so that Eli could get in.

“Come on, dear,” she said holding out her arms to him.

“Goodness, you’re shivering.” She wrapped her arms around him and rubbed his arms vigorously, trying to warm him up. Arthur reached into the front seat and popped the trunk before buckling in. Carmony dumped Eli’s duffle and cane in the trunk and pulled out a wool blanket before climbing quickly into the front passenger seat.

“Here, Mom, wrap this around him,” she said as she threw the blanket over the seat. Eli quickly found himself bundled in a warm blanket and squeezed tightly in Beverly Tucker’s arms. Things had happened so fast he’d hardly had time to get his bearings, but now he knew where he was and who he was with.

“I’m fine,” he said shakily and tried to free himself from her grasp.

“No you’re not!” she said. “Hold still!” Eli did as he was told and found himself squeezed up against her again. Carmony turned in her seat to see tears in her mother’s eyes. She quickly turned around again, and they headed for home.

“I’ve missed you, boy,” Beverly said as she hugged him.

“THANK you. I really appreciate the call.” Ilsa hung up the phone and looked at Alec. He was sitting at the kitchen table holding the book Eli had left behind. “He’s fine, sweetie. He’s a little drunk and currently unconscious, but fine.”

“He went to Bennett’s family?” Alec asked.

“Yes. Well, sort of,” she said joining him at the table. “They... they found him....”

“Ilsa, tell me.”

“They found him in the cemetery getting drunk by his grave.”

“I guess he felt he had nowhere else to go,” he said softly, looking down at the cover of his book. Ilsa reached across the table and took his hand.

“We both made mistakes, mostly me, but he knows we love him, Alec. He’ll come home.”

“That may be, Ilsa, but from the looks of this,” he opened the book and read the inscription again, “I won’t be part of his homecoming.” Alec looked into her eyes. “He’s given up on me.”

CHAPTER 26

ELI slowly opened his eyes and saw a ceiling fan spinning lazily above him. *No, wait.* He slammed his eyes shut again. It was the bed that seemed to be spinning. *Okay, not my room.* When the sensation stopped, he opened his eyes and looked to his right to see an open door leading to a white bathroom. To his left, there was a large bay window seat with sheer curtains and his duffle resting on it.

He lifted the covers and discovered his jeans had been replaced by brown pajama bottoms, and that, once again, he had no memory of someone undressing him. The gray sky outside was bright enough, thanks to the reflection off the snow, to make him squint. The light played off the pale blue walls surrounding him and made the dark furniture in the room look dull and muddy.

“Hello.”

Eli started and sat up a bit in bed to find a young girl poking her head in the door and looking at him.

“H-hi,” he croaked.

The girl pushed the door open all the way and stepped further into the room.

“Mommy sent me to....” She seemed to lose her train of thought. The girl had long, strawberry blonde hair and delicate, elfin features, and appeared to be about four years old.

“To what?” Eli asked.

Suddenly remembering her assigned task, she turned and shouted out the door, "HE'S AWAKE!" Eli laughed and regretted it immediately as his head began to throb. "You sick?" she asked. He looked at her with only one eye.

"I'm not feeling my best." When the ringing in his ears had stopped, he asked her name.

"I'm Leah," she said brightly as she lingered by the door. "You talk funny."

"Thank you," he said. "Leah? Your mother is...." He struggled to remember the last time he'd seen this girl.

"Carmony's her mom," Beverly said as she stepped past the girl and entered the room. She carried a tray of food. "Little Leah there is my granddaughter." She set the tray across Eli's lap. It was loaded with scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, juice, and coffee. Eli felt his stomach turn, and his expression showed it.

"I told you that was too much, Mom," Carmony said as she joined them. She scooped up Leah. "Good job, darling," she said, kissing Leah's cheek. The girl smiled and rested her head on her mother's shoulder as they stood at the foot of Eli's bed and watched him through matching sleepy green eyes.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Beverly asked him as she held a piece of buttered toast to his mouth. Eli took it reluctantly and nibbled the edge.

"I'm fine," he assured her but looked at the rest of the food before him as if it were a coiled cobra.

"It's a good thing Ilsa called us when she did," Bennett's mother continued. "I don't like the idea of you sitting out in this cold getting drunk. You could have frozen to death, silly boy."

She began to chop up his slightly runny eggs and Eli reached his limit. Beverly pulled the tray off his lap just as he grabbed his cane and headed as quickly as possible for the bathroom. She watched him disappear behind the door before sharing a knowing smile with Carmony.

"That was rotten, Mom," she said as Beverly took the tray and

followed her daughter and granddaughter out the door.

About an hour later, Eli emerged from his room. He followed the voices and laughter to the kitchen and stood in the doorway for a few moments, watching Bennett's family interact as they prepared a meal. Carmony stood sweating over the stove as Beverly sat at the kitchen island, sipping tea and directing her daughter in the fine art of making corned beef and cabbage. Sounds of a game on the TV in the other room drew Eli's gaze beyond the women and into the great room where Arthur sat with his father, watching football.

A small boy came toddling toward him. He was practically bald, had large brown eyes, a pacifier in his mouth, and was dragging a small patchwork quilt behind him. It was Ian, Bennett's nephew. He reached Eli and looked up at him with those big eyes. He didn't speak because he didn't want to relinquish the pacifier, but he did tug insistently on his pants leg and coo to be picked up. When Eli smiled down at him, Ian returned it without losing his oral grip.

"Is Ian in there?" Arthur asked from the other room.

Beverly immediately looked down to see if the little one was under foot or waddling by. Eventually her eyes found the toddler standing with Eli in the doorway.

"We've got him, dear," she said, not taking her eyes from Eli's. Ian took his finger and they walked over to the island to join his grandmother. "How are you feeling?" Beverly asked as he took a seat next to her and lifted Ian into his lap.

"I'm much better after my shower, thank you." This last comment was punctuated by raucous shouting from the other room.

"Coffee?" Carmony asked, putting a cup of it in front of him.

"Thanks."

"And a blueberry muffin." She put a tiny plate in front of him with one perfect muffin on it. In seconds Ian had dropped his blanket on the floor, popped his pacifier out of his mouth, and wrapped his lips around as much of the muffin as he could. Apparently, all comfort items were forgotten when faced with sugar.

"You need to be faster than that, Eli," Beverly said with a laugh.

She tried to take it away from the baby, but his chubby little hands had a good grip on it. As she struggled with him they all began laughing at his determination.

“Hey, Mom,” Arthur said, entering the room and spotting Eli. “Oh, you’re up. You feeling okay?” he asked.

“I’m better,” Eli said as he began playing with Ian’s busy hands. The baby was now trying to grab his coffee mug. “No, no that’s hot.”

“Here, I’ll take him,” Arthur said, rushing forward. “He needs a nap anyway.” He scooped up his son. Eli grabbed the baby’s pacifier off the counter and lifted the quilt from the floor with the tip of his cane.

“Arthur, you’ll be wanting these,” he said holding them up.

“Oh man, thanks,” he said, rolling his eyes. He took the items and carried the baby out of the room. As they walked out, Eli gave Ian a little wave, and the baby smiled at him. The kitchen fell silent as he turned back to face the ladies and found himself under scrutiny.

“I’m sorry,” he began slowly; the smile fell from his face. “I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble. Ilsa shouldn’t have got you involved.” Carmondy and her mother glanced at each other in shock.

“Got us involved,” Beverly said.

