

Loose Id



KATRINA STRAUSS
BLUE RUIN 4:
NEED YOU TONIGHT

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Katrina Strauss



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eISBN 978-1-60737-478-7

Editor: Jana J. Hanson

Cover Artist: P. L. Nunn

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

www.loose-id.com

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About this Title

Genre: BDSM LGBT Suspense Ménage

Series: Blue Ruin; **Previous Title:** *Chains of Love*

Blue's summer is heating up in more ways than one. When he befriends Dusty Sterling, he sees the opportunity to give his master Derek their first true threesome. But first, Blue must meet a requirement issued by Derek.

Derek is content with Blue as his exclusive lover, but when offered the chance to bring the beautiful Dusty into their bedroom, Derek can't resist. He agrees to Blue's idea under one condition—it's Blue who must seduce Dusty.

Blind since birth, Dusty is proud, independent, and knows what—and who—he wants. In need of temporary shelter, he accepts an offer to stay with Derek and Blue. The fact that he finds them both attractive doesn't hurt, but Dusty must let his hosts in on a secret—his unique and sometimes frightening way of “seeing.”

When Dusty's nightmares reflect a pair of real-life murders, Blue uses his connections with the police to bring Dusty in on the case. The friends grow closer both in and out of the bedroom, but their bond will truly be tested by the evil that lurks in plain sight.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, BDSM theme and content, violence.*

Chapter One

“Mr. McGowan, could you please identify your assailant from the night in question?”

Blue swallowed and cleared his throat. His Adam's apple bobbed above the tie that Derek had knotted around the starched shirt collar. Leaning toward the microphone, he tucked back the blue and white strands that had strayed from his slicked-back hair. His fingers skimmed the smooth curve of ear, devoid of the usual piercings.

He looked at the prosecuting attorney who patiently stood by. Shifting his gaze, Blue met the cold, hard stare of a killer. A chill coursed down Blue's spine, but he maintained eye contact.

“Yes, ma'am,” Blue answered and pointed. “The second guy from the left on the first row behind you.”

The prosecutor cast an obligatory nod over her shoulder toward the sullen, dark-haired young man who sat dressed in suit and tie, his wrists handcuffed where they lay propped on the table. “Can you please name the gentleman you've just identified?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am. Zack Smith. I mean, Zackary Smith.”

“At the time you were assaulted, did Mr. Smith say anything to you regarding a recent series of murders in the Oakwood district?”

Blue wet his lips and took a breath. He'd never forget that night, so long as he lived. “Zack—Mr. Smith—said he was going to kill me, like he had the others. He said they were just practice and that...that he was going to take his time with me. I asked him if he was talking about the Maple Street Murders. He said yes, that he had killed all of them.”

Blue watched Zack's sneer falter and those beady eyes waver. *He knows*, Blue thought. *He knows I've been coerced into playing the game, just like he's been.*

Except this time, Blue's father wasn't one of the players. As much as the man had manipulated and abused his authority over the years, the one place District Attorney James McGowan always played it straight was in the courtroom.

Until today. The DA had briefed Blue that morning before the trial. “*Shane, you tell the judge and the jury the same thing the defense team will tell them—that Smith openly confessed to all eight murders.*”

And so Blue had just committed perjury at his father's behest even as it turned his stomach. His nausea rising, he watched the prosecutor scribble something on her notepad. His eyes followed her to the jury stand, his ears ringing with the crisp echo of heels clicking across polished marble. He flicked a casual glance over the faces of the twelve men and women selected to determine Zack's fate. In light of the guilty but insane plea, it was the jury's task to decide whether the murderer had been in his right mind or not during a killing spree that targeted young male prostitutes, the victims bearing an eerie resemblance to Blue with their pale, slender limbs and hair colored various shades of the rainbow.

Except Zack hadn't been behind all eight deaths.

Blue remembered the conversation that had *really* transpired that night between him and his former high school classmate.

“*You killed those boys,*” Blue had accused, the tip of a knife pressed against his pounding jugular. “*You tried to set up Cameron.*”

Zack's face had beamed with a sickeningly proud smile. “*Most of them. Seems I have a copycat.*”

The prosecutor interrupted Blue's not-so-sentimental trip down memory lane. “At the time that Mr. Smith confessed to you, would you say that he appeared to be in his right mind?”

“Objection.” The attorney seated next to Zack spoke flatly, not even bothering to look up from the folder he studied. “Mr. McGowan is not a licensed psychiatrist.”

“Sustained,” the judge said, her tone equally weary. With lunchtime near, many of the courtroom observers seemed to be growing bored and listless. One man checked his watch; a woman yawned.

A rush of anger surged through Blue. People had died at Zack's hands; maybe not all eight of the prostitutes he'd confessed to, but he had killed nonetheless, his victims beaten or strangled and in fear the final minutes of their lives. All because Zack could, all because Zack wanted to. He'd also killed an undercover officer and left another for dead, but their names had been left out

of the trial proceedings. Blue knew from his talks with their superior officer, Detective Thomas, that the local police force was none too happy with that part of the plea bargain.

Blue also knew Zack didn't deserve an easy stay in some mental hospital with an eventual chance of release. That fucker belonged in prison for life.

Blue had been ordered to lie, but he could tell the truth on one count. "Zack was very focused," he blurted.

"Objection, Your Honor," the defense attorney said, casting an annoyed look at Blue before returning to his notes.

"He spoke very clearly," Blue continued, his voice rising.

"Objection!" The defense attorney bolted to standing, his attention caught.

From the corner of his eye, Blue spied the judge raising her gavel. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he swore she was waiting, allowing him to finish. He followed her cue, making the most of his limited time.

"He knew exactly what he was doing! He knocked out Cameron and tied him up! He was waiting until Cameron woke up before he killed me!"

"*Objection!*" The defense attorney was livid now. Zack simply sat and stared.

Blue directed every ounce of loathing and anger into the glare he threw back at Zack. "He said he was going to make Cameron watch!"

The gavel came down with a resounding crack. "Sustained," the judge said. She looked over at Blue, her mouth grim but with a warm spark in her eyes. "Pull another stunt like that, young man, and I'm holding you in contempt and striking your testimony."

"Sorry, ma'am," Blue mumbled. He wasn't sorry. Not one damned bit.

The judge glanced over her bifocals at the jury. "Please disregard Mr. McGowan's last statements." She trained her eyes back on Blue, and there was now no mistaking the conspiratorial glint in her eye. "I'll ask the court reporter to strike Mr. McGowan's comments from the record, starting with 'He was very focused' and ending with 'He was going to make Cameron watch.'"

The judge enunciated carefully as she quoted Blue's words, allowing his testimony to sink in even as she advised the jury to ignore it. Her eyes fell on the defense attorney, who in turn glared at Blue, his eyes simmering with fury.

Swallowing, Blue glanced at the prosecutor and saw her studying her notes a little too intently. He looked to the back row of the courtroom. The DA sat with arms crossed, face stolid, but one corner of his lip curled up with what Blue knew to be a smug smirk.

The smugness wouldn't last long. Twenty minutes later, it was the prosecutor crying "*Objection!*" The judge banged her gavel furiously and shouted over the din of the courtroom.

"May I remind you that it is Mr. Smith and not the witness who is on trial here today? Neither Mr. McGowan's sex life, nor the fact that he is the District Attorney's son, bears relevance to this case!"

Fuming, Blue was escorted from the courtroom. He supposed his father might have preferred a less public outing of his son's sexual orientation, much less one that involved the defense's questions regarding Blue's involvement in a "seedy gay love triangle" in order to discredit his trustworthiness. He passed the closed doors where he knew Cameron and Derek each waited to offer their version of events from the night that Zack had fully intended to gut Blue alive while Cameron was forced to bear witness. Thank God Cameron had freed himself from the rope and stepped in right before Zack had plunged the knife. Thank God Derek had arrived shortly afterward and prevented Cameron from then killing Zack in a rage of blind fury.

Blue took his seat in the private waiting room. Once a witness had taken the stand, they were normally allowed to sit in on subsequent testimony, but due to the shit storm that had just been unleashed, the judge had quickly excluded Blue from further proceedings and ordered him to take lunch on premises. That was fine by Blue, as he didn't care to breathe the same air as Zack Smith any longer than necessary.

He waited another three hours, drinking a complimentary bottle of water, nibbling on the fresh sandwich he'd been brought by the escort, although he wasn't really hungry. Attempting to get comfortable, he curled up in the chair and drew up his legs to reveal the mismatched socks scrunched above his dress shoes, his own private show of independence beneath the pleated black trousers purchased just for the trial. He flipped through outdated magazines, the only source of entertainment provided lest current local media influence testimony in such a high-

profile case. He caught himself worrying his tongue against his teeth a few times, listening for the familiar *click* before remembering he'd taken the tongue stud out.

At long last, the door opened. Blue looked up from the article he hadn't really been reading to see his father flanked by a pair of suited men.

The DA gripped Blue's arm and hustled him down the hall. "Stay with me," the older man said under his breath. "Don't say one word to the press."

As they entered the main lobby of the courthouse, Blue was greeted with a blinding volley of camera flash. A chorus of voices echoed around him. One of the suits pressed against him, shielding him from the sudden onslaught of bodies. As Blue was pushed and pulled through the small crowd, he recalled the time he'd jumped into the mosh pit at a concert.

"Shane, can you tell us about your relationship with Zackary Smith and Cameron Carter prior to the Maple Street Murders?"

"Shane, how long have you been involved with your partner, Derek Graves?"

"District Attorney McGowan, as a proponent of conservative values, what are your feelings toward your son's homosexual lifestyle?"

The DA's grip tightened painfully into Blue's arm. "My son suffered a harrowing experience at the hands of a sick and twisted deviant. He stood up to that same killer in court today, and I'm damned proud of him."

"District Attorney McGowan, any truth to the rumors you've been tapped as next State Attorney should Governor Hammond be re-elected this November?"

"That's news to me. Guess I'd better vote for Hammond and find out!" The DA chuckled, the reporters laughing with him.

At least one reporter failed to see the humor. Unsmiling, she elbowed between Blue and his bodyguard. She shoved a microphone in the DA's face, nearly smacking Blue's head in the process. "District Attorney McGowan, does the name Martina Petrova mean anything to you?"

The DA froze, and for the first time that Blue could recall, that staid, cool look that constantly fixed his father's features wavered and threatened to crack. Blue wondered who the hell Martina Petrova was, or why the mere mention of her name provoked such a reaction. Maybe someone his father had bribed somewhere along the way, or maybe she'd bribed him?

Whatever the case, Blue wondered what she had to do with the Maple Street Murders—not that the other questions flung at him or his father had much to do with the trial.

“Never heard the name,” the DA replied smoothly. “Now I ask you to leave my son in peace and respect his privacy. He’s been through enough.”

With that, the DA ushered Blue past the patron elevator to the service one. The doors hissed opened, and Blue was shoved inside.

“Derek!” Blue fell into his master’s waiting arms. The doors shut, and the elevator began its descent.

“I heard you did good in there, Blue.”

Blue melted against the taller man, the trauma of the day’s events finally sinking in. “Oh God, it was horrible seeing Zack again. It brought everything back. And then the defense asked me these really personal questions that had jack shit to do with the murders.”

“I know. They grilled me on the same crap. Your father pissed off the wrong fish in the food chain. They’ve used this trial to get to you so they can ruin his name.”

Blue clung to Derek in earnest. “It’s crazy! The whole damned city knows I’m gay now, but I lied about other stuff, Derek. I swore to tell the truth, and then I sat there and lied through my fucking teeth! Zack told me he didn’t kill all those boys.”

Boys, he’d just called them, yet they hadn’t been much younger than Blue.

Derek touched a fingertip against Blue’s lips. “Keep that information to yourself until the time is right.”

“You believe me?” Blue exhaled a sigh of relief. With it, the tears he’d been holding back streamed down his face.

Derek thumbed Blue’s tears away. “I’ve never doubted your story for a moment, Blue. But if the second killer is still alive and well and on the loose, they’re watching and waiting to pick up where they left off. Do you want to go on public record with your knowledge of this person’s existence?”

Blue considered Derek’s thoughts. “You’re right; I don’t. But I hate knowing that person is out there. I feel like I’m somehow responsible for whatever they do next.”

“You're only responsible for yourself, Blue.” The elevator chimed and lurched to a halt, the lowest basement level illuminated on the floor grid. Derek gripped Blue by the arm, much as the DA had, and tugged Blue along. “Move fast.”

They hurried through the parking garage. At the roar of a revving engine, Derek stopped in his tracks. A vintage baby blue Mustang with white racing stripes and tinted windows pulled around a row of cars. The unseen driver braked directly beside Derek and Blue.

The passenger door opened. Blue stood there, stunned, comprehending what he saw: Jodi, clad in a shirt and tie identical to his, her face obscured by oversized sunglasses, her hair tucked up in a newsboy cap. Nothing too unusual, except the loose strands of hair hanging to one side of her face were colored—*blue*? Even odder was her conspicuous lack of a chest.

Jodi grinned. She clutched a duplicate cap and shades in her hands. “Put these on,” she said, holding the shades open toward his face.

“What the fuck?” Blue asked.

“Decoy,” Jodi said. “Think I pull off boy drag okay? I even bound my tits down.”

“I don't know,” Blue said, allowing her to pull the cap down over his scalp. “Excuse me if I'm finding all this kind of surreal.”

“Get in the car.” Jodi nodded back over her shoulder at the Mustang. “I get to ride in the Porsche with your man.” She brushed past Derek and beamed up at him with a flirtatious smile, her step hurried all the while.

Derek took Blue by the shoulder. A strange look passed behind those gorgeous green eyes. Leaning down, he murmured in Blue's ear. “Remember who you belong to.”

With that, Blue found himself plopped into the Mustang's passenger seat and the door slammed shut. He looked at the driver, also wearing shirt, tie, and oversized shades, face shadowed by a navy blue baseball cap stitched above the brim in white with “FBI.” The driver was no federal agent, however. Blue's heart leaped.

“Cam!”

Cameron grinned, chin dimpling, his smile as smooth and dazzling as ever. “Hey, Shane.”

“Hey.”

Cameron's smile faded. "That sucked in court today. I don't ever want to see that son of a bitch Zack again. I'm skipping the sentencing. Figure I'll just catch it on TV."

"Yeah, me too. Cam, what the hell are we doing?"

"Buckle in. Me and Derek and your old man planned this shit months ago."

Cameron nodded toward the windshield. The Porsche wheeled into view, windows rolled down, its driver and disguised passenger in plain sight.

"And none of you bothered to tell me?" Clicking his seat belt in place, Blue was touched and annoyed at once. These damned men in his life, protecting him, determining what was best for him...

Cameron shifted into gear and hit the gas. The car's engine gave a roar, sending powerful vibrations through Blue's body where he fell back against the seat.

With one hand on the wheel and the other on the stick shift, Cameron pulled in behind Derek. Together, the drivers navigated the maze of the ramps, tires screeching at each turn as they ascended to ground level at entirely too high a speed.

Mildly turned on by each man's driving skills and the sexy cars to match them, Blue eased his grip on the door handle and surrendered to the roller coaster ride. "Nice wheels," he said. Realization sank in. "Wait, is this the car you were working on back at the Lube Your Tube?"

Cameron laughed at Blue's irreverent jab at the local rainbow district's Lube N Tube, but then everyone called the garage that, including the gay patrons who took their cars to be serviced there. "Yep, same one. Boss had it towed over to Bethel Ridge so I could finish it up."

Awed, Blue took in the polished leather seats, the shiny chrome dash. The interior sparkled with showroom clean. "Did you do all this?"

"I did the body work. I had some help with the interior. Okay, showtime." Cameron tapped the brakes, the car lurching a few times as it slowed but kept moving.

Breath huffing with each lurch, Blue looked ahead to see the Porsche crest the small rise of the garage exit. The street came into view, the curb lined with white news vans. A small crowd of reporters rushed toward the Porsche. Derek kept driving, slow enough not to kill anyone, but fast enough that a few reporters leaped out of harm's way. The second the front tires hit asphalt, Derek veered sharply to the right and shot down the street. The reporters ran down the sidewalk. Two news vans followed in hot pursuit.

Sunlight illuminated the Mustang's interior as Cameron hit street level. Steering left, he drove at a more leisurely pace so as not to draw attention like Derek had.

Blue turned and peered out the rear window. Another news van pulled away from the curb and flew in the direction the Porsche had gone, while the Mustang went ignored.

"Derek's headed for the freeway," Blue observed.

"Yep," Cameron said. "He's taking everyone on a wild-goose chase until he loses them. I bet Jodi's having a blast."

"Lucky her." Turning, Blue sat back and watched the downtown collage of steel, concrete, and mirrored glass play through the passenger window. "Where are we going?"

"Your dad's people set me up in this posh hotel." Cameron gave Blue a pointed glance. "You're spending the night. Just you and me."

"Oh," Blue said, his master's parting words suddenly making sense. He found himself flummoxed again. It might have been nice if he'd been consulted on Derek's and Cameron's big plan, yet he also found it a pleasant surprise. *Alone with Cameron, just the two of them.*

Panicked and excited at once, Blue reminded himself to breathe. Exhaling slowly, he looked back out the window. Compared to the test that lay before him, Blue got the feeling that his experience on the witness stand would prove the easier part of his day.

Chapter Two

Cameron drove around the block twice. Satisfied no reporters had tracked him to the assumed name he'd been registered under, he pulled through the hotel's circular drive. A somber valet in waistcoat and tie greeted Cameron at the curb.

The valet racked the pipes once before driving the Mustang into the parking garage. Blue laughed and shook his head. He followed Cameron through the rotating glass doors into the lobby.

Blue peered over his shades and let out a low whistle at the lush furnishings. "Our tax dollars at work."

Cameron gave a dry laugh. "Yeah. Too bad I had to testify against an old friend-turned-killer to set foot in digs like this."

As the elevator rose, Blue and Cameron stood side-by-side without touching or talking. Blue shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and watched the floor numbers tick off, one by one, the stress from the trial giving way to the growing sexual tension which permeated the air.

Blue entered the room first, his pulse pounding in his ears. He left his cap and sunglasses on the small stand by the door.

"This is nice," he said, pointedly looking at everything in the expensive suite but the bed. He heard the door shut, then felt a hand grip his shoulder.

Blue turned to face his friend. Gone were the shades and hat, revealing gorgeous amber eyes framed by wispy chestnut hair. Suddenly enveloped in the other man's arms, Blue tilted his face to meet the kiss, slid his hands up Cameron's back to return the embrace. He parted his lips, his breath whisked away as Cameron's tongue plunged into his mouth. He met the kiss, the slip and slide of his own tongue making for a foreign sensation without his piercing in place.

Cameron fumbled with Blue's tie. Blue helped free the knot before making easy work of the one around Cameron's neck, but then he'd had practice in that area thanks to Derek. At thoughts of his master, Blue hesitated. He recalled Derek's parting words.

"Remember who you belong to..."

He'd earned his master's trust, and with trust came privilege. Blue knew he'd better not fuck it up.

His misgivings gave way to arousal at the hand palming his crotch. He toed off his shoes and went for Cameron's shirt buttons.

They tumbled onto the bed, shirts open, belts unbuckled, half in, half out of their clothes. Blue slid his palms over Cameron's shoulders, thrilling to the firm bunch of biceps as he slipped the shirt sleeves down to the elbow. Their bared chests came into contact, their hearts pounding together. As Cameron's shirt slipped completely free, Blue trailed his hands down the other man's broad back and tugged down the trousers, his hands slowing where he traced the contours of well-sculpted buttocks and the hard bunch of thighs.

Cameron seemed less interested in exploration, practically ripping Blue's shirt off before tossing it to the floor. He bunched his fist and tugged Blue's trousers to the knees with one swift jerk.

Blue gasped at the friction of the hard cock pressed against his. "Slow down."

Cameron growled in Blue's ear. "I've waited months for this, Shane."

"All the more reason to take our time."

Cameron kicked his pants off. "Get me off first. Then we can take our time."

"Get on your back, then. I'll suck you off."

With a huff, Cameron stretched out on his back. Blue took off his own pants with a little more care than his impatient friend. He tossed the pants aside, then straddled the other man's hips. Fingers splayed across Cameron's ribs, Blue peered down through the disheveled strands of hair that fell in his eyes.

Cameron met his gaze, eyes fired with lust. He reached up and worried the small Slavic cross that hung from Blue's neck between his fingers. "What's this?"

Blue leaned in and brushed his lips across Cameron's. "I wore it for good luck today."

“Where'd you get it?” Cameron gasped and arched his head back as Blue's tongue trailed the column of his throat.

“Long story. You'd never believe me.” Drifting lower, Blue traced the firm muscles of Cameron's pecs with long, languorous sweeps of his tongue, tasting the salt of the other man's flesh before homing in on the nipple with short, teasing flicks.

Cameron groaned and threaded his fingers through Blue's hair. “Thought you were gonna suck me off.”

“I'm getting to that.” Blue rounded his lips and blew on Cameron's nipple, the rosy-beige flesh pebbling as the surrounding flesh dimpled with gooseflesh.

Cameron emitted another groan. “You're torturing me. You know that, don't you?”

“Good. You deserve it.” Blue nipped his teeth into the peaked flesh and gave a light tug. Cameron's next groan drew out longer and deeper. Blue felt his head being pushed and guided lower.

“Put that tongue to use elsewhere,” Cameron urged.

The submissive side of Blue responded to Cameron's brute tone even as his sense of challenge was provoked. He worked his way down, though he was determined to take his sweet time doing it. He trailed his tongue between the valleys of six-pack abs, wondering at the finely honed ridges. He swirled around Cameron's navel, eliciting another gasp before following the dark hair of treasure line.

Blue took in the scent of musk where he traced the fringe of pubes. He spoke between kisses. “All those times you gave me shit, bloodying my nose and sending me to the nurse's office, when we could have just locked ourselves in the boys' room and fucked each other senseless. Asshole.”

“Shane.” Cameron grunted at the tongue flicking the crease of his leg. “Don't bring that up now...”

“Shut up.” Blue traced his lips down Cameron's inner thigh, teasing and tormenting with his breath, seeking a certain pressure point. “You're going to shut up and lie there and take it while I do whatever I want to you. Understand?”

At the flinch of muscle and sharp intake of breath, Blue knew he'd hit the spot. He latched on and sucked hard. Cameron gasped, his entire body tensed, his grip tightening against Blue's scalp. A drop of fluid beaded at the tip of his prick.

Cameron spoke through gritted teeth. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Blue released his mouth with a pop. He studied the bruise forming on Cameron's thigh. "Looks like I'm giving you a hickey." He dove back in and sucked harder, integrating his teeth into the mix. Cameron reacted as though he'd been jolted with an electric shock.

Of course, Blue's knowledge of this particular pressure point, and the intense sensations derived from stimulating it, could be attributed to Derek's tutelage. *Stop it*, Blue chided himself. *Stop thinking of him when you're with Cameron.*

But it was impossible to leave Derek out of the equation, when the man had taught Blue everything he knew about sex. Frustrated, Blue bit down into the hard meat of Cameron's thigh.

"Shit!" Cameron jerked Blue's head back. With one hand firmly in Blue's hair, Cameron gripped the base of his own cock. The crown flared an angry shade of red, another drop of fluid leaking from the slit.

Blue found his face guided forward. He flicked his tongue, catching a taste of precum, then lowered his head and crushed his mouth against Cameron's balls instead. He suckled one ball, then the other, filling his mouth with each fleshy orb as he inhaled another heady rush of Cameron's scent.

"Damn it, Shane. I'm about to bust a nut."

"So? I thought you wanted to get off."

"I do—down your throat."

"Say please." Blue gripped the root of Cameron's shaft with a hard squeeze while pressing the heel of his palm into the sensitive divide between balls and anus.

"Please...God..." Cameron grunted and bucked, but there was no threat of climax so long as Blue maintained his grip.

"Back when we were in school together, did you think about me when you jacked off?"

"All the time. Every fucking time."

Blue squeezed tighter. He traced the bare tip of his tongue up the swollen, pulsing vein that ran from the root of the shaft to the tip of the glans. "Did you dream about me? Did you wake up wet with your sheets a sticky mess and have to hide the evidence from your mom?"

"Yes...Shane, please..."

"Say it like you mean it. Beg for it."

"Please, Shane. Please suck me off. Wrap those pretty lips around me and suck me off."

Blue trailed his tongue up Cameron's shaft again, swirling the cockhead before teasing back down. As much as he wanted to eat Cameron's load, then lie back while the act was reciprocated, he wasn't quite done toying with the other man. Blue knew he was playing with fire, but he could handle the heat. He released Cameron's prick and sat back on his heels.

"No."

Cameron eased up on his elbows and stared back at Blue, amber eyes narrowing to slits. "What?"

Blue gave a smirk. "No."

In a flash, Blue found himself crushed to the mattress beneath Cameron's weight. Their limbs slipped and slid together, Blue half-heartedly attempting to wrestle away. The more he struggled against Cameron, the more Blue found himself turned on.

Cameron rose up, jerking Blue with him into a kneeling position. "Against the wall," he said, brusque, commanding, and then Blue's lower torso was pushed against the headboard, his cheek pressed flush against the floral-papered wall, hard enough to jolt him, not enough to bruise him. Cameron's wide, calloused hands fanned over his, held them in place with Blue's arms stretched, and then the length of Cameron's spit-slicked cock slid up and down the crevice of Blue's ass.

Cameron whispered hoarsely in Blue's ear, the raw desire behind his words sending tremors of pleasure through Blue's limbs.

"I could fuck you right here and now."

Blue gasped, his cock twitching against the hard oak of the headboard. Had he pushed Cameron too far? "We...we can't."

Cameron ground harder. "And what if we did? Would you ask me to stop? Or would you cry out my name and beg for more?"

Understanding what Cameron needed, Blue took the reins of control. "Yeah," he answered. "I'd ride you all night." He pivoted his hips and ground back, matching Cameron's movements, keeping his tailbone centered at the root of his forceful partner's cock.

Cameron transferred his grip to Blue's hips and leaned back on his haunches. With room to move, Blue grasped the headboard for support as he worked his lower torso. They picked up the pace, Cameron humping between the cleft of Blue's buttocks, Blue thrusting back as he delighted in the feel of Cameron's cock there minus the benefit of penetration.

Cameron's grip tightened, his thighs flexing tight against Blue's ass, and then he let out a long, low groan. Blue's back and shoulders went hot and slick with each burst of cum.

Cameron's tongue swiped up Blue's back, licking the drops away. "Perv," Blue muttered, even as he shivered from the tongue darting up his spine. "Eating your own cum."

"I'd rather eat yours." Cameron breathed in Blue's ear. "Turn around."

Blue did as told, his cock the one that now throbbed and ached for release. Still on his knees, he stretched his arms across the headboard. Cameron dropped down on all fours and caught Blue's prick in his mouth.

He sucked hard and fast, matching Blue's need. Reaching climax all too soon, and yet exactly as the moment dictated, Blue threw his head back against the wall with a resounding *smack*. He gripped the headboard and bit into his lip to stifle his cries lest he disturb the next room's occupants. He tasted blood, his mind reeling, his load pumping into Cameron's mouth.

Cameron emitted a muffled groan of approval, sucking and swallowing relentlessly until Blue rode out the last wave of pleasure. His seed spent, Blue slipped down the mattress and collapsed onto his back. Cameron's body slid up his, and their mouths met in a kiss. Blue sucked Cameron's tongue into his mouth, tasting the salt of his own cum mixed with the coppery hint of blood. He could imagine how intense their lovemaking would prove if they actually fucked. Blue knew he could take it, every brutal moment of it, with Cameron's back clawed and bleeding in turn.

A sly voice taunted at the back of Blue's thoughts. *Derek will never know.*

But the fact that Derek would never know was exactly why Blue refused to succumb to temptation and betray his master's trust.

He contented himself with resting in Cameron's arms, stroking the other man's hair, the feathery layers slipping through his fingers. "Your hair's gotten longer," he mumbled in approval.

Cameron's breath puffed against Blue's throat. "I've been too busy to get it trimmed."

"You should grow it out."

"Like Derek's?"

There was no mistaking the resentment in Cameron's voice. "That's not what I meant," Blue said.

Cameron propped his head up on one hand. He tickled his fingertips down Blue's chest and abdomen, pausing to toy with the silver hoop that adorned Blue's navel, then drifted back up again. Blue stayed the caresses as they neared a different piercing.

Cameron laced his fingers through Blue's and cast a questioning glance. "I've never asked: how come I'm not allowed to touch your right nipple?"

Blue answered honestly. "Derek pierced it."

"Really? That's crazy."

"What's crazy? That you can't touch it? Or that he pierced it?"

"Both." Cameron pulled his hand free and drifted toward Blue's shoulder. "You changed your tattoo. You've got three roses now."

"Yeah, Derek took me in for a cover-up."

"Of course he did." Cameron flopped back on the bed, hands to his head. "His mark's all over you, Shane, and not just physically. He might as well be here with us."

Blue tensed. "He's my boyfriend, Cam. I live with him. He's the one who agreed to let me stay here tonight, while neither of you fuckheads bothered to ask my opinion on the matter. What did you expect?"

Cameron gave a barely concealed sigh and rose from the bed, leaving Blue's body cold. He strode across the room, firm ass bunching and flexing with each step. He stopped and parted the

curtains to the glass balcony door. The late afternoon light cast his handsome face and chiseled torso in a warm glow. *God, that body.*

"I'm not trying to start an argument, Shane. I've come to terms with the fact that you'll never be mine." Cameron looked back toward the bed. "I just want one night with you, that's all, before you go back home to him."

Blue sat up. "You invoked Derek's name first, not me."

"Neither of us has to say his name for me to know he's on your mind. But you're right. What did I expect?" Cameron's chest heaved with another quiet sigh. He shook his head. "Guess I want too much, huh, like I always have?"

Blue gave a wry smile. "You are a bit on the demanding side."

Cameron smirked and looked back out the window. "I had it all planned out. I was going to order room service, try every damned thing on the menu since the state's covering it. Figured we'd keep our strength up so we could take turns jerking and sucking each other off until we couldn't walk straight. Maybe slip into the garden tub afterward and relax."

Blue drew his knees up to his chin. "So why can't we do that?"

Cameron looked back at Blue. "Because it's not right, Shane. As much as I lo—" He quickly directed his attention back toward the window. "As much as I want you, I can't do this. This open relationship thing may work for you and Derek, but it doesn't fly for me. I want someone I can call my own, someone I can come home to every night at the end of the day, like you should be doing with Derek right now."

Blue felt his throat go tight. He checked the clock on the nightstand. He wondered what Derek was doing. Cameron was right—Derek might as well have been there in the room with them.

Blue recalled the comfort of melting in Derek's embrace in the courthouse elevator. He couldn't imagine turning to Cameron in that way. Deep inside, Blue knew the mechanic deserved more than an occasional hotel rendezvous; he needed someone who was free to be part of his life, a partner who needed him equally in turn.

Blue could never be that person. Vision blurring, he stood and scanned the floor for his clothes. He found his trousers and went to put them on. "I should go home. I'll call a cab."

Cameron strode across the room and stopped Blue with a grip of the arm. He cupped his strong, rough hands around Blue's shoulders.

"When I wrote you that apology last year, I told you I wanted to be friends."

"You did. And then a few months later, you spit that offer of friendship right back in my face. You said it hurt too much to be friends."

"I know, and I'm sorry. It was wrong of me."

"Okay." Blue knew it wasn't easy for someone as stubborn as Cameron to apologize, and he appreciated the gesture even if it had come a little too late.

"I can accept the fact now that I can't be with you, but I still want you in my life, Shane. I promise I can handle friendship with you now. I'm not saying it will be easy, but it's better than never seeing you or hearing from you again."

"You promise?" Blue asked. He grazed his knuckles tenderly across Cameron's cheekbone.

Cameron took Blue's wrist and planted a kiss there. "I promise."

Blue cocked an eyebrow at the less-than-platonic gesture. He reluctantly pulled his hand away. "I'd better call that cab now."

A surreptitious look passed behind Cameron's eyes. "I'll drive you."

"It's too much trouble." Blue went to the nightstand and picked up the phone to dial the lobby.

Cameron snatched the receiver from Blue's hand. "Damn it, Shane."

Blue whipped his head around and glared up at Cameron. "Give it back, asshole."

Cameron paused, the phone still held from Blue's reach. His chest broadened with a noticeably deep breath. He exhaled, then spoke with a level tone. "I have to take you home. Trust me. It's part of the plan."

"Fine. Whatever." *Great.* More surprises. As annoyed as he was curious, Blue slipped into his shirt and started buttoning it. "This better be good."

"I promise it'll be worth your while." Cameron smiled, his face dimpling with his charming, easeful grin, and Blue found he couldn't stay mad. He socked Cameron lightly in the arm.

“Worth my while? There you go using fancy words again. Better watch it, or you'll ruin that dumb-jock reputation of yours.”

“Hey, I've been listening to audiobooks every night before I turn in. I done learnt me some new vo-cab-ya-lary and stuff.” Cameron stiffened his spine, his expression one of exaggerated affront as he drew his words into a redneck drawl.

Blue laughed. “You goof. You're still naked, you know.”

Cameron looked down at himself with mock surprise. “Really? Thanks for telling me. Wouldn't want to embarrass myself out there in the lobby.”

Cameron bent over to rummage through the travel bag on the floor, offering another tempting view of his ass. He slipped into jeans and a T-shirt. The mechanic looked more at ease in the casual duds, not to mention his ass was better suited to tight denim while the black T-shirt stretched enticingly across his chest. Even in agreeing to a strictly platonic relationship, Blue knew he would never be immune to the sensuous sight of Cameron's sleek, sculpted form.

“Audiobooks, huh?” Blue asked, trying to divert his attention before he got turned on again.

Cameron sat on the bed beside Blue and busied himself tying his sneakers. “Back in high school, I was allowed to check out books on tape from the library since I'm dyslexic. But I was ashamed to let anyone know I was considered 'special needs,' so I never took advantage of the program. Now that I'm living in the 'boonies,' as you've called them, and don't have anything else to do, I'm learning I missed out on some great reads.”

“That's good.” Blue paused from tying his own shoes. “It's kind of ironic. It sounds like moving to some hick-ass town actually broadened your horizons.”

“I guess I just needed a change.” Cameron rose from the bed. He extended one hand and helped Blue to standing. Their bodies met.

Their lips touched briefly, enough to send a shiver of desire through Blue's limbs. “I guess that was a friendly kiss?”

“Hey, what are friends for?” Cameron nudged his forehead against Blue's. “Jodi told me you almost kissed her once.”

“Jodi has a big mouth.”

“How would you know? She said you chickened out before she could slip you the tongue. It might have been fun.”

“She's a girl. And I'm gay.”

“So? I've kissed girls before. I'd just rather kiss guys.” Cameron's mouth hovered near Blue's. “To be more specific, I'd rather kiss you.”