“Now you’ve done it,” Carmondy said.

“Hush, girl!” Beverly turned back to Eli, “Dear, we—all of us—have been involved since Bennett brought you home all those years ago!”

Over Beverly’s shoulder, Eli could see Sean Tucker, Bennett’s father, approach the kitchen, but he paused when he detected the anger in his wife’s voice. He silently turned around and returned to the sofa.

“Carmondy told me to let you be,” Beverly was saying. “That if you wanted contact with us, you’d make it happen.” Her voice was shaking and Eli continued to keep his mouth shut. “But I couldn’t do that. I wanted you in our lives.”

“I thought it would only remind—”

“Yes, dear,” Beverly said, nodding. “You would remind us, but

that's okay. It's good to be reminded of Bennett when he was happy, happier than we'd ever seen him." She reached out and touched his arm gently. "And he would want you to be happy if you can."

"What do you mean?" Eli asked, pulling his arm away from her.

Beverly and Carmondy looked at each other.

"Alec," Carmondy said softly.

Eli got to his feet quickly. "We're not talking about this."

"It sounds like he truly cares for you," she added hastily.

"And who told you that? Ilsa?" he asked, heading for the door.

"Eli, wait," Beverly said. "Please."

"You don't know what happened. You don't... I was a fool. She made a fool out of me."

"And Alec?" Beverly asked. "What exactly did he do?"

Eli bit his tongue. He wanted to shout that Alec had done the same, but couldn't form the words. He returned to his room and slammed the door.

"That went well," Sean said as he once again strolled into the kitchen. His wife looked at him like he was a coward for not getting more involved in the discussion. Her chilly eyes followed him as he sheepishly approached the refrigerator and removed a beer.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Arthur asked upon his return. "I just put Ian down." His face was livid but softened as he looked around the kitchen. "Where's Eli?"

HIS first thought upon reaching his room was to grab his bag and leave, but he wasn't sure where he'd go. The thought of returning to his home didn't appeal to him. He was still angry with Ilsa's meddling and had no idea what he would say to Alec. Maybe Casey would have room for him for a few days. Eli sat at the window seat and watched a couple of birds trying to scrape a meal out of their harsh environment.

CHAPTER 27

WHILE staying with the Tuckers, Eli watched a lot of television with little Leah and her mother. They were living there while Carmondy's divorce became final. Luckily, he was also a fan of *SpongeBob Squarepants*. Arthur and his wife, a doctor, brought Ian over nearly every other day because the Tuckers apparently couldn't get enough of their grandchildren.

He witnessed a lot of laughter and love during their family dinners. On more than one occasion, Eli would look around the table at them and realize that this was what Bennett had experienced his entire life. He was starting to feel very much a part of it all when he found himself missing his own room, his own bed, and his—family.

Exactly a week after he'd flown out of London, Eli sat on the back porch with Carmondy, sipping hot chocolate and whiskey. They were bundled up in coats, gloves, and scarves as they watched Arthur playing in the snow with Leah and Ian. The toddler could barely walk in his thermal suit and kept falling over, crying for his father while his cousin danced around him.

"What are your plans?" Carmondy asked suddenly.

"I plan to finish this and grab another," Eli said with a chuckle.

"What are your plans, Eli?" she persisted, but he didn't look at her. "Do you even know what you want?" For the past week, they'd expertly avoided this topic or any talk of London, Ilsa, or Alec.

"I don't know," he said softly. He looked out at Arthur and the

kids. The man was trying to teach his son how to make and throw a snowball, and Leah was volunteering as the target. But Ian's fingers were cold, and his mittens were wet, and he was having none of it.

"You know Mom and Dad would love to have you here as long as you like."

"But?"

"But none of us think that's what would be best for you—hiding in upstate New York with your dead partner's family." Carmondy was normally blunt, but the whiskey had kicked it up a notch.

"I can't forgive Ilsa for what she did."

"She loves you, Eli."

"She manipulated me, she lied to me, and she made a fool out of me. Simple."

"That's fairly black and white of you," Carmondy said. Eli nodded and sipped his drink. "It sounds to me like she brought someone into your life that you fell for."

He looked at her sharply. "Did he fall for me?"

"You're not going to find out by staying away from him."

"I can't face him," Eli said softly.

They stopped talking for a while. Arthur had surrendered, scooped up a miserable Ian, and was ushering a reluctant Leah toward the house.

"You need help?" Carmondy asked as she tried to get to her feet to help him undress the kids. Arthur looked her over.

"Nah, you better stay seated. I'll handle it. I'll get them stripped, warmed, pajama-ed, and cocoa-ed." Carmondy smiled gratefully at her brother and plopped back down into her seat.

"Eli, don't you think Ilsa feels bad about the way she handled things?"

"Good."

She laughed and finished her cocoa. They sat in silence for quite a while and contemplated a light snow that began to fall. Eli began to

wonder if it was snowing in London. He wondered what Lyle and Tony were up to and what Ilsa might be cooking. He wondered what Alec was doing. Briefly, he wondered what Alec was wearing.

“Did I tell you that we visited you in the hospital?” she asked but didn’t wait for him to answer. “Yep, we took turns flying over.” She looked at him, but he was staring out into the snow. “Me, Mom, and Arthur. Of course we were there for that special service that Ilsa organized. But before that, you were unconscious for about six weeks, ya know.” Eli remained transfixed by the snow. “It’s funny,” she said.

“What is?” he asked.

“When I came to visit you, Ilsa was there reading to you. When Mom came over, Ilsa was there filling you in—you were unconscious, mind you—on the happenings at home. And Arthur told me just the other night that when he came to see you, Ilsa was there working with you and the physical therapist.” Carmony took a deep gulp of her cocoa. “I guess you slept through all that, so you wouldn’t remember,” she said with a sigh. Eli’s eyes were tearing, and he couldn’t seem to staunch the flow. “On one of my trips I got into a long conversation with your young nurse, Crystal—”

“Casey.”

“What? Oh, sorry. Casey was her name. She told me that Ilsa was there every day. Except for the two days she was away for Bennett’s funeral here.”

“Casey has a crush on Ilsa,” Eli said quietly.

“I’m not surprised. I guess they ended up spending a lot of time together.” Carmony struggled to her feet. “Well, I’m too cold to hang out here any longer. I’m heading in.”

“I’m going to sit a while longer, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, but be careful. We stopped you from freezing to death once this week. Don’t make me send Mom out here after you.”

They smiled at each other before she disappeared into the house. He sat there and let everything she had said slowly worm its way into his brain.

Ilsa was there every day because she loves you like a brother.

“I know.”

The snowflakes grew bigger and fell faster as he watched. If he listened carefully, he could almost hear them whisper as they touched the ground. In the darkness beyond the reach of the porch light, he thought he saw movement, movement other than the snow and wind.

You've run away like he does.

“Not now, please.”

You want to run away, disappear?

“Yes.”

What are you waiting for?

He thought about it until more movement in the darkness among the trees caught his eye. He squinted, trying to catch it and bring it into focus. It was closer than before; it was moving toward him.

“I'd miss....” Eli began.

Yes?

“I miss you,” he said finally as Bennett stepped from the darkness and stood before him.

I know you do. His lips didn't move, but his voice was calm and understanding.

He was wearing his long black winter coat; his hands were shoved into the pockets, and the collar closed tightly around his neck. They stared at each other for a long time. He was perfect, completely untouched by hatred. His hair was the same sandy shade of blond as his sister's but wavier. He didn't step directly into the light but stood just beyond where it sliced into the darkness.