“That would be downright 'friendly' of you.” With his last ounce of willpower, Blue pulled away from Cameron and started for the door before things got any “friendlier” and they ended up back in bed.

It was time to go home to his master.

Chapter Three

The boy opened one eye. Music and chatter wafted through the thick velvet curtains that separated his bed from the rest of the loft.

Clutching his teddy bear, Derek curled up under the patchwork quilt that Granny Hannah had mailed to New York a few weeks before. The quilt smelled like her house, a comforting mix of sandalwood incense, chocolate chip cookies, and the spices Granny Hannah used in her cooking. Sandy had told Derek that her mother's real name was Hyun Jae, but the elder woman went by Hannah because it was easier for Westerners to pronounce.

Derek hoped Granny Hannah would send more money to pay for another bus ride to her big brick house with the wide grass yard, like she had that past summer, but Sandy didn't visit her family often. She said it was boring “back in the 'burbs,” and Papa Jack had “too many rules.” She told Derek he didn't have to call her father “Sir” or her mother “Ma'am,” but Derek did anyway. If he didn't, his grandparents pretended not to hear him. They never scolded him for it, either; they simply looked at each other and ignored their grandson until he addressed them properly. Once he did, Papa Jack always smiled and ruffled Derek's hair with another threat to “take this boy to the barber.” Granny Hannah laughed and hugged Derek and said she liked his hair just fine, then gave him whatever he wanted.

Derek liked his grandparents, and he liked rules. Rules made sense. Rules meant his belly was never empty. Granny Hannah served three meals a day, whether it was fresh-grilled hamburgers or yummy *gunmandu* dumplings, followed by peach cobbler topped with ice cream or *ho-ddok* filled with cinnamon and honey for dessert. When he'd come down with allergies after a drive out to Papa Jack's old farm in the country, Granny Hannah had boiled a pot of *sam-gae tang*, adding noodles to make it look and taste more like American chicken soup. The soup was spicier than the kind from a can, but Derek liked spice. He was only four, but he could eat foods that sent some grown-ups running for the ice water.

Yes, Derek liked spice, and he liked rules. Rules meant it was quiet at night when he went to bed, when all he could hear through the window were crickets chirping their lullaby, though he fell asleep as easily to the familiar sound of East Village traffic. The traffic didn't bother him; it was his parents' friends who made too much noise, but there weren't many rules in Sandy's and Austin's house.

"The only rule here is 'to be,'" Sandy liked to say, particularly during her parties, like the one going on now.

Derek squeezed his eyes shut, trying really hard to go back to sleep, but the party was growing louder, and he was thirsty. Teddy bear in hand, he slipped out from under the quilt. He padded across the cold stone floor in his bare feet and peered through the curtains. Sandy's favorite T. Rex album blared from the stereo. Austin had taken pictures of the singer, Marc Bolan, before Derek was born. The singer had died later in a car accident in a country called England. Austin had wanted to name Derek after the singer, but Sandy said it would be bad luck. Derek knew this because Sandy had told him the story countless times. Sandy liked to tell stories, and Derek liked to listen.

Holding his bear to his chest, the little boy in pajamas wove his way through the crowd. Some people danced, others simply stood and talked, all of them with a drink or cigarette in hand. A familiar tall woman with long blonde hair looked down at Derek. She smiled, her white teeth framed by lips painted red to match her shiny dress.

"What are you doing up, sweetie?" she asked, her words stretched in a long drawl. She turned to her companion, a skinny man with shaggy hair and big lips, and handed him her drink. "Here, Mick, take this." She reached down and swept Derek up in her arms. Balancing the boy on one hip, she peered back over her shoulder. "And don't drink it!"

Derek had met the woman before and knew he could trust her. He laid his head against her bared shoulder and sniffed. Her hair smelled good. Derek liked things that smelled good.

The stately blonde maneuvered with ease and confidence in her tall shoes through the sea of guests. The boy on her hip drew a few curious stares.

"What a gorgeous child! Almost makes me want to have one."

"Hey, beautiful parents, beautiful kid."

"Isn't Sandy part Chinese? Or maybe Japanese..."

“No, I'm pretty sure she's Thai.”

As they crossed the loft, Derek turned his head to see his parents perched on the leopard-spotted sofa. Austin slicked back his long, red hair and took a drag from a cigarette, the kind he rolled himself with the funny smelling grass. He leaned toward Sandy, who sat on her knees with her shoes kicked off, dressed in her shiny black *cheongsam*, her pale hair braided and coiled into two buns. Her hair was actually dark, almost black, but she used three bottles of something really smelly called “peroxide” to keep it white.

Austin opened his mouth as though he meant to kiss her and exhaled a steady stream of smoke. Sandy closed her eyes and parted her lips, as if to return the kiss, and breathed in deep, taking the smoke into her mouth. She breathed out, the smoke curling in tendrils between her and Austin, and then they did kiss, their lips locked in a slow, sweet show of affection. Derek knew they weren't mad at each other anymore, at least not until the rent came due again and Sandy had to scrape together the money from all the friends that she said owed her favors.

The blonde woman stopped at the sofa. She cleared her throat. “Look who I found.”

Sandy broke away from Austin, her black-lined eyes glazed over, a dreamy smile spreading across her face. “Hey,” she said, rising clumsily from the sofa. “What are you doing awake?”

She reached up and took Derek into her arms. He slid from the taller woman's hip to that of his mother. He wrinkled his nose at the scent of Sandy's breath. He liked the smell of store-bought cigarettes better.

Derek spoke in his mother's ear. “I want a glass of milk.”

Sandy carried him to the kitchen. “We're out of milk. Want some orange juice?” She opened the refrigerator, filled with bottles that Derek knew he couldn't drink from. “Shit,” Sandy cursed. “We used all the OJ for screwdrivers. Let's get some water.”

Derek sat on the counter and sipped his water from a plastic cup. Austin swaggered in, took a bottle of clear liquid from the refrigerator, then came to stand by the counter. He slipped an arm around Sandy's waist and smiled down at his son. His breath smelled of the funny grass and vodka. Austin liked vodka. He drank it every day, even when there wasn't a party.

“The noise bothering you?” Austin asked. Derek nodded and continued drinking his water.

Austin looked down at Sandy. "It's time to kick these fuckers out." He leaned in and murmured something in her ear, finishing his sentence with what sounded like "a little party of our own." They were always saying silly things like that to each other when they didn't think Derek could hear.

Sandy giggled. "Give me twenty minutes. I'll have this place cleared out like rats from the Titanic."

As Sandy carried Derek from the kitchen, they passed the nice blonde lady.

"Tell Aunt Jerry good night," Sandy said.

"Good night," Derek said.

"No," Sandy corrected him. "The other way. Our way."

"*Anyong-hi jumuseyo*," Derek said in Korean. Not Chinese, Japanese, Thai, or the other things people stupidly thought. Granny Hannah had been born in South Korea.

The nice lady laughed. She blew Derek a kiss and waved good-bye with a flutter of her fingers.

Austin took Derek from Sandy and headed toward the curtained space that passed for a bedroom. Derek peered over his father's shoulder. He watched his mother slide on her black shoes and purple coat before slipping out the door. She was probably going down the street to the payphone to call the police. She said the most memorable parties always ended with the cops banging down the door.

In spite of the noise, Derek's eyes began to droop. In the corner, he saw two men dancing, their pale, slender limbs entwined, their lips but a hairbreadth apart. One of the men had silver hair. The other's hair was dark. And they were both beautiful, so beautiful. The man with the darker hair pulled away. His eyes met Derek's, and he smiled.

"Blue," Derek muttered. *The man's hair was blue. Derek liked the color blue...*

Derek jerked straight, Blue's name lingering on his lips. He sat disoriented a moment. He was sitting on the balcony, the laptop opened on the patio table.

He couldn't believe he'd dozed off right there in the chair. His usual nocturnal schedule had been disrupted after waking early for the trial, his day spent on only a few hours' sleep, but he hadn't felt *that* tired.

Blinking, Derek ran his hands through his hair, the remnants of the dream clinging to his consciousness. He wasn't sure how close he'd ever been to "Aunt Jerry," though he vaguely recalled meeting the famous Ms. Hall at least once. Aside from that particular element, the dream had been a fairly accurate flashback, up until the point where Blue had appeared in the arms of a beautiful boy with silver hair. It had seemed so real, Derek could almost smell the pot smoke.

Derek sniffed. That *was* pot smoke. One of his neighbors must be indulging on a nearby balcony. Idiots.

Derek's gaze focused on the laptop, the browser window still open to the e-mail he'd been mulling over when he'd apparently drifted off to sleep. Austin was due to stop through town later that month with a three-hour layover and wanted to do lunch.

Lunch.

Derek hadn't seen his father in several years, and the man wanted to meet for lunch. Shaking his head, he sat with his fingertips hovering over the keyboard. So many things he could say, accusations to make, questions to ask.

Sure, Derek typed in reply. *Call me when you get into town.* He provided his cell phone number and hit send. As he did, the pot-infused breeze wafted through the balcony space, carrying with it the strains of his neighbor's stereo. Derek couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard the sounds of T. Rex.

His childhood come back to haunt him, Derek propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his hand. Closing his eyes, he recounted the last few moments of his dream. Who was that silver-haired boy with Blue? Derek swore he'd seen such a person in the waking world, but the memory of when and where eluded him.

Chalking it up to his mind playing tricks, he wondered how Blue was doing. Between the trial, Blue's four-day weeks at cosmetology school, and Derek's increased workload due to a shortened deadline, they hadn't spent much time together recently. Sending his lover off with Cameron earlier hadn't been easy, yet Derek had done so out of love and with the assurance that his brat would come home. He also suspected, based on the recent tone of conversation with his rival, that their little love triangle would soon be resolved. Derek would allow for this one night if it meant Cameron would finally let go and free Blue, once and for all, to focus on the future.

Our future, Derek thought, smiling. His head nodded; his hand slipped from under his chin, causing him to jerk awake with a slight surge of adrenaline. Sighing, Derek rose and carried his laptop inside. Time for a caffeine fix, or else he wasn't going to get any work done.

* * * *

Blue didn't spot any news vans staked out around the apartment building, but noted a couple of police cruisers and suspected they'd been dispatched at his father's request. With the coast clear, Cameron wheeled the Mustang into the parking garage. He braked to a halt between Derek's Porsche and a motorcycle. Blue recognized the black bike trimmed with silver chrome as Cameron's. He felt another surge of affection tinged with anger at how well the men in his life had planned "The Great Courthouse Escape" minus his awareness or input.

Cameron gave a final rev of the engine and pulled the key from the ignition. He looked over at Blue. "I guess we'll talk again soon?"

"Yeah." Blue smiled. "When's a good time to call?"

"Anytime in the evening. Now that my crew's trained, I've been putting in less overtime at the garage. Finished painting the house for my landlady too, so I've got some free time in the evenings."

"What the hell do you do besides listen to books? Sit on the porch swing and watch the traffic go by?"

Cameron chuckled, taking Blue's jab against small town life in stride. "Actually, some nights I do."

"No shit. You really have a porch swing?"

"Hey, I like my porch swing. It's relaxing. Though for your information, I also work out, watch movies, listen to the radio. This local DJ airs a show every night about paranormal stuff."

"You mean like UFO or Elvis sightings?" Blue gave a derisive snort.

Cameron shook his head and laughed. "A few kooks call in, but it's more so about hauntings, psychic predictions, things like that. This occult shop owner guest hosts sometimes and does tarot readings over the phone."

"You believe in that crap?" Blue asked.

Cameron shrugged. "You can say I'm an open-minded skeptic. Can't prove it, but can't disprove it, either."

"You're full of surprises, you know that?" Blue reached out and took Cameron by the hand. "It's good to see you happy. You seem more at peace with yourself now."

"I am," Cameron said. He leaned across the gear shift console and pressed his lips to Blue's brow. "You helped. Thanks. If you ever need a favor from me as a friend, you let me know. Okay?"

"Okay." Blue turned his face up. He touched his lips to Cameron's in a chaste kiss, keeping it brief to be safe. "I guess we can both get on with our lives now," he said, his sense of a new beginning laced with sadness.

"Yeah. Just be sure to call me every now and then."

Another quick kiss and a few minutes later, Cameron mounted the motorcycle. Some incongruous fact dawned on Blue. "Hey, if you're taking your bike, who's driving the Mustang?"

"You are." Cameron unclasped a ring from his keychain. He tossed a pair of keys across the parking space. Blue caught them with a jangle and gave them a puzzled look.

"Cam, I don't understand."

Cameron started the bike. He spoke over the purr of the engine. "Talk to Derek. He's the one who signed the title."

Blue stood mutely and watched Cameron ride out of the garage. Stunned, he took the elevator to the fifteenth floor.

He stepped into the loft. He shut the door and leaned back against it. Derek pivoted the chair from where he worked at the computer hutch. "I thought you'd be back tomorrow."

"It's too much," Blue said.

"What's too much?"

Blue held out the keys and jangled them impatiently. "The car! It's too goddamned much!"

"I wanted a second car." Derek shrugged, face impassive.

"Bullshit. You have expensive tastes, but you're also the practical type who only buys what you need. You and I both know who that car's for."

Derek pursed his lips a moment. "You can borrow it if you'd like. You can drive to school."

Blue threw his hands up and stalked over to the kitchen island. He slammed the keys down on the counter. "I can take the bus or bum rides from Jodi, like I've been doing the past two months."

"Have it your way, but the offer stands. I'll add you to the insurance policy tomorrow. Make sure you fill up when the tank gets low." Derek turned back toward the computer and started typing.

Oh no, he wasn't. Blue stormed over to the computer hutch. Arms crossed, he stared down at Derek. "Will you look at me?"

Derek's fingers hovered a moment. He turned the chair aside and looked up at Blue, his poker face maintained. Torn between embracing his master and throttling him, Blue opted to climb onto the chair and straddle Derek's lap.

He peered down, hands on his master's shoulders. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful. But I can't drive that car."

Derek's jaw tensed, just a little, but Blue caught it. "You have a driver's license, don't you?"

"So now you ask." Blue chuckled at the flicker of panic behind Derek's staid emerald gaze. "Yes, I have a license. It's good for another two years." He waited until he felt Derek's chest deflate with a quiet sigh of relief, then continued. "But that's not the problem."

Derek tensed again, one eyebrow arched. "What is it, then?"

Blue bit his bottom lip, suddenly embarrassed but determined to hide it. He intended to make his partner squirm, because while it was awesome to be surprised by one's boyfriend with the sweetest ride ever, Derek still should have asked.

"I can't drive a stick," he confessed.

"You can't drive a stick." Derek shook his head, turned it aside, propped it against his hand. He let out a wry laugh. He looked back at Blue, his expression gone sober again. "You will when I'm through with you."

Blue leaned in and nudged his forehead against Derek's. Without warning, the tears crested. "I'm the worst boyfriend in the world. I don't deserve you doing nice things for me."

"You're not the worst, Blue. Far from it."

Blue shook his head, tears rolling down his face. "How can you say that after I've been with Cameron the past few hours?"

"I knew exactly where you were. You went with my full blessing."

"Do you want me to tell you what we did?"

"No. I trust you."

God, that just made Blue feel worse, though he could take pride in knowing Derek's trust hadn't been placed in vain. He sniffed, crying harder. "You seemed surprised that I didn't stay the night."

"That's your business, Blue."

"Well, you should know this. Cameron and I had a long talk. I'm not seeing him anymore, not like that. We're just friends now. You're probably happy to hear that, huh?"

Derek brushed the bangs back from Blue's face, kissed the tears from Blue's cheeks. "I won't lie and say I'm not, but I don't like seeing you hurt, either. I know the situation with him has been confusing for you. I've understood that you needed to work through it."

Blue smiled down at Derek through watery eyes. "I really don't deserve you. I love you. I love you so fucking much."

Blue pressed his mouth to Derek's, putting every ounce of emotion he was feeling that moment into the kiss. Derek met and matched him in intensity, until it was Blue who pulled away to catch his breath.

Sitting straight, he wiped the remnants of tears away with the back of his hand. He half laughed, half cried. "You still should have asked me about the car."

"Perhaps. But I didn't."

"So what we do now?"

Derek stood, hefting Blue up with him. He started backing Blue toward the bathroom. "First, we get you in the tub. You reek of a certain mechanic."

Blue looked away, shamed all over again. Derek cupped his chin and made him look back up. "Then, we're getting a good night's sleep before we take *my* new car out for a spin."

"Okay." Blue grinned, wrapping his arms around Derek's neck, leading as much as he was being lead to the tub. "But I get to drive."

The kiss that followed was interrupted by the chime of Blue's cell phone. Seconds later, Derek's went off too.

"Shit," Blue mumbled. "I bet it's my dad." Pulling away from Derek, he reached into his pocket. He flipped the phone open to check the text message. Derek had remote control in hand and the TV on before Blue could read the message aloud.

Zack's angry face filled the screen, his suit and tie changed out for an orange jumpsuit. "You've all been misled!" he yelled at the cameras, struggling between the officers who dragged him in cuffs and chains from the courthouse. He whipped his head around and shot an angry glare at his attorney, who noticeably flinched. "Fucker! You promised me twenty years max!"

His rant was cut off as he was shoved into the back of a prison van. The camera panned to a reporter on the courthouse steps. "A rather violent reaction from Zackary Smith, also known as the Maple Street Killer, in the face of eight consecutive life sentences without eligibility for parole. Smith's defense pled guilty but insane, yet it's apparent from the jury's verdict they didn't buy the insanity plea and the judge has ruled accordingly. Again, eight consecutive life sentences without parole for Zackary Smith. It's speculated that testimony from Shane McGowan, nineteen-year-old son of local District Attorney James McGowan, played a hand in the jury's decision."

The newscast switched to footage of a familiar black Porsche speeding from the courthouse. Jodi peered through the passenger window from behind her oversized shades and temporary blue hair. Smiling, she raised two fingers in a V, palm out, then flipped her hand around, turning her flash of victory into the British equivalent of flipping the bird.

"Jodi-chan's performance was certainly in full character," Derek said. He turned off the TV just as the words "outed as homosexual" left the reporter's mouth.

A dizzying wave of relief washed through Blue, leaving him to sway where he stood. Derek reached out and caught him before his knees buckled.

"He's locked away for good, Blue. He can't hurt you, or anyone else, ever again."

“I know,” Blue mumbled, sagging against his master's chest. “I just wish I felt like it was truly over.”

“Let's get that bath,” Derek said quietly. Blue mutely complied.

Chapter Four

The traffic in front of the Mustang cleared. Blue depressed the clutch, accelerating slightly, then released the clutch as he shifted up to fifth gear. The car's engine roared, then smoothed into a rumbling purr.

"How was that?" Blue asked. He cast Derek a sidewise glance.

"Not bad."

Blue clicked his tongue ring against his teeth and smiled smugly. After three days of driving lessons in between cosmetology classes and Derek's random naps, he'd been eager to try his new shifting skills out on the freeway. An invitation to dinner with his parents had made for the perfect excuse.

"I thought you were going to have a coronary when I ground the gears those first few times."

"I'd prefer you didn't drop the transmission in the middle of the road. Don't tailgate."

"I'm not tailgating." Actually, Blue was, but only because the dilapidated vehicle in front of him was crawling at a snail's pace. He eased on the gas a bit.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Derek grip the passenger-door arm. "I don't know why you're so nervous," Blue muttered. "Unlike you, I actually drive the speed limit." Checking the rearview mirror, glancing over his shoulder to check his blind spot, he signaled and slid over one lane. He passed the slower driver, wondering how the car had managed to pass inspection.

"Your driving's fine," Derek said to Blue's surprise. "It's the other people on the road that worry me. Watch this asshole up ahead in the monster truck. He's going to cut in front of you without signaling."

Seconds later, the driver of the 4x4 suspended on massive tires did as Derek predicted. Blue tapped the brakes, enough to slow the car and alert the people behind him with a flash of the rear lights.

"Don't stomp the brakes in the middle of the freeway," Derek said, knuckles going white. "You'll get rear-ended."

"I thought you said my driving's fine." At Derek's silence, Blue continued, "And I tapped the brakes, not stomped them. I needed you to show me how to drive a stick, not give me a refresher course in Driver's Ed. I took that shit back in high school."

"We're not too far from your parent's house," Derek observed, noticeably changing the subject. "Ready to show Polly your new car?"

"My car?" Blue smirked at Derek's slip.

"You know what I meant."

"Uh-huh." Blue signaled and slid over to the right as he saw exit two seventy-three coming up.

"This lane's exit only," Derek said. "We have three more exits to go."

Blue took a deep breath, remembering not to yell at his backseat driver of a boyfriend who'd been nice enough to buy the car. "I'm taking the scenic route. You know, the back roads I suggested you take last time, but you informed me my route was inefficient?" Blue reached to change the radio station.

"Let me do that," Derek said. "Other than shifting gears, I'd rather you keep both hands on the wheel."

"Whatever." Blue returned his right hand to the steering wheel. "Find something that doesn't suck."

The truth was, the freeway traffic made Blue as nervous as his passenger. The music calmed him down.

Derek flipped through annoying commercials and mindless chatter before finding actual music. As a familiar tune by a favorite band wafted through the car, Blue relaxed in his seat, willing the butterflies in his stomach to still.

"Good sound system," he commented. "Was that Cam's doing or yours?"

"Mine," Derek said. "It's the same one I have in the Porsche."

Finding conversation proved calming as well, Blue seized an opportunity to glean more information about Derek's past. "So I've always wondered..."

“What?” Derek asked, voice edged with suspicion.

“How'd you get into the tech field?”

A smile ghosted at the corners of Derek's mouth. “My stepfather made the mistake of buying me a computer. I got bored one night and discovered the fine art of hacking. Look at the road, not me.”

“Sorry. You were a hacker?”

“That's how half the programmers I know got their start.”

“Is this when you had the green mohawk and knee-high combat boots?”

“At one point, yes.”

Blue tried to picture Derek in his younger street-punk incarnation, fueled on caffeine while sitting at a computer in the middle of the night and committing illegal activities. Blue cast a quick glance at the suave, sophisticated man seated beside him. The contradicting visuals refused to jibe.

“Did you ever get busted?” Blue asked.

Derek snorted and cut him a sideways glance. The smirk in his eyes said, *Please*.

Staying in the exit lane, Blue veered off the freeway. He wheeled smoothly around the three-sixty degree ramp, Derek clutching the armrest all the while.

After several minutes of strip malls and fast-food joints, Blue turned right. The Mustang veered onto the two-lane blacktop road that Blue had known since childhood. Packed parking lots, concrete, and apartment complexes gave way to quaint farmsteads, wooded glades, and open pasture.

“Horses?” Derek asked, incredulous. “Behind a shopping center?”

“Yeah. The next field over has alpacas and emus.”

One landowner had cashed in on the encroaching development and offered to let suburbanites come in and pick vegetables from his garden by the pound. Another had recently died, leaving the land to children who had promptly sold out to realtors, the spacious acreage now offered for sale in parceled lots.

Blue slowed around a sharp bend, tires hugging the pavement. The black-and-yellow warning arrow that loomed in the middle of the curve proved less sobering than the memento

staked into the ground beneath—a white wooden cross, bedecked with a sprig of baby's breath and circled by four smaller crosses.

“Someone didn't make it,” Derek observed as Blue pulled out of the curve.

“Yeah. Some drunk frat boy crossed the line and hit a family coming the other way. He lived, they didn't. Ironical, huh?”

Derek shook his head, grim-faced. “Shit happens. Anyone you knew?”

“No, I was too little to remember, but I've lost count of the number of times I've heard the story. My dad made it an example to me about the perils of drunk driving. He saw the wreck, so he gave me full details. It was...bad.”

“He witnessed it?”

Blue hoped he didn't jinx himself by discussing a car wreck while driving. “He was called out to the scene right after it happened by the frat boy's big-shot father. He was still at the law firm back then, and he was asked to represent his friend's son, right there at the damned wreck site. My dad refused. Needless to say, he and his friend weren't so close after that.”

“Jimmy McGowan, refusing to play the 'old boy' game?” Derek sounded impressed.

“Yeah. That was back in the old days, before he got to be such a big shot himself.” Blue crossed a short bridge over the creek-turned-runoff ditch, the one he'd once waded in barefoot before the water had grown clouded with toxins.

Satisfied no reporters lurked in the bushes, Blue took the rear entrance into the destined subdivision of sprawling houses and manicured lawns. On the surface, each house looked unique, the exteriors varying from wood to rock to brick, but on closer inspection, a rotating pattern of the same basic floor plans grew apparent.

The first time Derek had visited the DA's house, he'd told Blue, “*Nice neighborhood.*”

Blue had countered with, “*I hated it here.*”

Blue still couldn't say he loved the place, but now that he'd been away from home for a year, it didn't incite quite the same feeling of desolation and angst in the pit of his stomach. He wheeled into the driveway of the familiar two-story house with terraced yard, ready to show his mother the Mustang.

His Mustang.

Blue's mother came bounding out the front door and down the steps, all smiles and maternal enthusiasm in her cow-spotted apron. With her graying hair swept back in an outdated style and a spot of flour on one cheek, Polly McGowan looked about as far from being a politician's wife as it got, but the DA preferred her in the role of domesticated housewife over that of Chanel-suited sophisticate.

She greeted Blue with a long, tight hug. He hugged her back, surprised by the comfort he found in the smell of baked goods that lingered in her hair. He remembered when he'd been shorter than her; now a head taller, he was caught off guard by the sudden sense of protection he felt toward this woman who had raised and nurtured him.

From the corner of his vision, he caught a flash from a car parked across the street. He thought it was sunlight reflecting off the rearview mirror, but then another flash fired.

Blue glared across the yard. "Did someone just take a picture of us?"

Polly cupped his face and made him look back at her. She smiled brightly, but he saw the tension in her eyes. "Ignore it, Shane. Your father says it's good press to be seen like this. It's one reason he invited you and Derek for dinner." With that, she released Blue and went to hug Derek.

Unbelievable, Blue thought. His mother, who'd always held the public side of her husband's career in disdain, putting on a show for the cameras? And the intensely private Derek, playing along with it?

As Derek leaned down and accepted a kiss from Polly on the cheek, Blue wondered if it would be "good press" to show his boyfriend a little public display of affection too. That'd give the reporters something to talk about.

Before Blue could devise anything creative, Polly pulled away from Derek with a squeal and veered for the car. "Shelby Cobra!" she exclaimed, reaching for the driver's side door with almost irreverent awe. "May I?"

"Be my guest," Derek said.

Polly opened the door and slid behind the wheel. "'68? Or '69?" she asked.

"'69," Derek said. "You know your Mustangs."

Polly grinned. "My high school boyfriend fixed one up for shop class. His was a '66 and one of the last two-seaters Ford built." Gripping the steering wheel, she looked through the windshield, a dreamy look of nostalgia softening her features. "He painted it candy-apple red, the

same shade as this tight sweater I always wore. He let me race it once against our friend's Camaro. I won." Polly sighed, eyes misting. "Some of my fondest memories are linked to that car. We might not have had a backseat like yours, but the hood proved particularly supportive, even if the air scoop got in the way."

Derek gave a ribald chuckle. Blue proved slower on the uptake, taking a moment to digest his mother's innuendo. He attempted to envision his docile, cookie-baking mother as a carefree teenager, dressed in tight red sweaters, winning drag races and banging a shop student on the hood of a muscle car.

As the image took form, Blue instantly regretted it. His face went hot, and his stomach turned. "Thanks, Mom. I could have gone the rest of my life without that visual." At yet another camera flash, Blue flicked an annoyed glance in the photographer's general direction, then turned toward the house. "Where's Dad? Shouldn't he be out here kissing babies or something?"

"He's in his office on the phone," Polly said, stepping out of the car. "Your father's a busy man these days. Tonight's dinner is the first meal he and I've shared together in weeks."

"I know how that goes," Blue said. "My man and I haven't spent much time together lately, either." He slung his arm around his mother's waist and guided her toward the front steps. At the bounce of light off the living room window, he cast an angry glare over his shoulder. Derek fell in step behind him, blocking the camera's view.

Derek put one hand on Blue's shoulder, one on Polly's. "Behave, Blue," he murmured, ushering them up the steps. "The vultures will tire of you soon enough if you don't give them anything to feed on."

* * * *

Derek cringed in disbelief as the pump counter steadily ticked away. Gasoline prices had nearly doubled in the past few weeks, then spiked another dollar overnight. Reading about it in the news was one thing—standing there and watching a small chunk get chiseled out of his debit account was another.

He caught a flash of light in his peripheral vision. Whether it was a camera flash or the flicker of the fluorescent bulb overhead, Derek couldn't be sure. Fist clenched, he took a deep, calming breath, reminding himself to practice what he'd preached earlier on the DA's front lawn. He started to count down from ten to one; instead, he watched the pump counter go up and up.

Blue sauntered across the convenience store parking lot with one of his multi-colored frozen beverage creations. “Suicide slush” Blue called his concoctions, with four to five random flavors represented in the clear sixty-four-ounce cup.

Blue stepped up beside Derek and passed him a canned energy drink. “These things are bad for you.”

Derek eyed Blue's rainbow monstrosity. “And that isn't?”

The gas nozzle clicked off; Derek returned it to its rightful place and screwed the gas cap back on. Blue sipped his slush, his eyes going wide at the price counter. “Jesus. It costs that much to fill up?”

“It does today.” Derek opened the driver-side door.

“I don't get to drive home?” Blue asked.

“No.” Derek discreetly flicked his eyes to his right. “Got a reporter on our tail.”

Blue openly scanned the parking lot. “Where?”

“Get in the car, Blue.”

“Go kick their ass!”

“No can do. Bad press for Jim.”

“Fuck bad press! These assholes need to back off!”

Derek slid behind the wheel, slammed the door, and started the car. He rolled down the window and spoke over the roar of the engine. “Get in the damned car before I leave you here.”

“Fine!” Brow furrowed, eyes livid, Blue slipped into the passenger seat.

“Buckle up,” Derek said. He popped open his energy drink and took a sip.

His brat was due for a lesson in how to properly drive a Shelby.

* * * *

Derek maneuvered the Mustang like a professional racecourse driver, smoothly changing lanes, shifting gears with deft precision, the engine purring between each release of the clutch. The effect proved sexy.

He handles his car like he handles me, Blue thought. *Sure and smooth, in tune with the most subtle response*. At that, his prick stirred. He took another sip of his slush, tasting watermelon, then cherry, taking care not to give himself brain freeze.

He peered back through the rear window. The sun had set, leaving only the glare of headlights visible. “Did we lose them?” he asked.

Derek checked the rearview mirror. “Yes. Several miles back.”

“So you're just driving like a bat out of hell because you want to.”

Derek smiled. “Something like that.”

Blue faced forward. “We're near the airport,” he observed, watching a plane fly so low over the freeway, he swore he could see the passengers through the lit windows. “You sure we lost them?”

“Positive,” Derek said.

“Take the next exit.”

Derek cut him a sidelong glance. “Why?”

“I want to show you something. Local secret.”

* * * *

“Your mother's right,” Derek said. “The hood is rather supportive.”

“Do you want me to puke up this slush?” Cross-legged on the corner of the car hood, Blue looked over at Derek, admiring his master's long, lean form reclined between the air scoops. A jumbo jet ascended directly overhead, its silhouette blocking the stars.

“So this is the local make-out spot,” Derek observed once the roar of the jet faded.

“Yeah. The joke's always been that, come Monday morning, there's enough beer cans on the ground to build a car, and enough rubbers to fit it with tires.”

“Nice.” Derek cocked an eyebrow. “And how familiar would you be with this spot?”

Blue shrugged. “I came here a few times with friends, but I didn't drink and could never get laid to save my life.” He finished off his slush with a loud slurp, tasting raspberry. Or maybe strawberry—he couldn't tell.

He pitched the cup into the nearby trashcan set beside a picnic table. A tinny voice wafted through the speaker posted high above the table, letting visitors to the public viewing area in on communications from the control tower.

On impulse, Blue crawled across the hood and straddled Derek's hips. He planted his palms beside Derek's shoulders and gave the hood a little bounce. "I hate to say it, but Mom's right. The hood *is* supportive." Hair hanging in his face, he gave Derek a kiss and pulled away. "What do I taste like?"

Derek licked his lips. "Coconut."

"I didn't use coconut. Try again." Blue gave Derek another kiss.

"Banana."

"Wrong again."

Derek cast his gaze from side to side. "What if someone sees us?"

"This coming from the man who molests me at the grocery store? Relax. No one comes here in the middle of the week."

"You've shown complete disregard for the rules lately. I can't recall the last time you called me 'Sir.'"

"Don't have time for rules these days, *Sir*." Blue ground his ass down against Derek, meeting a hard bulge, eliciting a low groan.

"Damn it, Blue. You're asking for it."

"You bet I'm asking for it. I say we get in the backseat and christen the car."

Derek's frown faded. He sat up part way and nuzzled Blue's pulse point. "Not enough room."

Blue shivered at the tickle of lips against his throat. "Passenger seat?"

"Still going to be a tight fit."

Blue wiggled his butt. "I thought you liked tight fits."

"Smartass. I have a better idea."

At the evil gleam in Derek's eyes, the words *I should have known better* ran through Blue's mind. Minutes later, he found himself bent over the hood, legs spread, and his pants down to his knees. Spit-slicked fingers slid up and down the crevice of his ass. Despite his assertion that no

one came to the park during the week, Blue looked around nervously, waiting for a crew of photographers to jump from the bushes paparazzi-style. He'd wanted to fuck *in* the car, not on or against it.

Yet the idea of getting caught only fueled Blue's excitement. Hands braced to either side, he gripped the hood of the car and let out a moan. At the feel of Derek's cockhead against his hole, Blue dipped his spine and angled himself to better receive his master.

Derek slammed into him hard and fast, whisking Blue's breath away with equal parts pain and pleasure.

"Oh God," Blue said through gritted teeth. But the moment dictated efficiency, and he was prepared to make the most of their short time.

He held steady, emitting a series of clipped grunts with each strike against his prostate, his pleasure rising with every harsh, brutal thrust. Around him, the symphony of crickets that filled the humid night air gave way to the rising whine of a jet preparing for takeoff.

Blue's balls coiled tight, and then climax overtook him, one relentless wave after the other. Clutching the car for support, he tipped his face heavenward, his cry of pleasure drowned out by the roar of the jet overhead.

Derek dug his nails into the meat of Blue's ass and stilled, his cock shoved in to the hilt. The roar faded, the plane's lights trailing off into the dark, and it was only then that Blue heard his master's groan.

Panting, Blue looked down at the pearlescent drops of fluid that splattered the Mustang's grill.

"Pervert," he muttered. "That's not what I meant by christening the car."

Derek pulled away, leaving Blue's ass with a dull but satisfactory ache. "We'll stop by the carwash on the way home."