You don't have to miss him.

“I could stay here with you—with them,” Eli said.

Bennett shook his head slowly. *They'll always love you, but your future is in London with your family.* He glanced up at the house and smiled as the light and warmth pouring from it washed over him. He looked back into Eli's eyes. *I'll stay here with mine.*

The wind picked up, and a blast of it tore through the yard, lifting

some of the snow into a dancing, swirling cloud of white and redistributing it. Eli shut his eyes against the onslaught, and when he opened them, Bennett was gone. He looked into his empty cup and began to cry. He spent the next hour crying silently as the snow accumulated. When his tears stopped, he went into the house and called British Airways.

CHAPTER 28

ILSA turned off the water and stepped from her shower. Vigorously rubbing a towel over her head, she went into her bedroom to finish dressing for work. She paused, thinking she'd heard the front door, but after hearing nothing further, she continued dressing.

“Bloody hell!”

Now, *that* she heard.

“Hello?” she shouted from her door. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me. Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I nearly tripped over my bag is all.”

“Eli?” she asked, not quite believing it possible.

“Yeah.”

She shrieked and dashed down the stairs toward him wearing only her blue satin undies. She hadn’t had time to secure the matching bra, and she was quite the sight coming at him. He didn’t think he’d ever been so thoroughly embraced by such a beautiful, scantily clad black woman before. He became sure of it as her warm and still slightly damp body pressed against him. She wasn’t letting go and she was crying. Eli returned the embrace and tried to soothe her as she shook in his arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she whimpered.

“It’s okay, Ilsa,” he whispered. “I love you too.” He lightly kissed her cheek and they parted. He looked her up and down. “I tell you, that

was quite the greeting. If I rode that bus, I'd take you right here."

"Oh stop it!" she said with a giggle as she swatted at him before securing her bra. "I'm truly sorry," she said as she looked into his eyes.

"I know, sugar," he said with a slight grin. Ilsa smiled at his use of her vernacular. "You finish getting dressed, and I'll put my stuff away."

"Okay. I'll call off work, and we can talk."

"No. I don't want you doing that," he said quickly.

"But you just got back," she said as she paused on the stairs. "There's no one else here. I don't want you to be alone."

"Where's Alec?" he asked. She hesitated and he sighed. "Where is he, Ilsa?"

"They just left," she began slowly. "It's Friday. He went out with Tony and Lyle. They're going to a late movie then meeting Mirabell at a club." Eli didn't say anything. His eyes took in the dark, quiet rooms surrounding him and then came to rest again on Ilsa. She watched him with concern. "I don't know specifically where they went, but I can call Lyle," she said eagerly and made to come back down the steps. "I'm sure they'd come home if—"

"That's not necessary," he said quickly. "I'm a big boy. It's fine."

"You're sure?" He nodded, and she slowly headed back upstairs, casting a glance or two at him as she went.

He was torn. Part of him wanted to find Alec; he would search the whole of London, if necessary, and bring him home. He would lay claim to him, profess his love, and never let him go. Another part wanted to enter his room and shut the door on those feelings and all the possibilities they carried. He had no idea what he was going to say to Alec. He'd come close to hitting him with his own book at the store; that couldn't have been very attractive.

Eli carried his bag into his room and turned on the light. He stood in the doorway and glanced around before tossing his duffle on the bed and beginning to unpack. He was glad to be home even though it hadn't felt like home for two years.

Ilsa knocked on his door a little while later.

“Come in.”

“I just wanted to let you know there’s lasagna in the fridge and garlic bread on the stove. You know—if you get hungry or something.”

“Thanks.”

They fell silent and she looked at her watch. “I could heat it up for you,” she offered.

“No, thanks, I can do that.”

“I hate to leave you like this.”

“I’m fine, woman,” he shouted in mock exasperation. “Go to work. Stop treating me like a child.”

“Sorry.”

“And stop apologizing.”

She suddenly smiled brightly and joined him on the bed. “I did meet a lovely redhead last week,” she said. “I’m hoping she’ll come to dinner at Peaches again tonight.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Alec has missed you,” she said quietly.

“Let’s not talk about him, Ilsa. I’m working on it.”

“Fair enough,” she said, raising her hands in surrender as she stood and headed for the door. She suddenly stopped and spun around, embracing him again. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

“So am I,” he said softly as he patted her back.

After she’d gone, Eli lay back on the bed and stared at his ceiling. His thoughts moved on to Bennett and how he had looked standing before him in the snow at the Tuckers’s. Intellectually, he knew Bennett hadn’t really been there. He was conjured from too much whiskey or too much heartache. But Eli couldn’t help but wonder. *If I want to see you badly enough, will you appear? Would you come back to me?* He felt his chest tighten again and breathed deeply to hold off any tears.

He sat up suddenly and looked around the room, his eyes coming to rest on his collection of photos. Neatly framed and arranged, they

chronicled their time together: the two of them at fund-raisers, the beach, a friend's wedding, and the awards ceremony where Bennett won that architectural honor.

"I said you'd win that one," he said out loud to no one. He waited, but there was no answering voice. Bennett had been awarded the design contract the week before his death. Because his work load would soon become unreasonable, they'd decided to go out for what would be their last date for a while. "Last date forever," Eli said.

He felt a familiar, empty ache in his chest and quickly got to his feet to finish emptying his duffle but then thought better of it. He'd left the Tuckers in such a rush he hadn't had time to do any laundry, so he shoved all his clothes back in and left his room, dragging the bag down the hallway toward the laundry room. A knock at the door stopped him. Eli turned and saw a shadowy figure moving under the porch light, so he abandoned his laundry and answered the door.

"Oh, Burke," his neighbor said. "Sorry to bother. I saw Ms. Lacoste leave and wasn't sure anyone else was home. I haven't seen you around lately. Good to see you."

"Good to see you, Mr. Brandt. I just got back tonight, actually."

"I see. I see."

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"As is the custom recently, we've received a package in our lot that actually belongs here," he said, producing a tall, slender brown box and handing it to Eli.

"Thank you, sir." Eli took hold of it. "Tony must have ordered a new easel or something," he said as he eyed the box curiously.

"Oh, no, it has your name on it, not Mr. James's."

"Me?" Eli asked, turning the box to examine the label. There it was, his name and his address, but he hadn't ordered anything. "Thank you, sir. You have a good night."

Brandt headed back home, and Eli closed the door. As he carried the box to his room, he stopped at the hall table and dug a pair of scissors out of a drawer.

Eli sat on his bed, carefully cut the box open at the top, and

reached in. He found another box. It was wrapped in dark green gift paper, which he quickly removed. There was no cutting involved to open this box.

He reached in and knew what it was the moment his hand closed around the handle. “Bloody hell!” he shouted as he pulled the cane free and quickly removed the bubble wrap surrounding the shaft. He couldn’t believe it. He stared at it for a few moments before realizing he hadn’t closed his mouth, which he did abruptly.

His fingers slowly traced the elegant contour of the rich, dark brown derby handle. The wood of the shaft was almost black and had an impressive luster. Eli grinned stupidly as he turned the cane in his hands, closely examining the sterling silver band that joined the handle to the shaft. *Who could have...?*

Attached just below the band was a silver, oval-shaped plate with the initials “E.R.B.” engraved on it. He gently ran his thumb over it and then set the cane aside and rifled through the packing debris at his feet. He found a tiny booklet that explained how to properly maintain the cane’s luster and a description saying it was made of Blackthorn and how much weight it could support. Next he found a small envelope with his name typed on the outside. He opened it and removed the card.