"Automated?"

"Manual."

Blue tugged his jeans up and zipped them. Legs still shaky, he turned around. "Let me guess. I wash the car while you watch."

“That's very perceptive of you.” Derek buttoned his slacks, calmly collected as always, but the flush of orgasm lingered on his cheeks.

Blue wrapped his arms around Derek's neck and pressed their bodies close. “How about this? We go home first and hit the shower. Then we go to the automated wash, order the full works, and I give you head.”

Derek smiled and nudged his brow against Blue's. “For once, I like your plan better.”

Chapter Five

Smoke curled from the glowing cone of incense, infusing the bedroom with the sweet scent of jasmine. Sensual Japanese music issued softly from the stereo. The current from the rotating fan teased across Blue's nipples, pebbling the pink flesh around his piercings.

Jodi's breasts pressed against his back as she slid the strip of vinyl around his waist. She murmured in his ear, sending cool, pleasant tremors down his spine. "Relax, Blue-kun," she said. "Breathe out." As he did, she cinched the vinyl tighter.

He peered down his bare torso at the black pants that hung loosely from his hips. He met April's gaze from where she kneeled at his feet. She tugged his pants down another inch. Her cheeks flushed pink at the scant fringe of blond above the waistband.

Reaching for her, Blue threaded his fingers through her fuchsia hair and gave an affectionate tug. "Your roots are showing," he said. "We need to touch them up."

"I know," April muttered around the row of straight pins held between her teeth. She tugged the pants back up by a millimeter. Blue's pubes safely covered, April took the pins from between her teeth, one by one, and fixed the waistband in place. She squinted at where the vinyl measuring tape met at his navel. "Your waist is so thin. What's your secret?"

"Probably the workout Derek-sama puts him through every night." Jodi snickered. "You know, Blue-kun, you've got the perfect waist for a corset."

"No. No corsets." Blue spoke firmly, concealing his rising sense of panic. "Skirts are out too."

"Stop talking," Jodi scolded. She cinched the measuring tape tighter. "Or breathing. You'll mess up April-chan's measurements."

"I'd like to be able to breathe in whatever the hell you're dressing me in," Blue grumbled. Inwardly, he questioned his wisdom behind submitting to the girls' whims. He hadn't even watched the anime series his friends had decided to reenact at the upcoming cosplay convention.

He only knew the main character had blue hair, which proved a convenient fit for Jodi and April's diabolical scheme in convincing him to play “dress up” in the first place.

A cherubic face peeked around the paper-paned *shoji* screen that divided Jodi's half of the bedroom from her younger sister's. “Hey, Blue.”

Blue smiled down at the nine-year-old. The big brown eyes behind her glasses were the same shade of brown as Jodi's—that was, when Jodi wasn't wearing her purple contact lenses.

“Hey, Allison.” He resisted the urge to call Jodi's sibling “kid” or “squirt,” since he hated getting called crap like that himself.

“What the hell's going on?” Allison asked.

Blue laughed at her irreverent choice of vocabulary. “Your sister is evil and up to no good, that's what's going on.”

“I want to go to the convention,” she said. “Can April make me a costume?”

“You're too young,” Jodi said. “Gotta be eighteen and up. What are you doing in here anyway? I told you to get lost.”

“It's my room too. Mom says to start the laundry.”

“We can do it tomorrow.”

“I don't have clean clothes for school.”

“Damn it,” Jodi muttered. “Fine. Go sort a basic load of whatever you need. I'll wash it later and do the rest tomorrow.”

“We need towels too.”

Jodi rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Sort a load of towels too.”

“Okay. You don't have to be such a bitch.” Allison beamed like an innocent angel even as she cursed like a sailor. She scampered off with a flounce of pigtails.

“She thinks it's fun to help,” Jodi said. “Boy, does she have a lot to learn.”

April gave a wry laugh. “You white kids are spoiled. I work at my grandmother's restaurant every day, and without pay. Korean kids are expected to help family.”

“Helping family is one thing,” Jodi said. “Taking entire responsibility for it is another.”

Blue opted to stay out of the conversation. He'd been bad about doing chores when he'd lived in his parents' house. He didn't think the housework he did for Derek was appropriate to the

discussion, considering he often performed his assigned chores in the buff, save for a cock ring or a collar, and usually got fucked afterward as reward for a job well done.

Of course, Jodi would probably love to hear all about *that*, the pervert. Blue still failed to grasp why the prospect of two men together excited her so much. Of course, the majority of straight men seemed to have a kink for lesbian sex, a concept which Blue found equally perplexing. He'd once asked Derek why heterosexual guys got off on lesbian porn, since Derek had been with a woman years before. Derek had shrugged and replied that it was a mystery to him.

"Turn around," April instructed. As Blue complied, he took in Jodi's faux Asian furnishings—the comforter set with the *kanji* calligraphy print, the Chinese lanterns strung from one corner to the other, the Fortune Cat coin bank perched alongside the dancing Buddha figurines that Blue had found for Jodi at the dollar store. Posters of androgynous Japanese rock stars with multi-colored hair adorned the wall next to a geisha calendar and cheap reproductions of Edo-period woodblock prints.

If the room didn't scream "Jodi-chan," Blue didn't know what did.

"Ouch!" He flinched at the prick of the needle.

"Sorry!" April pled. "I'm almost done."

"I thought you liked getting poked in the ass," Jodi said. She changed shirts while Blue barely batted an eye. She grabbed her discarded shirt along with a few other dirty clothes that lay scattered on the floor. "You two want to stay and help me with laundry? We could go in together on pizza and a movie."

"Yay, pizza!" a small voice piped in.

"Get out!" With an exasperated growl, Jodi tore past the shoji screen and threw her clothes at her sister. The siblings exchanged a slew of insults as the elder ushered the younger from the room.

"I'm glad I'm an only child," April muttered.

Blue just shook his head and laughed. At least Jodi and Allison had someone to share the dysfunction with.

* * * *

Bass boomed from a passing car; wolf whistles sounded from the open windows.

“In your dreams,” Jodi muttered.

Blue stood by, laundry basket under one arm, while Jodi checked her mailbox. His brow beaded with sweat, the scant summer breeze doing little to cool him. With his free hand, he fluttered his T-shirt. It was days like this when he pondered wearing less black since dark clothes absorbed heat. One thing was certain—when he got home he was retiring the tight jeans to the back of the closet and throwing on his baggy cargo shorts whether Derek approved or not.

Jodi's brow creased as she thumbed through a stack of what appeared to be bills. She tossed the accompanying junk mail into a large trash bin that, judging from the pile of identical flyers, had been placed by the mailboxes for that purpose.

Blue's attention was caught by a clear liquid soap bubble wafting through the mailbox alcove. April reached out with her finger and popped it. Two more floated by. April popped one, Blue popped the other.

“What's up with the bubbles?” he asked.

“Over there.” Jodi nodded across the heat-baked parking lot toward the apartment complex office. An automated bubble blower had been placed outside the door and was furiously spewing bubbles into the humid summer air. “They've got some new lease special going. It'd be nice if they put as much energy into fixing up this dump for the renters who already live here as they do luring new tenants.”

As Blue followed the girls across the parking lot, he agreed the complex could stand improvement, from the drab shade of green used to paint the trim around the windows and balconies, to the cracks showing in the mortar between the bricks.

Jodi stopped in her tracks and craned her neck, hand shielding her eyes. She peered up at one of the balconies. “Damn it, he's not out today.”

“Who?” April asked.

“That hot guy with the silver hair I told you about. He usually comes out in the afternoon, but he's always talking on a headset and never notices when I wave at him.”

“Stalker,” Blue teased. Inwardly, he thought it was rude of Jodi's mysterious neighbor to ignore her. Talking on the phone or not, you'd have to be blind not to notice someone as colorful and exuberant as Jodi.

Smoke wafted from the next apartment over. “Um, is the building on fire?” Blue asked.

“No, but it's going to be if that asshole doesn't stop grilling on the balcony.” Jodi yelled up at the man throwing steaks on the open grill. “Hey, that's against city ordinance!”

He raised his beer at her in toast and went back to cooking.

“Tell the landlord,” April said.

“I already have, twice,” Jodi grumbled. “Some of the neighbors have complained too, but the asshole's family is on housing assistance like the rest us. They were on the list for a year for a three-bedroom, and now that they've got it, management has to go through lots of red tape to file a formal eviction. I hate to see his five kids out on the street, but they're going to be homeless anyway when the damned place goes up in smoke.”

Five kids in a three bedroom apartment? Blue thought that maybe he was glad to be an only child after all.

The trio passed the office and cut a path through the bubble swarm to the laundry room. “I feel like I'm trapped in a bad *shojo* manga,” Blue said, referring to Japanese comics aimed at young female readers. Bubbles often spontaneously appeared in the comic panels to frame an attractive character, or erupted between the heroine and the object of her desire to denote the blossoming of love. When it wasn't bubbles, it was flowers, stars, feathers, or sparkles—in other words, girly stuff.

Jodi giggled. “Yeah, shojo bubbles of doom.” She stopped in her tracks and gripped Blue by the arm. “Oh my God. It's him.”

Blue followed her gaze to a pale, skinny, shaggy-haired blond in a white T-shirt, baggy black shorts, and high-top sneakers perched cross-legged on the bench outside the laundry room. Surrounded by bubbles, the young man simply sat and stared off at nothing in particular.

“His hair's not silver,” Blue said, experiencing some vague sense of recognition. The guy's hair was a pale shade of blond, nearly as white as Blue's albino streak, but to describe it as silver was a bit far-fetched. Leave it to Jodi-chan to filter her world through the inside of a giant, shiny shojo bubble.

A bubble popped against the blond's bare knee. He turned his face toward the breeze, his eyes scanning absently over Blue and the girls, his brow lifted in question. As he did, the hair blew back from his smooth, pretty face and caught the sunlight, and for a fleeting, surreal

moment, the blond strands indeed shone silver. The boy held out his hand, extending one willowy arm. A bubble popped against his palm, another on the tip of his nose. His eyes maintained the same vacant gaze.

Blue's sense of *déjà vu* suddenly clicked. He'd seen this guy a few months earlier at the grocery store down the street from Jodi's apartments. So had Derek. In fact, Blue had caught Derek scoping the guy out.

"He's blind," Blue said under his breath, regretting his thoughts from a moment before.

"Holy shit," Jodi mumbled. "That's why he never waves at me. He couldn't see me."

"That's sad," April said. "He's so beautiful."

The blond cocked his head to one shoulder. An impish grin played on his face. "What's sad?" he called out. "That I'm blind? Or beautiful?"

Blue had heard that blind people were more highly attuned to their sense of hearing, but he didn't know they could hear *that* well. Then again, the breeze had likely carried his and the girls' voices—which meant the blond had heard every word they'd said.

April's cheeks flushed as pink as her hair. She gave a nervous laugh. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude."

The blond smiled. "That's okay. Most people don't mean to be. What's your name?"

"April," she said shyly, leaning against the back of Blue's shoulder for support.

Recovered from her initial shock, Jodi reverted to her usual outgoing personality. She walked up to the bench and plunked down beside her target. "I'm Jodi," she said. "We're neighbors."

"Hi, Jodi. Nice to meet you." He turned toward her, his smile widening, his face glowing with an almost childlike innocence. He held out his hand. "I'm Dusty."

Jodi took his hand. As their fingers met, her cheeks mantled. Blue felt a twinge of jealousy. Jodi was *his* girl. Well, sort of. Yet he found himself equally intrigued by their new acquaintance. And while Dusty wasn't really his type, Blue recognized an attractive person when he saw one.

He guided April to the bench, their conjoined shadow falling over the blond. Dusty turned his head up. As he did, his eyes flashed silver before settling on a very pale shade of gray. Blue

knew the illusion was the result of a lack of pigment in the iris, but it still made for an eerie effect.

“Hi,” Dusty said. “Do you live here too?”

“No, I’m Jodi’s friend. I’m Blue.”

“Really? What are you blue about?”

Blue laughed. “My name’s Blue.”

“Interesting.” Dusty let go of Jodi and extended his hand.

As they touched, Blue experienced an odd, tingling rush, inducing a response that bordered on attraction. He couldn’t say that he actually felt *attracted* to Dusty, but the feeling he was experiencing proved stronger than anything he felt for Jodi or April.

He’s gay, Blue realized. Derek often teased Blue for having weak gaydar, but that was not the case today. Blue was definitely picking up on some strange, unspoken vibe and he knew, without a doubt, that Dusty liked men.

“Why do they call you Blue?” Dusty asked.

“My hair is blue.” Blue wondered if Dusty had always been blind. If so, would he have a concept of color?

“Light blue or dark blue?” Dusty asked.

That answered that question. “Dark blue. Cobalt.”

“I guess your name makes sense. You smell pink, though.”

“Huh?” Blue asked, taken aback.

Dusty’s grip tightened a moment, sending more tingles before he released Blue’s hand. “Pink. Like strawberry and peppermint.”

Blue realized his face had gone as hot as the girls’. He forced a laugh, unnerved by the lingering effect of Dusty’s touch. “My boyfriend goes overboard with the high-priced shampoo and soap.”

“It smells like your boyfriend has good taste.” Dusty repeated “boyfriend” without the slightest hint of hesitation or discomfort, while his tone came off as mildly flirtatious.

“Well, expensive taste.” *Yep*, Blue thought. Dusty was gay. Interesting—interesting indeed.

“You still with us, April?” Dusty asked. He canted his head to one side, a gesture he seemed to be in the habit of. Blue supposed that came with a reliance on the sense of hearing.

“Yeah, I’m here.” April stepped around Blue to take Dusty’s proffered hand.

“You must be the quiet one,” he said.

“Not when you get to know her,” Blue said. He cast Jodi an impatient glance. “You want me to start this laundry?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said absently, rising from the bench.

Dusty rose with her, drawing his height just an inch above Blue’s. He seemed to instinctively find and grip Jodi’s elbow as though he’d long known and trusted her. “My roommate and I are doing laundry too,” Dusty said. “He ran up to the convenience store for more quarters and some drinks.”

“Roommate?” Jodi asked. She looked pointedly at Blue.

Dusty grinned with his dazzling smile. “Not that kind of roommate. We’re foster brothers. Jarod’s straight, and I’m single.”

Jodi and Dusty walked into the laundry room together. Blue let April go next, then followed behind. Something told him he’d better get used to Jodi fawning over another guy—one who was blind, gay, and drop-dead gorgeous with silver-blond hair and silver-gray eyes, making for an enchanting combination that left Blue feeling pale in comparison.

Jodi chattered away as Blue helped her start the wash. Dusty leaned back against the folding table and smiled, listened, and laughed, his sightless gaze landing in Jodi’s general direction, the cocked angle of his head coming off as attentive as if he looked her straight in the eye.

When Dusty’s roommate returned, Blue remembered him from the grocery store encounter too. Dusty took a handful of quarters and a Coke, then made quick introductions. Jarod’s eyes lit on Blue with a hint of recognition, but he didn’t ask if they’d met before, and Blue didn’t offer an explanation.

“Was your favorite clerk working today?” Dusty asked with a teasing lilt.

Jarod grinned. “We’re having dinner tonight.”

“Wow, three dates in a row,” Dusty said. “That's like a record for you. Go get ready. I'll put the clothes in the dryer.”

“Okay. Don't get confused and steal the neighbor's underwear again,” Jarod said on his way out the door. He and Dusty laughed together, indicating the joke was an ongoing one between them.

After she loaded the laundry, Jodi jumped up to sit on the folding table. Blue went to stand between her knees and wrapped his arms protectively around her waist. Of course, Dusty couldn't witness his territorial display, but it made Blue feel better.

Courtesy of a few blunt questions—ones which only Jodi could ask so casually without coming off as rude—their new friend revealed his full name of Dustin Sterling, his age of twenty, his work-from-home job as a telephone psychic, and that he'd successfully argued for an upstairs apartment rather than one of the downstairs ones reserved for disabled tenants like Jodi's mother. Blue detected the sneer behind Dusty's utterance of the word “disability,” and felt himself warming up to the guy more.

It also came out in conversation that Dusty enjoyed the same bands they did, and to the trio's mutual surprise, he loved anime and preferred it over other forms of entertainment.

“But how?” Jodi asked matter-of-factly. “You can't actually watch it. How do you know anime's any different from other cartoons?”

Dusty smiled, unfazed by Jodi's curiosity. “I like to listen to it. The music and dialogue are more interesting than that in Western cartoons.” His grin deepened. “I also hear the guys are hot and have fabulous hair.”

Jodi laughed. “You and Blue both look like you stepped straight out of an anime. Don't they, April-chan?”

April agreed. Blue glanced over his shoulder at her, standing off in the wings as a quiet observer while Jodi stole the show. It struck him that April acted as third wheel to his and Jodi's friendship, even though he'd met April first and was in fact the one who'd introduced the girls; yet she'd never exhibited an ounce of jealousy toward Jodi.

Blue silently chided himself over his initial reaction to Dusty. He pulled away from Jodi and reached for April's hand, drawing her into their trio turned quartet. She blushed and smiled as she nestled in the crook of Blue's arm.

It was good to have friends, Blue thought, both old and new.

Chapter Six

Blue pumped the salon seat. He unwrapped the white towel from his client's head and fluffed her wet hair a moment.

His mother squinted back at him in the mirror and smiled. "I can't see a thing without my glasses. I trust you two didn't color my hair blue or purple."

Jodi laughed. She stepped in and worked a dollop of styling mousse through Polly's hair. "Nothing too radical. Just a warm ash blonde with subtle highlights."