“I saw this and had to get it for you,” Eli read aloud. “I hope you like it. —Alec.”

Eli couldn’t help but smile. He kicked the debris out of his way and stood to try out the cane. The handle fit perfectly into the palm of his hand. The height was just right. He crossed the room and opened his closet to stand in front of the mirror hanging on the door. Eli turned to look at himself with the new cane from a few angles before he decided to put it away. *I’m not using you to do the laundry.*

He placed the gift gently next to his headboard and cleaned up the garbage littering his bedroom floor. He was unable to stop smiling during the entire process. He stuffed the care instructions and gift card in his back pocket and then resumed his laundry plans. Once the wash was started, he headed for the kitchen to heat up the lasagna and bread Ilsa had mentioned.

The house was dark and empty. The silence was so oppressive, it felt unnatural and he found himself feeling lonely, missing the voices

of the Tuckers, his housemates, and especially Alec. He hadn't spoken to Alec in a week and struggled to remember the sound of his voice.

He began to wonder what Alec would say to him when they saw each other, or more importantly, what he would say to Alec. He still hadn't thought of anything. At first he thought the gift was a good sign, but then he realized that it had to have been purchased before the incident at the bookstore. How long had it sat at the neighbor's?

He found Tony's laptop set up on the kitchen table with a digital camera plugged into it. He set his dinner down and took a seat. Eli ate in silence for a while before his curiosity got the better of him and he lifted the screen on the computer. It came to life and the screen was consumed by the face of an incredibly good looking young man. He began to scroll through the photos and discovered several more attractive men.

This is definitely Tony's work. Next he came to several of Lyle with looks of exasperation on his face and he smiled. These were followed by various shots of the Last Blast festival at Louan: pictures of the road on the way there, of the soccer pitch, and numerous men who had caught Tony's eye. There were a few pictures of Lyle behind the wheel, the back of Alec's head as they drove to the farm, and of Ilsa cooking in their shelter. The last was from a great distance, showing the entire shelter.

The rest were a beautiful overview of the event itself. Tony must have taken them when he was wandering around the camp. Occasionally, Eli could spot someone from his group in a picture. He saw a couple of Casey, some with Ilsa, and a few of Alec.

In one, Alec was watching him when Eli wasn't aware of it. This made him smile, but he stopped when he found one of Dray's assault on Alec during the soccer match. He moved past that one quickly, but the next one made his heart stutter.

Eli stared at it for a long time, trying to figure out where Tony had been standing when he took it. It was a shot of Casey, himself and Alec sitting at the shelter. They were all smiling. Eli was talking, Casey listening, and Alec had his head thrown back, laughing. It was taken shortly after they'd gotten settled when he was telling them about jumping off the outcrop with Bennett.

He slowly caressed Alec's face with his finger. *You look so happy.* They all looked happy at that moment. "Our Tony, forever the artist," he said out loud. Slowly, a memory began to wriggle to life at the back of his brain. He looked up and into the dining room.

He closed the laptop and got up, leaving his dinner half eaten. He turned on the light in the dining room and crossed to the buffet against the wall. He pulled open the top drawer—Ilsa's junk drawer—and began shoving around the chaos inside. He wasn't sure what he was looking for at first until he came across a DVD inside labeled "Christmas 3." It was a DVD of their third Christmas in the house—the first one without Bennett.

Tony had given Lyle a digital video camera for his birthday years ago and then quickly commandeered it for his own purposes. It became his thing to make a record of significant moments. Eli recalled Tony spending more time documenting the move into the house than actually helping with the work. He was sure there were many shots of an exasperated Lyle on that DVD.

He began to search more frantically through the drawer because he knew one of the more recent uses of the camera had been Bennett's wake. Eli had never watched it and now felt an overwhelming need to do so.

He found a disc marked "Goodbye." He stared at the cover for a few moments, gently running his fingers across it; then he went into the living room and turned on the DVD player. He slipped it into its cradle and pressed play. After a few moments, the television came to life revealing shaky, chaotic camera movement and muffled voices.

"What do I say?" someone asked.

"Just say whatever you want." It was Tony's voice. "Say whatever you feel."

The picture came into focus on a young man with short brown hair. He was wearing a dark suit and looked uncomfortable as he stood there with a small napkin of bite sized treats in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

"You were a damn good friend—"

"Say who you are first... sorry," Tony's disembodied voice

instructed.

“Oh. My name is Chuck Laura. I was your roomy our first year at NYU,” he smiled nervously. “Then we got our own apartment, and all was well until I fell for Rachel and you fell for Burke. I decided to get married, and you moved to London, you lunatic,” Chuck laughed but quickly stopped as he remembered why he was where he was.

He paused and looked around the room at the other people who had come to pay their respects, and then, ashamed, he glanced back at the camera. “I thought you were crazy to follow him, but men in love do crazy things, don’t we?” He lifted his glass to the camera. “All my best, B,” he said as he finished off his wine. He began to tear up, but Tony kept filming. “Y-you can move on to someone else now,” Chuck said and Tony did.

Eli slowly backed up, making his way to the sofa without taking his eyes off the screen. He sat there and watched the entire recording. Tony filmed comments from thirty or so people who gathered after Bennett’s New York funeral and another twenty at the London service.

Eli even caught a glimpse of himself in the background of one shot. He didn’t look like he knew where he was, but Bennett’s mom was hovering nearby. She looked much older than the last time he’d seen her.

He saw Carmondy with her husband. He looked uncomfortable and she looked exasperated. Leah appeared to be about two years old and had fallen asleep in a pew. He spotted Arthur’s very pregnant wife.

“Cheers, Ian,” Eli said to the screen and waved. He listened to everyone say great things about Bennett, about how he had made their lives better just by knowing him. “You did that,” Eli said quietly. There was no response, and that ache in his chest returned as he began to cry quietly. “You made my life better.” Still nothing. He ran his hand through his hair and stared at the screen. “I don’t know what to do,” he said and waited. “Tell me what to do,” he pleaded, but there was only silence.

CHAPTER 29

ALEC sat in the back seat of Lyle's car listening to him argue with Tony. As near as he could tell, the argument had begun two weeks ago and was simply continuing. He wasn't sure what it was about specifically, but it was becoming quite heated.

"Listen, I agreed to give you a lift tonight. Don't test me." Lyle said, tight-lipped.

"I suppose you just wanted it to be you and Alec, leave me home with nothing to do?"

"Nothing to do?" Lyle wasn't watching the road very well, and Alec was feeling unnerved by his inattention.

"Bloody right, nothing! Eli's taken off to the States, and Ilsa's either working extra shifts or laying some bird or bloke; who the hell knows anymore?"

"You've been locked in the basement for twelve days. You have plenty to do."

"I'm done painting for a while," Tony said calmly.

"So you decide to come up for air, and we're supposed to be there waiting for you? Waiting to entertain you?"

A chilly silence enveloped the car just as Alec was considering walking the rest of the way to the club. He had mentioned meeting Mirabell there in passing. Lyle offered him a ride, Tony overheard, and voila, here they were, crammed together in their happy little metal box.

He was meeting Mirabell at Glorious. She had mentioned that some friends would be joining them, which Alec thought smelled suspiciously like a fix up, but he had agreed to go out and have a good time. He would try, anyway.

To him this meant dancing with strangers, having a few drinks, and lots of laughter, but he feared his friend had other goals in mind for him. He missed Eli terribly. They'd come so close to starting something on their date, but then it had all gone to hell. Alec had nearly lost his mind worrying about where Eli was and what he was doing. Thankfully, Ilsa began receiving the first of many calls from the Tuckers. They provided her with periodic updates on Eli, which she passed on to Alec.

He thought again about where the family had found Eli, and it was almost too much to bear. Alec's deception had driven Eli to the graveside of his partner, and it broke Alec's heart. Ilsa was quick to point out that Eli was upset with her also and that Alec shouldn't take it all on.

They pulled into the parking lot of the club, but neither Tony nor Lyle made a move to open the doors. Alec waited impatiently.

"Are you getting out?" Lyle asked Tony.

His passenger angrily opened his door and pulled his seat up to allow Alec to exit the car. Once he was out, however, Tony quickly got back in and locked his door. Alec stood there, about to ask why, but decided against it when he heard them going at it again. He turned and walked to the club on his own.

Glorious was wall-to-wall people. The pulsing lights and pounding music made it difficult for Alec to orient himself quickly. He walked a bit deeper into the club, allowing the crowd to close around him as he searched for Mirabell. He kept his gaze low because she was probably the tiniest, yet shiniest person in the room.

He turned slowly and spotted a few intimate booths against the back wall. He saw several people sitting there in the shadows but couldn't make out if any of them were Mirabell. Having no luck and enduring a couple of mysterious, inquisitive pinches to his bottom, he hurried over to the bar. It was the most brightly lit section of the club and made Alec feel like he was under a spotlight and preparing to

perform. If she was here, she'd spot him.

"What?" the bartender snapped.

"Beer," Alec said as he took a seat. The bartender passed him a bottle just as Mirabell appeared at his elbow.

"You made it! I knew you wouldn't let me down!"

"I promised you, didn't I?"

She looked around. "I thought you warned me you were bringing friends?"

"They're in the car arguing. Believe me you don't want them in here."

"Well, come with me," she said, taking his hand and a last gulp of her champagne. "I want you to meet some people."

She led him through the crowd, which miraculously parted before her as the pedestrians on Compton had weeks before. They retreated to one of the more secluded booths. The light above it cast a flattering shade of natural light over the people gathered there. "This is Reginald; he's a banker," Mirabell began. "This is Ray; he is not."

Alec looked at Mirabell in stunned silence; they were twins, identical in appearance with wavy blond hair and large hazel eyes. Reginald was wearing a suit, apparently having stopped by after work. He'd loosened his tie and was nursing a bourbon. Ray wore jeans and a dark gray hoodie, no shirt.

Alec shook their hands and introduced himself as Mirabell scooted in next to them and then dragged him down next to her.

"What do you do, Alec?" Reginald asked. He didn't have to shout above the music because his voice had depth and timber that cut right through to Alec's ear.

"I'm a professor of psychology," he shouted back.

"Ooh! And a Yank, if I'm not mistaken," Ray piped up, clearly delighted as he sipped on a tall, colorful drink. Alec smiled, but felt a bit uncomfortable with the eager energy this twin was generating. Ray's voice was identical to his brother's, but carried an overt sexual charge that made Alec feel like he was in immediate danger of being

groped.

“Have you been in London long?” Reginald asked. He was calmer, cooler, and more aloof. He looked Alec up and down languidly through half open eyes.

“Nearly three and a half months. I’ve applied for a position at Birkbeck.”

“That would be lovely,” Ray said, his foot finding Alec’s under the table. He shifted position slightly to escape the man’s reach.

His brother appeared to be aware of what was going on. “You’ll have to forgive him,” he said, his eyes boring into Alec’s. “He’s had quite a bit to drink already.” Alec smiled nervously. “The psychology department there is top notch, as I understand it,” Reginald continued. “Although, I believe their specialty is early childhood development?”

“Yes, that’s true,” Alec said, perking up.

Mirabell spotted someone on the dance floor she simply had to talk to and promptly disappeared off their booth seat as if a trapdoor had opened beneath her. Alec was strangely relieved to see her crawl out from under the table on her hands and knees.

“I would have let you out, Mira,” he called after her.

“No worries,” she shouted. “Ray, come with me, there’s someone I want you to meet.” She reached over the table and took his hand. He glanced at Alec and appeared reluctant to leave but relented.

“Yeah, you’re right, love. A banker and a professor deserve each other.” He maintained his grip on her as his brother rose to let him escape. “He’s older than me by six minutes,” he informed Alec as he and Mirabell were swallowed by a mass of gyrating bodies. Alec was left alone with Reginald and quickly began to squirm under his scrutiny. He wasn’t sure if this silent appraisal was any more comfortable than his brother’s overeager puppy approach.

“Can I get you gentlemen something?” A waitress had arrived at their table, startling Alec.

“Another of these for me,” Reginald said, handing her his empty glass. “Alec, what would you like?”

“I’ll have another beer,” he said.

It was relaxing talking with Reginald, or “Reggie,” which he preferred. He seemed interested in Alec’s work and questioned him at length about it. Alec had to apologize because he couldn’t be as enthusiastic about the subject of banking.

“Don’t worry about it, Alec,” Reggie said. “Neither am I.” They both laughed out loud. “I’m just damn good at it.”

They drank some more, talked some more, even danced a little, but when the music slowed and they moved closer, Alec became hesitant. However, Reggie did not. He pulled him close and tight, and they began to sway to the music. Alec felt a little dizzy from the beers, but knew exactly where he was and what he was doing. And it felt great.

Reggie felt powerful in his hands, firm and muscular. Alec nuzzled at his neck, breathing him in, getting lost in his scent as they swayed together. Reggie tightened his grip on him, and suddenly they were kissing. Their busy hands clutched desperately at the other’s waist, or pressed into the other’s back, or tangled in the other’s hair. Then, just as suddenly, they weren’t kissing.

“Who’s Eli?” Reggie asked, panting.

“W-what?”

“Eli,” Reggie repeated, eyeing Alec with one raised eyebrow. “You just said his name.” Alec went red under his gaze and stepped quickly back from him.

“I’m s-sorry, Reggie.”

Reggie only smiled sadly. “You’re in love with someone, aren’t you?” he asked. Alec looked around at the crowd nervously. “Just my luck,” he laughed, stepping back farther from Alec to look him up and down.

“I am sorry. It was Mira’s idea that I come out tonight,” Alec said quickly. “I was glad to meet you. I mean, you’re a great guy.”

“Just not him,” Reggie said. He took Alec’s arm and led him over to the bar to escape the enthusiastic crowd. “No worries, mate. I’ll survive. It’s not like I haven’t been there, you know?” Alec nodded. “What now?” Reggie asked. “Going to give him a call?”

“No. He’s angry with me.”

“What did you do?” he asked, grinning at him.

“I wasn’t honest with him. He doesn’t trust me or my feelings for him.”

“Then you tell him different.”

“Can’t. He took off for the States. He’s been gone a bit more than a week.” Alec looked around the club again, but saw no evidence that Tony or Lyle had ever come in. “I don’t know where my friends are, but if all else fails, I’ll just take a taxi home. Tell Mira bye for me, please.”

“Let me take you,” Reggie offered suddenly, grabbing his arm. Alec started to protest. “No, I’d like to. Really.”