"Yeah," Blue chimed in. "It camouflages the gray better."

Polly smirked in the mirror at his reflection. "And who do you think put that gray hair there, young man?"

"I wasn't that bad of a kid," Blue retorted.

Polly McGowan could have patronized any high-priced salon of her choosing. Instead, she'd surprised her son with a visit to the school's public salon. Blue was as touched by his mother's show of support as he was anxious over her choice to play guinea pig. After two months of classes, he and Jodi had only enjoyed the hands-on portion of their training for a week. While the duo had already earned a reputation among their classmates for their skills with color and tint, Blue still felt intimidated by the cutting and styling part of the equation. His mother acting in the role of test subject only served to bump up the stress factor.

Jodi clicked on the blow dryer and set to work with Polly's hair. Blue tossed the towel in the hamper and walked over to his assigned workstation. He nodded at a few fellow students in passing, all of them dressed in uniform black and busily clipping, coloring, and styling away, infusing the air with everything from pleasant peppermint shampoo to pungent perm solution.

Blue stopped in his tracks and shook his head. In the past hour that he'd worked at Jodi's station, one of his anal-retentive right-handed instructors had gone behind him and rearranged his

supplies again. With a quiet sigh, he quickly shuffled everything to the left. Once he was licensed and started work at a real salon, he'd set up his station as he pleased.

He returned to Jodi's station with his preferred shears in hand. Chances were he'd missed a few tags when he'd shaped his mother's layers. Once Polly's hair was dry, Blue and Jodi stood back and admired their handiwork.

"Your mom's pretty," Jodi murmured. "You have her eyes."

Blue nodded, unspeaking. The transformation wrought by his hands had left his mother looking ten years younger, calling to mind the young, vivacious woman he remembered from his childhood, before marriage to an overbearing spouse had sapped her spirit. Blue had always been so entangled in his own issues with his father, he hadn't considered how things must have been for his mother. As often as he'd played the role of buffer between his parents, it struck Blue that his mother had equally played buffer between husband and son.

No wonder her hair had gone white, Blue thought with a twinge of guilt. He'd left and found his freedom, but Polly continued to share a home and a life with the DA. Blue wondered why, seeing as the obligation of parenting no longer tied her to the man. It couldn't be for appearance's sake, since Polly had never quite lived up to her expected role of socialite and had instead supported her husband's high-profile career quietly from the wings. Did she really love Blue's father that much, or did she simply stay because there was nowhere else for her to go at this stage in her life?

Pondering his mother's reasons, Blue handed Polly her glasses, then turned the chair back toward the mirror. He leaned over her shoulder and pressed his cheek to hers. "Look."

"Wow," she said with muted wonder. "There I am."

Blue smiled. "Yeah, there you are."

Her eyes crinkled and misted with tears. "You did a wonderful job, honey. You and Jodi both. Thank you."

"No problem." Eyes stinging, Blue stood straight and busied himself with the broom. Polly fell a tad on the sensitive side, and to Blue's chagrin her open show of sentiment brought out his own.

The instructor stopped by, clipboard in hand, and gave Polly's hair the once-over. "Nice. You two can leave for the day since it's almost closing time." The instructor jotted something down, then moved on to the next student.

Jodi murmured under her breath. "Nice?' What about how well we matched shade to skin tone? Or the way we subtly wove in the highlights to achieve a natural sun-kissed effect?"

Blue nodded toward the mirror where his mother's reflection beamed back at them. "See her smile? That's all we need to know that we got it right."

Blue's cell phone vibrated in his apron pocket. He took it out and saw he'd received a text message. He flipped the phone open and read the message from Derek. *Dinner w/agent. New project in works. Be home late.*

Blue shut the phone and sighed. With his and Derek's schedules out-of-synch, their evenings together had become cherished time. He'd been looking forward to coming home and curling up on the couch with his master while they watched movies, then indulging in some hot sex before Blue passed out and Derek went back to work on the computer.

Oh well. Blue looked at Jodi and then his mother. "Want to do dinner?"

"I'd love to!" Polly gushed.

"I've got to get home," Jodi said, putting her station in order with efficient haste. "We're still behind on laundry and God knows what else. Plus Dusty-tan promised to drop by and watch anime with me."

"Tell him I said hello." Blue wistfully watched Jodi walk out of the salon with a chirp of the electronic door chime. *Dusty-tan?*

Reminding himself to stand guard against jealousy, Blue addressed his mother. "Guess it's dinner for two. There's a sandwich shop right up the sidewalk."

"Do they have salad?" she asked. "I'm on a new diet and already exceeded today's carb allowance."

"You look great, Mom. But yes, they have rabbit food."

Blue double-checked his workstation to ensure everything was in order, then unknotted his apron and threw it in the hamper with the towels. He took Polly by the arm and escorted her

outside into the summer heat. Looking down at her, he experienced the same sense of protectiveness he'd felt the last time he'd seen her.

He just wished she'd stop tearing up at the drop of a hat. He blinked, his vision threatening to blur. As he did, he caught a flash of light from the corner of his eye. Thinking nothing of it, he started down the tree-lined sidewalk with his mother in tow.

The outdoor shopping plaza had been built to emulate Victorian districts like Blue's neighborhood, Jericho Pass, but fell short with its cheap vinyl siding and faux gingerbread trim. Tackiness aside, Blue still enjoyed strolling by the various shops, while the wishing fountain and garden centered in the parking lot provided a nice spot for lunch breaks.

Another flash bounced off the window to Blue's left. Polly stopped and stared across the parking lot. Blue followed her gaze. A strange man stood in the bushes near the fountain, a camera aimed directly back at Blue and his mother.

"Hey!" Blue shouted, pulling away from Polly. The photographer snapped another image and scurried off. "Hey!" Blue repeated, waiting for a car to pass. "Get back here, you fucker!"

Polly gripped him by the arm. "Let it go, Shane."

"Let it go? That asshole either tracked me to school, or followed you here!"

"He's already taken the pictures and left, honey. Don't let it spoil our time together." To Blue's surprise, she batted her eyes and primped her new hairstyle. "At least I look good for the camera."

Blue let out a wan laugh. "Okay, but only because you asked me to." Taking her by the elbow, he peered back over his shoulder.

He'd let this one go at Polly's behest, but he swore, if anyone tried to steal a candid shot through the restaurant window while he dined with his mother, they'd be scraping their camera from the sidewalk in tiny little pieces.

* * * *

Blue stepped out of the bathroom. A cloud of steam trailed in his wake as he closed the door behind him. Toweling his hair, he padded naked across the hardwood floor to the plush rug of the bedroom area. His bare skin prickled with gooseflesh from the air-conditioned climate of the loft.

While it was a rare luxury to have the apartment to himself, Blue felt a pang of loneliness at the reminder that Derek wouldn't be home for a while. Bearing his master's return in mind, Blue carelessly tossed the towel to the floor. Derek would likely “punish” him over such sloppiness, but then punishment was sort of Blue's goal. Just thinking on the possibilities sent the blood surging straight to Blue's prick, leaving him half-erect and aching for some hands-on stimulation.

His cock leading the way, Blue fumbled through the nightstand drawer for Derek's chrome butane lighter. A relic from the reformed smoker's not-too-distant past, the lighter now served more worthwhile purposes.

Blue lit the candles scattered throughout the apartment, each of them plain, unscented beeswax. He paused in between to turn off a lamp, then switched off the track lighting. Gradually, the loft grew suffused with candlelight, the warm glow flattering the taupe and black shades of Derek's tasteful furnishings.

Returning to the bed, Blue clicked the lighter shut and tossed it on the nightstand. He crawled under the covers, the satin cool and sleek against his skin. He flopped around and rumpled the sheets to lend them a slept-in appearance. Satisfied with his efforts, Blue had one last detail to set in place—himself. He stretched on his side, then rolled slightly forward, crooking one knee while extending the other leg, allowing the sheets to slip partway down his torso. Worried his posture might appear too contrived, he inhaled, then exhaled, allowing his limbs to relax. No, too relaxed. He rolled completely onto his stomach, the barest hint of ass showing. Trusting he'd achieved a sexy yet natural pose, he propped his head on his arms and closed his eyes.

He caught himself drifting off to sleep. His day at the salon had left him more tired than he realized, but he supposed standing on one's feet for eight hours had that effect on a person. He willed himself to stay awake, as Derek would be home any minute. But really, it felt nice to lie there, sprawled across the comfortable mattress while the slick satin sheets caressed his skin. Eyelids fluttering, Blue looked at the time on the digital clock. Derek should have been home by now. He wondered what the holdup was.

Yawning, Blue shifted his limbs and burrowed his head deeper into the pillows. The sheet slid down his ass another inch, but that was fine. He'd go ahead and take a short nap...just a quick one, before Derek arrived home...it wouldn't be long now...

He woke with a start at soft lips tracing the curve of his ear. "Welcome home," Blue mumbled with a lazy drawl. "What're you doing?"

"I like smelling my shampoo in your hair," a low baritone murmured.

Blue shivered pleasantly at the warm breath against his neck. "What else do you like?"

Derek nuzzled the back of Blue's shoulder, inducing more shivers. "I like smelling my soap on your skin."

Blue sighed as Derek's mouth ghosted down his spine, teasing and tantalizing with a warm stream of breath. He uttered a soft cry at the gentle bite on one ass cheek, squirmed at the silken tickle of Derek's hair along his hips.

Fully awake, Blue glanced at the clock and saw Derek was two hours later than expected while a few of the candles had burned out. Deciding he didn't care, he dipped his spine and arched his ass to better receive his lover's kiss.

Blue gasped at the fingers digging into his flesh and spreading his buttocks wide, cried out at the flick of the warm, wet tongue directly beneath his balls. His cock twitched and lengthened against the mattress, causing him to draw up fully on his knees.

"Like it there too?" Blue managed to ask.

Derek grunted something noncommittal in reply. Granted better access, he sucked and licked at the sensitive taint spot, sending tiny thrills of pleasure through Blue's nerves. His mouth drifted, his tongue and breath teasing up the crevice of Blue's ass.

"Oh, God." Blue gasped and clawed at the sheets. He spread his thighs wider, arched his ass higher. He moaned at the delightfully taboo sensation, his swollen cock pulsing in time to the skilled ripple of his lover's tongue in his most intimate place.

Derek withdrew all too soon, only to sweep his tongue over Blue's tailbone and back up Blue's spine, leaving a trail of heat and damp in his wake. As the kiss reached the nape of Blue's neck, smooth skin brushed up his back while something long and hard prodded between his buttocks. Apparently Derek's shirt was unbuttoned and his pants already open. Blue ground back, letting his master know he was more than ready to be fucked.

Derek slipped his cock inside Blue, and they groaned together, the ease of penetration surprising them both.

“Slut,” Derek teased, giving a quick, sharp thrust.

“You made me this way,” Blue shot back, his last word clipped by a grunt as his lover gave another shove. Long fingers wrapped tight in his hair and tugged against his scalp. Blue reared back to find himself seated on Derek's lap.

“Ride me,” Derek commanded, leaning back, holding steady.

Following his master's cue, Blue worked his body up and down, sliding down onto Derek's cock, pulling back up to what he'd learned to be the maximum extent before dropping back down with his full weight. Gritting his teeth, he grunted with pained exertion even as he delighted in the way Derek's length stretched and filled him.

He found equal satisfaction in the desperate way that Derek clung to his ass and hair, deriving a certain sense of power in the groans of pleasure rising from the other man's throat. He spit in his palm and worked his own cock, partly to facilitate his pleasure, partly because he knew the harder he came, the tighter his muscles would squeeze Derek. He sped up the pace, his brow beading with sweat, his breath coming harder and faster to match that of Derek's. The candle flames around him blurred into a single, soft glow.

Blue slammed back one final time, his buttocks slapping hard against the solid bunch of Derek's thighs. His balls tightened, his muscles clenching of their own accord. He held there, head thrown back, losing himself in the dizzying rush that made his senses reel, yelling out as he gripped his shaft and pumped his load all over the crisp, clean sheets.

Melting back against Derek for support, he felt his master's firm body shudder and tremble and succumb to their mutual pleasure.

Blue gave a soft laugh. “You really know how to wake a guy up.”

Derek's lips curved against his scalp. “I should've popped your ass with that towel you left on the floor.”

“What changed your mind?”

“I decided there are better things to do with your ass.”

“I'll say,” Blue agreed. And his master did those things well.

Blue lifted himself off of Derek and flopped back onto the mattress. Derek stretched out on his side and nuzzled Blue's throat.

Blue lazily stroked Derek's hair. "How was dinner?"

"Decent. My steak was overcooked."

Blue snorted. "That's not saying much. You like it to 'moo' when you slice into it. I meant, how did things go with your agent?"

Derek rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. "My current contract is ending three months early due to budget cuts. I'm wrapping up a week's worth of work to stay in good standing with the agency; then I'm done."

"That sucks." Blue rolled to his side, head propped on one hand. "They should find you a new job pretty quick though. Right?"

"My agent suggested a few leads, but I'm overqualified and the pay is shit."

"How much?" Blue asked. Derek answered with an hourly rate. Blue cocked an eyebrow. "Your idea of 'shit pay' is some people's dream salary."

"I'm not committing to second best, Blue. It pulls me out of the running when a worthwhile position comes up."

"I'll give you a worthwhile position." Blue climbed on top of his master and rubbed his ass against the other man's cock.

Derek let out a pleasant groan and gripped Blue's hips. "I think we could negotiate agreeable terms."

Blue kissed Derek under the chin. "Hmm. Can I invite the gang over tomorrow for Chinese? I'll pay since you're jobless."

"I'm not destitute, Blue. I'll cover dinner. Save your money for school and gas."

"Okay. You get to meet Dusty." Blue kissed his way down the column of Derek's throat.

"Dusty?"

Blue smiled at the hint of jealousy in his lover's voice. He brushed his lips down Derek's sternum. "My new friend."

"Boy or girl?" The question ended in a gasp.

Blue paused from suckling Derek's nipple. "You'll see." He gave another lick, then shifted his hips and went for the other nipple, hoping to distract his master from further questions.

Blue soon found himself on his back with his hands pinned above his head. He wrapped his legs around Derek's waist, smug in the knowledge that his ploy had worked.

But then his ploys usually did.

Chapter Seven

Derek stood at the door, dumbstruck, his brain processing an unexpected piece of data. Blue looked up from where he sat cross-legged at the coffee table. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Finding his legs, remembering to breathe, Derek closed the door and strode to the kitchen counter. He set down the large bag of Chinese takeout and swept his gaze a second time over the attractive youths gathered around the table. There was Jodi with her purple-tinged ebony mane pulled up in ponytails, and April with her dark pink bob. And Blue, of course, his cobalt mop with its vein of white, his eyes smudged with a faint trace of kohl. All of them dressed with an apparent disregard for fashion, like a time machine had regurgitated the remnants of '80s chic meets '90s grunge, which was exactly what made the group's style so vibrant and fresh.

Not an unusual sight in Derek's apartment since the more sociable Blue had come into his life, but as Blue had informed him, the trio had acquired a fourth party. It was the silver-haired boy, the one Derek had seen in his recent dream, the one he'd racked his brain over as he tried to recall where on earth he'd seen this beautiful young man before.

With the boy right there in his home, it suddenly came to Derek. *The grocery store*. The blind boy he and Blue had seen that day at the grocery store...

His memory jogged, Derek flicked his gaze to Blue, his mind teeming with unspoken questions. *Who is this? Where did you find him? Why did you bring him here?*

Blue flashed his trademark impish smile. “This is Dusty. He's Jodi's neighbor. He's doing a rune reading for April.”

The newly introduced Dusty smiled and cocked his head toward the kitchen. “You must be Derek.”

The pleasant tenor sent shivers down Derek's spine. He swallowed and cleared his throat. “You must be Blue's new friend.”

“It smells like you just brought in Chinese.”

“Yes. Blue warned me the gang would be over, so I picked up a little something on the way home.”

Dusty's smile widened, the effect simply dazzling. “Chinese is my favorite.”

“Mine too,” Jodi said. She rose from the table, her gaze lingering on Dusty.

She crossed the loft and stepped around the kitchen island, a vision of the trendy rebel in her green Care Bears T-shirt and hot pink beads paired with purple stretch jeans torn at one knee. It was a garish combination that only Jodi-chan could pull off.

“Hey, Derek-sama.” With a tilt of her head, Jodi batted her amethyst eyes and offered one cheek.

“Hey, sweetie.” Derek leaned down and graced her with the usual kiss of greeting.

Jodi busied herself getting plates and utensils while Derek opened the bags and took out the various trays and cartons of entrees and rice. He considered setting aside the Kung Pao chicken for himself, given that he'd ordered from a place that prepared the dish with authentic Sichuan peppercorns, rendering it spicier than the Westernized version most establishments still served even after the ban on the imported peppercorns had been lifted a few years ago.

On the other hand, it was entirely too fun to watch Blue eat spicy food. Grinning to himself, Derek set the Kung Pao in the center of the makeshift buffet.

He stood back and watched with curiosity as Blue directed Dusty to the kitchen with a gentle grip of the elbow. He observed how Dusty casually accepted Blue's help without asking for any. He noted how Blue described the menu selections and prepared a plate for Dusty without coming off as condescending. This told Derek a few things—Dusty didn't like to ask for help but accepted that sometimes he needed it; Blue knew this of Dusty and respected that; and the two young men had developed an intimate, unspoken rapport between them in a relatively short span of time.

Interesting, Derek thought. Interesting indeed.