They stared at each other for a few moments as Alec considered his offer. He finally agreed, and they made their way toward the door together. Several men greatly impeded their progress with random come-ons as they navigated their way through the club. Upon reaching safety, they laughed and shook their heads as they looked back at the gauntlet they’d just run. Stepping out onto the street, the air bit into Alec’s skin, and he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“My car’s in the lot across the street,” Reggie said, as they started off.

“That’s where I left my friends.”

As they neared the lot, Alec saw an extremely large bald man in baggy jeans and a hoodie circling Lyle’s car. He was stunned to see the man produce a baseball bat and bust in the passenger side window. It took several swings, but he got it done.

“Get out, you fuckin’ poofters!” he shouted. The thug reached in through the window and, taking hold of Tony, yanked him halfway through it. Alec took off running toward them.

“No, Alec!” Reggie shouted, before turning and running back into the club. Alec reached the car quickly and leapt onto the thug’s back. Startled, the attacker let go of the artist, and Tony tumbled to the ground.

“Lay off, you needle dick jackass!”

He tried to get a grip on the man's neck with his hands, but it was too thick, so he wrapped his arm around it instead. It didn't help. Alec didn't feel he was impeding his breathing in the least. The thug reached up and tore him from his back, throwing him to the ground. Alec's head struck the side of the car, and he saw stars.

Through his haze and some blood, he saw the man advancing on him, but in the distance, he saw four, maybe five similarly dressed men approaching. Alec's head throbbed and his stomach lurched as he lay there hoping he was simply seeing double.

"Check this out, mates. We found us three faggots," the thug said to his comrades. "Guess we'll have to share." They hooted with delight as they ran toward them. Suddenly, the first man grunted loudly and dropped to the ground beside Alec, unmoving.

"Bring it on, you fucking idiots!" It was Lyle.

Alec saw him standing there like some tall lanky super hero, feet planted squarely and evenly spaced, fists lifted in preparation. The other thugs paused briefly in their approach, appearing a bit uncertain; then they noticed Tony was a bit wobbly and Alec was down for the count, so they kept coming. Lyle jumped forward and nailed the closest thug with kicks to the chest and head. Alec's head felt like it had split open. He thought he might be hallucinating; did Lyle actually know karate?

Tony opened the door he'd just been dragged through and reached behind his seat to the floor. He withdrew a tire iron and turned to face the approaching threat, taking his place beside Lyle. Alec tried to get up, but his head swam. Their would-be attackers paused again, but even people that stupid can count—four against two. They continued their approach, but then the doors of Glorious flew open.

Much of the crowd emptied out into the street, led by Reggie and the bartender who carried a baseball bat of his own. They ran toward the parking lot, howling with rage.

"I wouldn't linger, if I were you," Lyle said as he watched the color drain from their attackers' faces. "Most of those folks have been waiting a long time to beat someone like you unconscious." Tony quickly removed his cell phone from his pocket, flipped it open, and snapped pictures of the thugs' terrified faces before they fled the scene.

He shared a stupid grin with Lyle.

“I’ll just email these to my friend at the police station,” he said. Lyle raised an eyebrow, and Tony blushed. “We made out once or twice last year.”

The crowd surrounded and showered them with cheers and laughter. Lyle received slaps on the back that probably did him physical injury. Several of the larger clientele surrounded the still-unconscious brute to hold him for the police. Mirabell was the first to notice Alec dry heaving next to the car and ran to his side.

CHAPTER 30

ILSA'S phone was vibrating its way into her unconscious as it rattled and bounced along her bedside table. She unwrapped herself from the curvy and ample young redhead she'd brought home and answered it.

"Heya," she croaked. She listened for a moment or two and then sat upright in bed and threw the covers off. "Yeah, I'm listening." Actually, she was stumbling around her room, trying to find her other sneaker and pull it on. "I'm on my way!" She slapped her phone shut as her companion began to come awake slowly.

"Something wrong?" the woman asked sleepily.

Ilsa looked at her and smiled. Her wavy red hair was mussed and hanging in her face, half shielding her full lips. *My God, that bed has never looked better to me.* They'd met when the woman had become disillusioned with her dinner companions and began chatting up the chef last week. She'd returned to Peaches late tonight for a drink and another chat with Ilsa, who had been hypnotized by her extensive vocabulary and powerful-looking thighs. It turned out she trained horses. Ilsa continued to get dressed as the words "hypnotized by her thighs" repeated over and over in her head.

"Listen, sweetie, I have to go check on some friends at the hospital."

"I hope it's not too serious."

"I don't think it is," Ilsa said. "They were jumped by some skinheads, and I need to look after them, bring them home." She paused

while buttoning her jeans. “Will you be here when I get back? I shouldn’t be too long.”

The redhead smiled sleepily. “I’ll be here,” she said.

Ilsa headed for her door then stopped. “Oh, one of my housemates is asleep on the main floor, but don’t mention where I’ve gone if you happen to run into each other, okay?” The woman nodded and promptly fell back to sleep.

Ilsa left the room and crept down the hall and the stairs. She grabbed her keys from the hook by the front door and left the house. It was bitterly cold outside, and she tightened her jacket collar around her neck as she climbed into her car.

SEVERAL hours later, Eli was returning to bed after a trip to the bathroom when he heard the front door open. He glanced at the numbers on his clock. It read 5:13. Apparently, everyone had had a great night out. He couldn’t help but wonder if Alec had returned with Lyle and Tony or, possibly, a new friend. Maybe Alec was spending the night at someone else’s house. Eli paused by his door to listen.

He heard lots of whispering—including Ilsa’s voice, which confused him because she had already taken a woman to bed. He thought she had been in for the night. Maybe she’d taken her guest home. *Then who are you coming in with?* He cracked his door a little and saw three pairs of legs unsteadily climbing the stairs. He stepped out into the hall as he realized Tony and Lyle were helping someone up the stairs.

“What’s going on?” he demanded of Ilsa, who was right behind them. She looked startled to see him, and he saw guilt and fear on her face.

“Alec’s had a little too much to drink, sweetie,” she said; her voice was shaking and her words were rushed. “Tony and Lyle are putting him to bed.”

Eli knew she was lying to him. “Is he all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s fine. Go back to bed, sugar.” She rushed up the

stairs behind them.

Sugar did not go back to bed.

TONY and Lyle deposited Alec on his bed as Ilsa got the light. Tony stood and looked around the room, marveling at the improvements Alec had made. He took special note of the framed photos on the walls.

“How you feeling, hun?” Tony asked.

“M-my head hurts, but otherwise, I think I’m okay,” Alec said, surprised by Tony’s sudden attentiveness. “I’m not so dizzy anymore.”

“Well, that’s good,” he said as he untied and removed Alec’s sneakers. “Better leave these socks on. It’s a bit nippy in here,” he said, playfully squeezing Alec’s toes.

“Tony, did you hit your head?” he asked.

Tony ignored the question, but Lyle laughed out loud. Ilsa was studying Tony as if she expected to find the mark where the alien had entered his skull. She stood by the bed and watched him help Alec undress. She saw Alec wince and glanced at the bandage covering the stitches at his temple.

“Does it smart terribly?” she asked.

“Not as much as it did,” Alec said.

“There was a lot of blood,” Lyle interjected.

“Wounds to the head and face bleed more,” Tony informed them. “They’re rarely as bad as they look.”

“Learn that from some doctor you made out with?” Lyle asked.

“Now, now, don’t start up again, sweetheart,” Tony warned. Alec and Ilsa looked at each other and then back at Tony.