Blue prepared his own meal, pausing to sniff the Kung Pao before spooning a modest portion onto his plate. He took a seat at the coffee table beside Dusty. As their bared knees brushed, Blue flinched and pulled away, then relaxed and let his knee ease back against the other boy's.

Derek stood by in silence, taking it all in stride, when his head suddenly swam with the brilliant, beautiful vision of Blue and Dusty tumbling together onto the satin-sheeted bed as they tore at one another's clothes.

He caught himself gripping the countertop for support. "Jesus," he muttered under his breath.

When Blue rose from the table and made a beeline for the kitchen, Derek was waiting with a glass of milk in hand. His red-faced, speechless partner shot him an annoyed glance, then threw back his head and gulped down the milk. Derek chuckled quietly even as he reveled in the sight of Blue's slender throat stretched enticingly taut, his Adam's apple bobbing with each swallow.

Blue plunked the glass down in the sink. He glared up at Derek, his upper lip coated white. Derek laughed outright. "Step outside," he said, steering his brat toward the balcony door.

"It's hot out there," Blue said.

"It's hot in here," Derek murmured back. "Outside. Now."

It was moments like this when Derek wished he still smoked. He leaned over the balcony ledge and studied the roof garden atop the neighboring building, amazed to see a miniature orange tree ripe with fruit.

Blue stepped up beside Derek and propped his ass against the balustrade. "What's up?"

"You remember seeing him before, don't you?"

Blue smirked up at him. "I love how you ask questions without question marks."

"What do you mean?"

"There. You just did it again."

"Answer the question."

"Yeah, I remember him. How could I forget? You nearly tripped over yourself ogling his ass at the store that day."

"Why did you bring him here, Blue?"

Blue smiled smugly. "So you do know how to inflect a question."

"Blue..."

“Sorry.” Blue kept grinning like the cat that had swallowed the canary. He turned and hunched over, crossing his arms across the balustrade. He stared down at the traffic. “You want him?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“The kind with, I don't know, a question mark at the end?”

“After Cameron and Sasha, I thought we'd purged this threesome business from your system.”

“It would be different with Dusty, and you know it.”

“Exactly. Which means the dynamic wouldn't be to your liking.”

“It would be to yours, though.”

“Blue, I'm not going to enjoy it if you aren't.”

“I like Dusty well enough. I could deal. I suspect you could deal too.” Blue stood straight and peered back up at Derek. Sweat beaded his brow. “Damn, it's hot out here. How come you're not sweating?”

“I'm not the one who ate Sichuan peppercorns.”

“Asshole.” Blue socked at Derek's arm with a playful punch.

Derek snatched Blue's wrist and pulled the boy into his arms. He looked toward the French doors, catching sight of Dusty through a part in the curtains.

“He's blind, Blue. Don't take advantage of that.”

“Don't let Dusty hear you say that. He'd be offended that you'd assume he'd allow anyone to use him.”

“Point taken.”

“You still haven't answered my question. Do you want him?”

Yes, Derek thought. God yes, he wanted that boy, and with Blue, both of them together in his bed to do his bidding. And Blue was willing to make it happen so long as Derek gave him the word.

Finding his voice, he kept his tone level lest he betray his excitement. “If you want to bring Dusty to our bed, you approach him. You seduce him.”

Blue's brow furrowed. “Me?”

"This is your idea, Blue."

"But I want to watch you in action. I want *you* to seduce him. The idea turns me on for some weird reason."

Derek gave a firm shake of the head. "No. You want to bring him into the fold, you do the work. That is, if you're up to the task."

Blue stiffened his spine, the sense of challenge that Derek loved so much sparking those blue-gray eyes. "Okay, fine. I'll do it. And then what?"

Derek leaned in and brushed his lips against Blue's ear. "Then you'll be amply rewarded."

"In other words, you'll be waiting and ready."

Derek swallowed and looked back through the window. "Yes," he admitted. "I'll be waiting and ready."

He followed Blue back into the cool loft. It seemed the summer was due to heat up in more ways than one.

* * * *

Derek and Blue each picked one rune from the stones cupped in Dusty's hands. Derek toyed with the rune between his fingertips, wondering at the symbol etched into the smooth, polished surface. "Moonstone," he observed, identifying the gem.

"Yeah," Dusty said, his tone ringing of mild surprise. "It enhances intuition."

Blue eyed his selected rune with a skeptical lift of the brow. "How can you tell the future from a stone?"

"The power doesn't lie in the runes themselves." Dusty dumped the remaining stones onto the table with a small clatter and swept them into the black velvet dice bag. "They're a divination tool, like a tarot card or a crystal ball. They help me focus and tune into my ability. Let me see which one you picked, or should I say, which one picked you."

Dusty took the rune from Blue and smoothed his thumb over the symbol that resembled a backward number seven. He'd given April and Jodi full readings earlier, each of them proclaiming amazement at his insights, but with the evening drawing to a close, he'd opted to give Derek and Blue each what he called a single rune reading.

"Laguz," Dusty said. "This is the strongest of the feminine symbols."

“Leave it to Blue-kun to pick the girly rune,” Jodi teased, elbowing Blue in the ribs.

Blue flipped the bird without looking at her. “So what does that mean?” he asked Dusty.

“Feminine doesn't mean 'girly' but that it encompasses traits often associated with the feminine side of the spectrum. Laguz is associated with the water. You're constantly moving, changing, like the ebb and flow of the tide. You're impulsive and unpredictable, but only because you follow your instincts. Which means you're a touch on the psychic side, even if you don't acknowledge it.” Dusty gave a playful grin. “Laguz also tells me you're a sexually charged person.”

“Oooh!” Jodi and April giggled in unison.

Derek simply gave his pet a knowing look. Blue's cheeks flushed red.

“On the negative side,” Dusty continued, “water brings life, but it also drowns or destroys. Your impulsive nature tends to land you in risky situations.”

“No offense, but that's all kind of vague,” Blue said. “You could say that about anyone in this room.”

Derek remained silent, but as far as he was concerned, Blue couldn't have picked a more fitting stone.

Dusty smiled. “Nothing wrong with some healthy skepticism.” He closed his fist around the rune, his brow kitting in concentration. The light from the candle centered on the table cast his delicate features in an iridescent glow.

So beautiful, Derek thought, torn between the sympathy that the boy's blindness evoked in him and the baser desires spurred by the subtle chemistry simmering between the three men at the table. In spite of Blue's earlier admonishment that Dusty didn't expect to be handled with kid gloves, Derek pondered how far he should take things if Blue succeeded in bringing the boy to their bed. While he suspected Dusty was not as fragile as he looked, Derek also knew that to describe his and Blue's approach to sex as “intense” was an understatement.

Dusty pursed his lips, the crease of his brow deepening. Though Derek couldn't read the mood behind that eerie silver-eyed gaze, he sensed something troubled the boy. His lips moved a moment before he spoke, as though he hesitated.

“The one you trust cannot be trusted.”

Blue shot a questioning glance at Derek. In turn, Derek was flooded with an instant wave of guilt over the secret he'd kept from Blue since that past spring. *The DA's mistress, Martina...*

"What did you do this time?" Blue asked. "Buy another car behind my back?" It was clear from his teasing tone that he viewed rune casting as nothing more than novelty.

Inwardly shaken, Derek shrugged it off. "I woke up this morning in the mood for a Jag."

"Wow, I think you just cracked a joke." Blue turned back to Dusty. "What else does the stone tell you?"

"That's all," Dusty murmured, his tone uneasy. He dropped the stone into the bag. "Derek?"

Finding Dusty's reaction to Blue's reading curious, Derek passed him the rune, the brush of fingers inducing another shimmer of energy between them. From the corner of his eye, he observed Blue watching them closely.

"Jera," Dusty announced, his mood lightening. "You're resourceful and talented, with some type of specialized skill."

"Computers!" Jodi blurted.

"My man's got skills," Blue said. He cast a sly glance toward the bed.

Brat, Derek thought. He'd demonstrate his "skills" all over Blue's ass once their guests left.

Dusty ignored the interruption, taking it all in stride. "Jera represents the harvest cycle and the balancing of karma. It indicates a major turning point ahead, that the seeds sown in the past will see fruition in the future. This can be a positive or negative change, one of reward or punishment." Dusty folded his fingers over the stone, his face taking on the same look of concentration as before. "The one who wronged you will set things right."

At Dusty's pronouncement, Blue bit into his lip and gave Derek a furtive look. Derek wondered how much guilt still lingered over Cameron, and suspected the offer to recruit Dusty into a threesome might be Blue's way of seeking atonement.

Of course, the reading might not pertain to Blue, or anyone for that matter. Derek supposed time would prove the accuracy of Dusty's prediction.

“Well, that was all very interesting.” Blue abruptly stood and went to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator. “Anyone want seconds on Chinese?” Turning, he sank his teeth into an egg roll.

“No, thanks,” Jodi said. “If I eat another bite, I’ll spew.” The quieter April gestured in kind.

“I’ll take some more beef broccoli and fried rice if there’s any left,” Dusty said. The final rune put away, he cinched the pouch’s drawstring and rose. He stretched his limbs, his shirt pulling up to expose a smooth plane of abdomen, the waistband of his plaid boxer shirts peeking above his jeans. Derek tried not to stare.

“You scarfed down three platefuls while ago!” Jodi said, eyes trailing wistfully up and down Dusty’s lean form. “Where do you put it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Dusty patted his flat stomach. “I’ve been called a bottomless pit by more than one person. Jarod says it all goes to my head.”

Jodi’s cell phone chimed. She read the text message and heaved a sigh. “Better take it to go, Dusty-tan. Duty calls.”

Derek didn’t know much about Jodi’s situation outside of what Blue had told him, but from what he’d gathered, she’d taken on the role of caretaker for her family at a young age and was beginning to show signs of resentment. He’d also been given the impression that along with her nerves, her household finances were strained.

Rising, Derek blew out the candle and joined Blue in the kitchen. “Does your sister like Chinese?” he asked Jodi.

“She loves the stuff.” Jodi gave a proud smile. “I taught her to eat lo mein with chopsticks when she was in kindergarten.”

Derek started setting cartons and trays back out on the counter. “Blue and I will just throw these out after the second day. You and Dusty take the leftovers and split them between you.”

“Not the egg rolls!” Blue protested around a mouth full of food. He withered under Derek’s glare. “Leave me one for breakfast. I like them cold first thing in the morning.”

“Sure, thanks.” Jodi shrugged, but Derek sensed a deeper layer of gratitude beneath the nonchalance of swallowing one’s pride.

He stood in the doorway and watched Blue's friends walk down the hall to the elevator. Dusty had insisted on carrying the food in one arm while he navigated his white cane with the other.

He's a proud one too, Derek noted. And with a damned fine ass.

He thought of Blue's proposal on the balcony earlier. His blood went hot at another unbidden vision of Dusty and Blue together, their pale, naked bodies tangled and sweating in his bed.

"You're gawking again," Blue purred from behind. One slender arm slipped around Derek's waist.

Derek peered down at his tease of a boyfriend. "Go brush the egg roll from your teeth and then get your ass in bed."

"Yes, Sir." Blue gave a mischievous smirk and sauntered off to the bathroom.

Derek stole another glimpse of Dusty's ass down the hall. He thought of the rune readings.

The one you trust cannot be trusted.

The one who wronged you will set things right.

Shutting the door, Derek pushed further speculation or interpretation to the back of his thoughts. Time to show his brat some skills.

Chapter Eight

“Hurry, hurry,” Blue muttered under his breath. He tapped his foot for the elevator to arrive. He glanced at his costumed friends. April, the only one in the group dressed as female, had miraculously achieved eye-popping cleavage to fill out her rather revealing hot-pink dress. Meanwhile, the more buxom Jodi's hidden bindings allowed her to pass for a flat-chested samurai warrior. Blue worried Jodi's ribs would be sore by the end of the day, but he had to admit, she made a halfway decent-looking guy. Even Dusty's elf costume, thrown together at the last minute after he'd eagerly accepted Jodi's invitation to join their entourage, bore a professional finish.

Though he still wasn't certain what he'd gotten himself into, Blue had to concede that he and his friends looked pretty damned good. April had gone all out in constructing everyone's costumes, prompting Blue's suggestion that she consider fashion design school.

He still wanted to get the hell out of the building before Derek returned from the coffee shop. Between contracts, the computer tech had accepted a two-week rush job and was pulling his version of an all-nighter—in other words, working throughout the morning and afternoon on little sleep the night before.

The elevator chimed, and the doors hissed open. At the sight of his master clutching a tall cup of iced latte, Blue cringed. If there'd been a rock handy, he would have crawled under it.

Derek stepped into the hall and studied Blue's skintight black vinyl duds with a wry lift of the brow. “So this is what you've been up to on your days off from school.”

“It was Jodi's idea. I didn't want to hurt her feelings.”

“Of course.” Derek used his free hand to hold the elevator open. Jodi brushed past him, openly appraising him as she braced her butt against the support rail.

“You know,” she said, “if we colored your hair silver like Dusty-tan's, and dressed you in head-to-toe black leather armor, you'd look just like—”

“Hold that thought.” Derek leaned down and murmured in Blue's ear. “Leave this on when you get home.”

“You're a sick man.” Rolling his eyes, Blue joined his friends. As the elevator doors closed, he caught his master's parting smirk, latte raised in toast.

* * * *

Blue popped the heart-shaped *onigri* into his mouth. He chewed the sticky rice with a thoughtful crease of the brow. “Good texture,” he said.

Jodi knelt on the picnic blanket beside Blue, sharing the same patch of shade under a small tree. “Thanks,” she said, beaming with pride. “The automated steamer cooks it up just right. The rice holds shape perfectly.”

Dusty sat cross-legged between Jodi and April. His fingertips traced the boiled egg shaped like a fish. “How'd you do this?” he asked.

Jodi took a swig of melon soda before answering. “You peel the egg and press it into the mold while it's still hot, then put the mold in the refrigerator for about ten minutes.”

“How do you keep from burning your fingers?” Blue asked.

“You run the egg under cold water long enough to handle it,” Jodi explained. “It takes some practice.”

April studied the radish carved into the shape of a rose before dipping it into the accompanying cup of dressing. “Koreans do *dosirak*, not *bento*. We shake the box and mix it all up. But I bet my grandmother would sell these at the restaurant.”

“You think so?” Jodi said. Inspired to lend a Western twist to the traditional Japanese box lunch, she had prepared each of her friends a customized bento. Blue had unwrapped his *furoshiki* cloth and opened his plastic tray to find a meal themed around the color of his hair. Heart-shaped, blue-tinted rice balls and eggs were garnished with blueberries, blue corn chips, and blue raspberry fruit roll-up cut into stars, while a single blue candy heart declared “Luv U.”

Where Blue's theme tipped the cutesy scale, April's bento bore a delicate touch with its floral motif of fruits and vegetables cut and arranged like petals around an ounce cup of yogurt dressing. Dusty's meal boasted the most variety, his rice topped with fruit, cheese, and eggs presented in varying shapes and sizes so he could feel them as he ate, an added touch which Blue

found particularly thoughtful on Jodi's part. Her own bento proved a work of art, the centerpiece a mini rice sculpture of her favorite *Pokémon* character.

Jodi's creations couldn't be described as filling or nutritionally balanced, but they were visually pleasing, almost too pretty to eat, while the time and effort she'd put into making something special for each of her friends shone through. Blue found himself thinking that if he'd been born straight, he would have moved in with the girl by now.

Dusty nibbled an ear off a teddy bear-shaped piece of cheddar. He paused and frowned. "Something's wrong," he said, fumbling in his tunic for his cell. April had hidden pockets in each of their outfits so they could discreetly carry their phones.

Dusty flipped open the clamshell, revealing an oversized keypad with raised numbers. He hit one key for speed dial and raised the phone to his ear. "Jarod?" he said, brow furrowed. "You okay?"

He listened, pale face mantling rosy pink from his cheeks to his fake pointed ears. He let out a nervous laugh. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt. I've just got one of those funny feelings. Yeah, the really vague ones where I don't know shit other than something's off?"

Dusty laughed again. "Okay, sure. Don't forget the condoms, in case that's what I was picking up on. See you later." He flipped the phone shut and tucked it back into his tunic. "Crap. I hope his girlfriend isn't pissed."

"Is he still seeing the clerk from the convenience store?" Blue asked.

"Every night this past week. Sounds like they were going at it pretty hot and heavy."

"I'm sure they'll pick up where they left off," Blue said.

The quartet continued eating. A voice wafted across the courtyard.

"Oh my God. Pandora?"

April's head jerked around. "Oh hey, it's you!" With a bounce of her magical cleavage, she jumped up and went to greet yet another group of acquaintances with a round of kisses, gropes, hugs, and laughs.

Blue and Jodi had been floored to discover April already knew several convention attendees. It seemed their quiet friend had quite the thriving social life via the Internet under the persona of "Pandora." Between her revealing costume, the confidence evoked from wearing it,

and the steady stream of online friends who'd stopped to greet her upon recognizing her, the popular Pandora came off as a wholly different person than the shy, dutiful April-chan, outshining the exuberant Jodi for a change. Having only known her alias as an e-mail handle, Blue had now officially been introduced to the minor celebrity behind it, receiving a crash course education in the fact that there was more to April than met the eye.

A lot more, he thought as she bounced with another jiggle of the breasts.

One of her Net friends looked over at Blue, then flicked her gaze to Dusty. "Oh wow, my favorite pairing! Can I get a picture? Well, when you're done eating."

"That's okay," Blue said, setting his food aside. He aimed his voice toward Dusty with a playful coo. "You up for some cuddling, Dusty-tan?"