“Sweetheart?” they asked simultaneously. Tony stood and began folding Alec’s clothes without a word of explanation. After he was done, he walked over to Lyle, put his arms around him, and kissed him.

“I admit I need to practice the pet names a bit, but why do you

think we never made it into the club?" he asked.

Lyle faced them and leaned back against Tony, covering his arms with his.

"We've reached an agreement," he said.

"Which is?" Ilsa asked with a huge smile on her face.

"I promise not to move out, and he promises to admit he's in love with me."

Alec laughed and instantly regretted it as pain shot through his skull. His face said it all, and Ilsa stepped forward to make him climb under the covers. He sat with his back against the headboard as she drew the blankets up over him.

"I'd better go make some coffee," she said. "The doctor said you shouldn't go to sleep for at least eight hours, and we'll need to help keep you awake."

"It's not that serious, Ilsa. You all don't have to do that," Alec said. "I didn't lose consciousness or anything."

"Yes, but you were nauseated."

"I'll make the coffee, Ilsa," Lyle volunteered.

"I'll help you," Tony said.

"Wait, before you go," Alec said. "I have to know where you learned to fight like that, Lyle."

Tony and Lyle began to laugh.

"We all took self-defense classes," Tony said. "It was a community effort after... you know. Even Eli joined in once he was up and walking again."

Alec smiled, remembering Eli taking down that teenager and that drunk at the bookstore.

"But Tony didn't stick with it like the rest of us," Lyle said.

"True, but I know how to use a tire iron," Tony added. They all chuckled, Alec painfully. "Give us a little time, and we'll be back with the coffee."

“Guys, try not to disturb Eli,” she said quickly, avoiding Alec’s shocked eyes. “We don’t want him to know about this.”

Tony and Lyle headed downstairs as quietly as possible. On the first landing, they paused as Lyle shoved Tony against the wall and kissed him deeply. He’d never admit it, but the artist’s knees got weak. They continued down the stairs and tip-toed into the kitchen.

Eli heard the floor creak as they passed his door. He opened it a tiny bit to make sure they’d reached the kitchen, but before he could step into the hall, he heard feet lightly and rapidly descending the stairs. He stepped back into his room and watched through a crack in the door.

A beautiful young woman with red hair paused at the bottom of the stairs and nervously glanced down the hall toward the kitchen. She took out her mobile to make a call. Eli stepped out and approached her.

“Excuse me,” he began quietly, but she nearly came out of her skin.

“What—” she whirled on him with wide, startled eyes, but made very little noise as he held his finger to his lips.

“I’m sorry to scare you, but you’re Ilsa’s friend, yes?”

The woman nodded.

“You’re her housemate?”

He nodded.

“Do you happen to know what’s going on up there?” he asked. The woman glanced back up the stairs and then at him. She began to say something but stopped herself. “Please,” Eli said.

“Ilsa left earlier to go to the hospital.”

“Who’s hurt?” he asked as he felt his stomach drop.

“I don’t know. She only told me that her friends were attacked and she needed to—hey, are you all right?” she asked, noticing Eli’s expression. He didn’t seem to be breathing. She looked up the stairs, into the kitchen, and back at the stairs. Perhaps she should get help for him. “Maybe you’d better sit down,” she said.

“No,” Eli croaked. “I’m... I’m okay. I just need to.... Thank you for t-telling me.” He was finding it difficult to catch his breath, and he

wouldn't look at her.

"You're welcome," she said uncertainly as she walked to the door. "I've got to call a cab. Goodbye. Good luck." And she was gone.

Eli looked up at the stairs again. He felt dizzy and as if he might vomit, but he needed to get to the attic. Lyle and Tony were in the kitchen. He could hear them preparing something and talking softly. They were trying not to wake him. They were trying to keep something from him. That left Ilsa and Alec.

It was Alec. Ilsa had been in bed, gotten the call... another call like that... like the last one... and she'd rushed out. *It's Alec*. The fear that gripped him was nearly paralyzing. He didn't know if he could make it up there. He hadn't tried since coming home from the hospital, but he knew that if he wanted to find out what was going on, he'd have to work for it. *It's Alec*.

Eli put his left hand on the railing, then his left foot on the first step, and—feeling a little uncertain—pushed off the floor with his cane and brought his right foot to rest on the first step. *Just two thousand more to go*.

"HE'S back?" Alec asked Ilsa once they were alone.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"H-how is he?"

"He seems fine. We haven't really had a chance to talk." She got up and went to Alec's closet for another blanket. "I had to go to work just as he arrived." Ilsa opened the blanket and fanned it out perfectly over the bed.

"Did he mention me?"

Ilsa smiled. "Isn't that a bit junior high of you?"

Alec grinned. "Perhaps, but it's a legitimate question."

Ilsa sat on the bed and sighed.

"I told him you had missed him, and he said he didn't want to talk

about you,” she said. Alec lowered his eyes and stared at his hands. “He said he was working it out.”

ELI looked up at the next collection of stairs and began climbing again. His leg was starting to complain and very loudly as images of Bennett’s bloody face flashed in front of him. He fought to remain focused on what he was doing. *That’s all I need... to fall down these stairs.* He tried to laugh at how absurd that would be, but instead he heard their laughter, those skinheads from so long ago. He remembered how delighted they’d sounded as they removed Bennett from this world. Eli continued climbing.

“WERE you scared?” Ilsa asked as she checked the bandage on Alec’s head.

“Of course I was, but he was going after Tony—dragged him right through the window. What else could I do?” Ilsa nodded, but she didn’t have an answer for him. They sat quietly for a few moments. “You don’t want to mention this to Eli?” Alec asked and she shook her head emphatically. “He’s a lot stronger than you know, Ilsa.”

“Look, I know you think we’re too protective of him, but you don’t know what he was like when he lost Bennett. You got a glimpse of it at the art show.”

“But he’ll never get beyond that if everyone avoids acknowledging that someone you all loved was taken from you.” He wanted so much for her to understand. “You’ll never heal.”

“You told me people don’t heal,” she countered quickly.

“True, but they do learn to live the life they’re left with and make the most of it. If they’re allowed to, that is.”

The door opened.

“It’s about time, guys,” Ilsa said, turning to discover Eli standing in the doorway. He was red-faced and panting, but he’d made it. “Good

Lord! H-how did you get up here?" she asked as she rushed to his side and helped him to a chair.

"Y-your f-friend l-left... t-took a c-cab," Eli managed. He looked at Alec; his eyes searched his face. His stomach turned over slightly when he saw the large bandage at Alec's temple.

"Where are Lyle and Tony?" Ilsa asked.

"K-kitchen," Eli said.

Ilsa stepped back and looked Eli over in amazement. She glanced at Alec, who looked like he'd just been hit in the head again.

"I'll go down and see if I can hurry them up," she said, quickly leaving the room before either of them could protest. Once they were alone, they stared at each other for a long time while Eli caught his breath.

"It's good to see you," they said at the same time.

CHAPTER 31

WORKING together, they managed to keep Alec wide awake for the recommended eight hours, plus four for good measure. Tony and Lyle eagerly recounted their brush with greatness, much to Ilsa's dismay. She kept watching Eli closely for any sign of discomfort. She saw none but did catch him smiling several times as they told their story.

She kept them all fed by cooking large, ambitious meals throughout the day. Alec's room was quite crowded for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There were games of chess, cards, and Trivial Pursuit. There were episodes of Tony's favorite soap opera, *Neighbours*; he excitedly filled Alec in on all the characters and their respective plights.

Eli wandered around the room, marveling at the new paint job and Alec's placement of the photographs he'd purchased. While examining some of his possessions, Eli came across a photo album and made Alec put names to the faces. There was one picture each of his former lovers.

"I had to keep a record," Alec explained with a smile.

Ilsa went out to get a few movies and surprised everyone by returning with Casey in tow. Eli was delighted to see them together, but Ilsa maintained she had picked her up because she was a nurse, "You know—for Alec." She had given Casey a complete rundown of events on the ride over.

They all crowded into Alec's room and watched the films on his small television, which was something of a strain given the lovely,

large flat screen downstairs. He and Eli shared a smile when Tony put in *All About Eve*; they laughed themselves sick during *Dr. Strangelove*; but Eli looked a bit panicked when Ilsa produced *Uptown Saturday Night*.

“What’s the deal with that?” he asked.

Ilsa turned to look at him as she slipped the movie into the DVD player. “Casey insisted we get it. She said Alec needed to see it.”

Everyone in the room turned questioning eyes on Alec. “I don’t know why—ask Casey,” he said.

“It’s a favorite of Eli’s mom,” Casey said brightly as she returned from the bathroom.

“Casey,” Eli said; there was a warning in his voice.

“One of her favorite actors is in it,” she said, teasingly. She sat in the floor—very close to Ilsa—and smiled defiantly at Eli and then winked at Alec. His eyes lit up with understanding and he focused all his attention on the movie.

IT WAS a perfect day, if they overlooked the hate crime aspect of it. The only thing that would have made it better in Alec’s mind was if Eli had come within touching distance, but he didn’t. He remained stubbornly in his chair, the one he’d claimed upon his dramatic arrival in the attic.

Before the movie ended, Alec drifted off to sleep, so the television was switched off and all but one member of his new family quietly left the room. He woke with a start a few hours later to find the room dark. He quickly located the bedside lamp and was startled to find Eli watching him from the chair when the light came on.

“You’re still here?” he asked.

“Of course,” Eli said quietly. “Nightmare?” Alec nodded; his face was shiny with sweat. “I thought so. You made noises in your sleep.” He got up, came over to the bed, and sat down near him. “That’s to be expected. Do you want to talk about it?”

“There wasn’t much to it. I didn’t get to Tony in time,” Alec said. “I couldn’t stop it from happening.” Eli nodded. He understood. “Do you still have them?” Alec asked.

“They’ve lessened over the years, but they haven’t gone away.”

“Have you slept at all?”

“Off and on.” He reached up to examine the bandage on Alec’s temple. “We should probably put a fresh one on that at some point.” Alec reached up to touch his hand, but Eli withdrew it.

“I’m sorry,” he said hurriedly. “I’m so sorry about what I did. I should have been—”

“Shhhh,” Eli said and he fell silent.

“Did all this upset you?” Alec asked.

“I was worried about you and, I have to admit, a little rattled.”

“But you understand things like this... they happen.”

“Always?”

“Well, until people smarten up, yes,” Alec said. Eli didn’t say anything. He reached out and rested his hand against Alec’s chest. He seemed to be counting the heartbeats. They were strong, solid, and steady. Alec covered Eli’s hand with his own, holding it in place. It felt strange, this contact unrelated to their conversation, but he didn’t want it to stop. “I think I’ve figured out your middle name.”

“Really?” Eli asked with a sly grin. “Careful, you only have two guesses left.”

“I know,” Alec said, smiling.

“What conclusion have you reached?”

“It’s Rosalind.”

Eli laughed out loud. “Rosalind?”

“Rosalind Cash. She was in the movie Casey brought,” Alec insisted.

“Oh yeah, I think that came awfully close to cheating, my friend.”

“No, it was just a hint. We agreed to that before you and I struck

our deal.”

Eli eyed him suspiciously for a moment. “Elias Rosalind Burke. Okay, I can see that,” he conceded with a chuckle. “It’s got a nice ring to it, but sorry, it’s not Rosalind.” They shared a few silent moments. “Did you want one of us to call your sister?”

“No, I’ll tell her the next time we speak,” Alec said. “Thanks, though.”

“Mirabell called to check on you,” Eli said.

“Oh yeah?”

“She mentioned something about a bloke named Reggie?” Color rose to Alec’s cheeks and Eli smiled, removing his hand from Alec’s chest. “He wanted to know if you were all right.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a guy I danced with.”

“Danced with?”

“Uh. And kissed.” Alec shrugged. “We made out a little bit.”

“Did you?” Eli smiled. “Didn’t think about bringing him home, did you?”

“Actually, there was a good chance of that—until I said your name.”

Eli’s eyes widened, and the blueness of them nearly stopped Alec’s heart. “That must have been awkward,” he chuckled. “Just make sure he doesn’t show up here.”

“Why?” Alec asked.

Eli answered him in sign language, doing it very slowly so that he could follow. Alec thought about it, his brow furrowing as he worked it out.

“Or... or you’ll kick his ass?”

Eli smiled brightly and nodded. “I’m impressed. You’re coming along nicely.”

“You should become a teacher, Eli,” Alec said.

“I’ll give it some thought,” he whispered, and then, without

another word, Eli stood, leaned his cane against the wall, and tugged his T-shirt off over his head. Alec saw the scars on his chest from the beating he'd suffered years ago and silently counted them.

The dark brown hair on his head was sticking up at odd angles now, and Alec saw a dusting of chest hair that grew thicker and darker as it traveled down and around his navel and then on into regions below the band of his sweat pants.

He took in Eli's slight but harmonious build. He was beautifully formed, his skin pulled tightly over lean muscle. When he removed his pants, Alec's eyes were immediately drawn to his leg, the one he had been expert at keeping hidden. Eli paused and then stepped directly into the light thrown by the bedside lamp to give Alec a better look.

An ugly, twisted, dark scar ran down the outside of the leg. It stood out in contrast to his otherwise pale skin. Alec reached out to touch it but hesitated. He looked up at Eli for approval and then drew his finger along its ridges and curves.

Eli shivered visibly. "I'm a bit ticklish," he said with a chuckle. "By the way, thank you for the walking stick. It's beautiful."

"You're welcome, Roscoe."

"I swear I'll walk out of—"

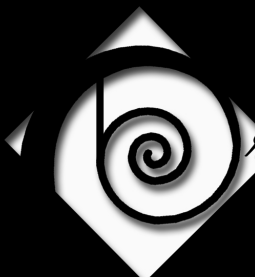
"No, no, don't go," Alec said quickly, grabbing Eli's arm. "I'm sorry. I promise I'll never mention it again." He was fighting not to laugh because it made his head ache all the more. Eli grinned and carefully climbed into bed next to him, prompting Alec to speak up.

"I hate to say this, but I have a headache."


Eli laughed out loud. "I know that, love," he said as he slid beneath the covers. "It's chilly in here. I'm just getting in to keep you warm. We have time for more another day."

Alec kissed Eli and then snuggled down beside him, wrapping him in his arms. He sighed and quickly switched off the light before Eli could see the tears in his eyes.

DAWN KIMBERLY JOHNSON is a graduate of Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, where she grew up and still lives. For eight years she worked as a copy editor at a daily newspaper before heading west to Oregon in search of adventure. After eight years there, five of them good, she returned home where she is trying to regain her health and still hoping for the best.



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