Dusty laughed. "I can think of worse things to be asked to do."

Within minutes of arriving at the convention, Blue had quickly deduced the motive behind Jodi's choice for Dusty's costume. It seemed certain female fans of the series wanted to see Dusty's character hook up with Blue's. Why, Blue had no idea, but he'd stopped trying to figure out girls long before he'd realized he was gay. As he and Dusty twined together on the blanket, more female passersby stopped and whipped out their cameras. Blue burrowed his face against Dusty's throat in the event a reporter lurked in disguise.

"They're so pretty," one picture-taker sighed.

"And actual boys, even," said another, dressed in male drag like Jodi.

"I can't decide which one's the *uke*," piped a third.

There was that word again. "Oh-kay, what's an *ooh-kay*?" Blue finally hazarded to ask.

Jodi took her place beside April and grinned. "It means you're the bottom, bitch! Now say 'cheese' and pucker up for the camera."

As they snuggled closer, Blue noticed his friend felt tense. "What's wrong?" he murmured in Dusty's ear, careful not to knock the pointed elf tip loose.

"I still feel like something's wrong, but can't put my finger on it."

"We're two gay guys being ogled by a bunch of women. You tell me." Channeling Derek's more mischievous side, Blue slipped his hand down to Dusty's ass. He gave a firm squeeze, eliciting a round of squeals, wolf whistles, and shutter clicks from their audience.

Dusty gasped, then laughed. “Pervert,” he scolded, hooking his leg higher up Blue's thigh.

Their groins pressed together, sparking an unexpected jolt of arousal. Flushing, Blue had to agree with Dusty's earlier assessment—there could be worse things to be asked to do.

And worse people to do those things with. Blue was beginning to think he was up to Derek's challenge after all.

He just wondered when he'd find the right time and place to make his move, and how Dusty would react.

* * * *

Blue checked the rearview mirror. Ensuring no more fire trucks needed to pass, he pulled back onto the road. In the full moonlight, he made out the winding column of smoke a few blocks away, placing the source in or near Jodi and Dusty's apartment complex. He had a bad feeling about this.

Jodi hit speed dial on her cell phone for her landline again. “Why isn't Allison answering?” she muttered, voice tense.

Dusty fared no better with his third attempt to reach his roommate's cell phone. “Shit,” he mumbled, brow knitting with worry, his voice quivering slightly. “Are we almost there?”

“Almost.” Blue quelled his instinct to floor the Mustang's accelerator. Better to get his worried passengers to the apartments in one piece than panic and cause more grief for the paramedics that were now barreling up behind him. Blue pulled back over to the right and let the wailing ambulance past.

“Oh God,” Jodi said. Blue glanced over his shoulder to see his friend's already pale face blanch while April clutched her hand for support.

Minutes later, Blue wheeled into the apartment entrance to find the parking lot blocked off by police cars. The complex was definitely the source of the fire.

Crap, Blue thought. He parked on the grass alongside others who'd done the same. Taking Dusty by the hand, he approached the pair of uniformed officers that stood guard.

The male officer looked Blue and Dusty up and down. “I didn't know it was Halloween.”

“He lives here,” Blue explained. He nodded toward Jodi and April. “So does the girl with the black hair.”

"That's a girl?" the officer asked.

Jodi rushed to the female officer, her hands folded in supplication. "Please let us in, please! My mother's disabled, and she's home with my little sister. I need to see if they're okay."

The officer studied Jodi a moment. She flicked her gaze over Blue, her eyes lingering where he held Dusty's hand. "You're McGowan's boy."

"Yeah." Blue stood straighter, prepared to take some flak even as he considered using his father's name to gain access to the apartments.

The officer's eyes warmed. "Good job at the Smith trial. Your testimony put that bastard in prison where his sick ass belongs." She lowered her voice. "My girlfriend and I are rooting for you, Shane." She nodded at her partner. "Let 'em in. These people need to check on their homes and families."

Blue thanked the officer as he ushered his friends past the checkpoint. "You never mentioned you're the DA's son," Dusty said.

"I didn't want to bore you." Blue followed the crowd. The scent of burning wood grew stronger, the crackle of flame getting louder.

"You testified against the Maple Street Killer."

"Yeah. I don't like to talk about it." Blue squeezed Dusty's hand a little tighter as they rounded the street. His stomach sank as the blazing structure loomed into view, a fireman atop a turntable ladder silhouetted against the raging flames.

Visible relief washed through Jodi's face. "Oh thank God, it's not my building." As soon as the words slipped from her lips, Blue saw the regret flit through her eyes. "Dusty, I'm sorry..."

"It's my building," Dusty said matter-of-factly, his grip on Blue tightening. "Help me find Jarod."

The quartet wove together through the crowd. A random voice wafted toward Blue. "You think the blind boy left something on the stove?"

Blue felt Dusty go rigid. "No," a second bystander said. "It was that asshole who grills out on the balcony. I've reported him twice to the landlord, and nothing was done."

"I knew it!" Jodi blurted. "That stupid motherfucker!"

“Yeah, well that 'stupid motherfucker' is homeless now,” Blue said quietly. And so was Dusty from the looks of it. The flames had been doused where they crossed the breezeway, only damaging the exterior wall of Dusty's living room, but the charred remains of the door and the soot-stained glass of the windows indicated smoke damage to the rest of the apartment.

“How bad is it?” Dusty asked. Blue told him. “That means the door was blocked,” Dusty said. “Do you see Jarod?”

“No,” Blue answered. “But the bedroom window is broken. I bet he hung and dropped.” He continued pushing through the rubberneckers with Dusty in tow.

He found Jarod clinging to his girlfriend and watching the fire with a forlorn gaze. Judging from their disheveled state of dress, they'd either been napping or doing the deed when the fire had broken out.

As Dusty spoke with Jarod, Blue scanned the common area. A few feet away, the responsible culprit huddled with his family, his expression dazed, his wife crying. A quick headcount showed all five children had escaped unharmed. Blue relayed this information.

Dusty sighed. “I feel sorry for them.”

“How can you feel sorry for that dumbass?” Jodi said a little too loudly.

“It's not the kids' fault,” Dusty said.

“Yeah? Let's hope stupidity isn't a genetic disorder,” she snapped, eyes livid.

“Chill out,” Blue urged, nudging Jodi toward April. “You're taking this worse than Dusty is.”

April took Jodi's hand and coaxed her away. “Come on. Let's make sure Allison isn't running around out here unsupervised.”

Blue gave April a grateful nod of thanks and turned his attention back to Dusty. For the next hour, he watched the firemen, updating his friend as their efforts progressed.

He listened in as Dusty spoke with the two teenagers who lived below the burning apartment. While the firewall had effectively barricaded the flames from invading their home, smoke billowed in thick, ugly waves from the windows that had shattered from the heat. Anything of theirs which survived the smoke would likely suffer damage from the water spewed by the gallon onto the building.

Jarod and the teenagers' mother returned from consulting the landlord. The harried mother addressed her children. "Management has two vacancies, both of them three-bedrooms. They'll let us have one indefinitely." Her face torn between a sneer and sympathy, she gestured toward the family whose father had started the fire. "By law, management can't evict them over this but can choose not to renew their lease. They get the other spare until their lease runs out next month, then they have to leave."

She looked toward Dusty and Jarod apologetically. "Housing code says we get dibs on the first one because we have more people. I can stay with family, though, if you two really need it."

"No, you need the space more than we do," Dusty said.

"That's what I told her," Jarod said. "Management says once that second apartment is vacant, we can stay there until a two-bedroom opens up. That'll give us time for you to consult the housing authority and get the paperwork approved on the transfer."

Jarod's girlfriend chimed in. "You can both stay with me. Dusty can sleep on the futon."

Dusty gave a wry smile. "I know you two've been thinking of moving in together, but Jarod feels responsible for me. Here's your chance."

"How'd you know—" Jarod stopped himself short.

Dusty smiled. "Call it a hunch. One you've just confirmed."

Jarod's girlfriend took Dusty by the hands. "You can stay as long as you need to. Maybe the three of us could rent a bigger place together."

"I'd feel like I was in the way," Dusty said.

"You can stay with me," Blue offered.

Dusty laughed. "With you and Derek? I'd be in your way even more!"

"Just a night or two," Blue said. "It'll get you away from this mess and give you a chance to clear your head before you decide what to do next."

"I don't know," Dusty said, seeming to weigh the idea. "You think Derek will mind?"

"No," Blue said. "But if he did, it wouldn't matter. It's my house too."

"Okay," Dusty said. "But just for the night. I don't want to impose."

He turned his face back toward the dwindling fire. The orange glow of flame cast his pale, handsome features and gossamer-spun hair with an ethereal glow. His sightless eyes glistened

with moisture, and Blue knew he was fighting tears. Touched by his friend's beauty, moved by the young man's plight, Blue resisted the urge to wrap Dusty in his arms and kiss him.

No, Derek won't mind your hot, young ass lounging around the loft at all, Blue thought, though his offer was motivated by genuine friendship. The guy needed a place to stay, pure and simple. Blue flipped his cell open and speed-dialed his master before Dusty could reconsider.

Chapter Nine

Blue woke with a start. He sat up in the bed, the sheets sliding down his T-shirt and shorts. He blinked, disoriented by the bright silver rays which filtered through the balcony door curtains.

Lunacy, derived from lunar, he mused. Old wives' tales of madness induced from sleeping in moonlight flitted through his slumber-dazed thoughts as his eyes focused and his mind made sense of why he'd woken.

He thought he'd heard Dusty call out, but his friend remained asleep across the mattress. Blue peered in the opposite direction across the moon-bathed loft to make out Derek's reclining form on the leather sofa. Blue was thankful to see his master had finally turned in at least a few hours before dawn.

When Derek had offered Dusty and Blue the bed while he took the couch, Blue had momentarily suspected his master's motives extended beyond hospitality toward their guest. After Dusty had emerged from the bathroom in nothing but boxer shorts without so much as a lewd lift of the brow from Derek, it became clear that the older man's graciousness stemmed from the same reasoning behind Blue's invitation of temporary shelter.

"You two enjoy your slumber party," Derek had said before returning to work at the computer. Blue had peeked from under the covers a few times to see if Derek looked back. Assured his master was truly immersed in work, Blue had finally succumbed to sleep. Now he sat wide awake while his master slumbered in peace.

Dusty mumbled and shifted. He rolled toward Blue, his hair shining like gossamer in the lunar rays, his flesh translucent where the sheets slipped down his bare torso. "No," he moaned.

Blue wondered if Dusty was dreaming about the fire. He reached out and cupped Dusty's smooth shoulder. He gave a gentle shake.

"No!" Dusty cried out, flinging Blue's hand away. "Stop!" He bolted upright, ribs heaving, eyes open wide but unseeing.

“Dusty, it's okay.” Blue spoke firmly, hesitant to touch his friend again but feeling the need to intervene.

Dusty's breathing leveled out. He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. “Not like this,” he murmured, voice shaky, limbs trembling. “Please not like this. My parents will hate me...they'll say I deserved it...”

Blue realized Dusty's vacant stare wasn't due to blindness—the other man's mind lay trapped in the dream. “Hey,” he said, his tone more urgent. “I'm here.”

“I'm going to die,” Dusty said. “I'm going to die, and there's no one here to stop him, no one here to help me. That's okay. It won't hurt after I'm dead. At my funeral, they'll say I'm burning in hell.” He went rigid again and clutched at his throat, gasping for air. “Hot. Ribbon.”

Fuck gentleness, Blue decided. He gripped Dusty by both shoulders and gave a firm shake. “Wake up!”

“Can't breathe...dying...”

“You're not dying, damn it! Wake the fuck up!”

Dusty uttered a sharp cry of surprise. “Blue?”

“I'm right here.”

Dusty's breath came in short, ragged gasps. “Where am I?”

“You're at my place. Remember?”

“Can't breathe. Need air.”

“Come on. Let's go outside.”

Blue led Dusty out onto the balcony, closing the door quietly so as not to disturb Derek, who was apparently exhausted enough to sleep through Dusty's rather vocal ordeal and Blue's attempts to quell it.

He showed Dusty to a chair, then pulled up the other seat to sit directly beside his friend. Dusty hugged his knees to his chest. The warm night breeze caressed his hair back from his face. “Oh God, Blue. It was horrible. There's a bad person out there, doing horrible things. And I felt it. I saw it.”

“It was just a nightmare,” Blue said. “You're understandably stressed about the fire.”

He thought of Dusty's odd phrasing toward the end. *Hot. Ribbon. Can't breathe.* Fire was hot, and smoke interfered with breathing, although Blue was hard-pressed to interpret "ribbon."

Dusty's brow furrowed. "It wasn't a stress dream. I've had nightmares like this from as far back as I can remember. I go through stages where I have them more often than others, but there's never been a connection to any stressful events in my life."

"So these nightmares are an ongoing problem?" Blue asked.

"Yeah. It's why I went through so many foster homes before that last one where I met Jarod. Everyone felt sorry for the poor little blind boy, until I woke them up a few times and freaked them out. I should have warned you, huh?"

"It might have helped," Blue said.

"I thought I'd be okay for the night. Guess I was wrong." Dusty angled his head toward Blue. "There's more to it, though. There's this way I imagine it must be like to see. In certain dreams, everything that I can feel, hear, smell, and taste blends together, to the point where it takes this tangible shape. That's how I 'see.'"

"Makes sense to me." Blue nodded his head out of habit.

"I explained it to a neurologist once," Dusty said. "She told me it's called synesthesia. It's commonly experienced by people who were born sighted and lost their vision later in life. It's rare for someone like me who was born blind.

"There's something else," Dusty continued, his tone hesitant, "something I didn't tell the neurologist or she would have had me committed."

"You can tell me," Blue encouraged softly. As someone who'd been misunderstood and criticized since birth, he'd learned long ago not to judge anyone.

"Like I said, I only experience this effect in certain dreams—the ones that come true." Dusty shivered in spite of the warm night. He drew his knees tighter.

"You mean these are like...psychic dreams?" Blue asked.

"Yeah. My sixth sense is vague at best when it comes to rune readings, or picking up on events that directly affect me, like the fire. But in these dreams, I see things happen to other people, while they're happening. I once dreamt a friend of Jarod's was hurt in a car accident. I saw it *while* it happened, Blue. It's like I was in the driver's head, which is crazy, of course,

because I've never driven. I saw him take a curve too fast, go off the road, and flip the car twice. I heard his bones break, I felt his head crack. The next morning, we found out he'd totaled his car and was in ICU with a fractured skull and internal injuries. The wreck happened just the way I'd seen it."

"That *is* crazy," Blue agreed. "Not saying you're crazy," he quickly corrected.

"That's not the half of it. There've been other dreams about complete strangers. I'll know something bad has happened, but I won't know to who or exactly where, only that it's happened. And then Jarod will turn on the news, and there it is! Like the commuter train that hit the school bus two years ago?"

"Oh yeah," Blue said, recalling the horrid casualties courtesy of a faulty train crossing gate. "My dad had to negotiate the settlement against the city. Did you 'see' that?"

Dusty's mouth faded into a grim line. "Yeah, I did. I woke up from that dream crying, and the story broke not an hour later. And I hate it, because it's always too late to do anyone any good! And then I feel like it's my fault somehow, that if I'd just seen it *before* it happened, maybe I could have stopped it. Like tonight's dream. I think this person was murdered, Blue, and there's nothing I can do. What's done is done."

Now it was Blue's turn to shiver. "I can kind of relate," he said. He briefly summarized the situation with Zack and the copycat killer. "I told Derek I feel responsible for the fact that a murderer is still out there. He told me I'm only responsible for myself. And that's how it is with you. I know it must be hard to see these things and think you could have helped, but you're not responsible for what happens."

"But what if you knew when the killer would strike?" Dusty said. "What if you could stop them beforehand and save someone's life? Would you agree with Derek then?"

"Under those circumstances?" Blue said. "No. I'd do whatever it took to stop the killer and prevent another death."

"Blue," Dusty said quietly. "I'm pretty sure I had a dream about one of the Maple Street Murders last year. I considered calling the police and telling them what I knew, but I worried they'd think I was nut job. That, and I figured any help I could give them was too little too late." He laughed wryly. "Hell, you probably think I'm a nut job now."

"No, I don't think that at all." Blue placed a hand against Dusty's back for reassurance. The skin there was smooth and warm.

"You don't believe me, either."

"I'm trying to be open-minded. You don't seem crazy to me."

Seeing that Dusty had calmed, Blue rose and led him back inside. As they slid under the covers together, Blue was surprised to find Dusty's body curled against his.

"I want my teddy bear," Dusty mumbled. "I hope the smoke didn't mess him too much."

"I guess we'll find out when we get your stuff tomorrow." Blue wrapped an arm around Dusty. In turn, the other man nestled closer and rested his head against Blue's chest.

"I've had that bear since I was a baby. The janitor found me with him in a bus station bathroom."

"Huh?" Blue asked, not knowing what else to say when presented with a bombshell like that.

"I was abandoned at the bus station when I was just a few hours old. The janitor found me bundled in a blanket in the bathroom sink. My mother left me with a teddy bear and a note that said my name was Dusty and to please take care of me because she couldn't. They didn't realize I was blind until the paramedics checked me out."

Dusty relayed the story with little emotion, his voice growing drowsy. His detached recitation only made his story all the more touching. What must it be like, Blue wondered, to matter-of-factly accept that you'd been deserted by your mother as a newborn?

An inexplicable lump rose in Blue's throat. He tenderly brushed the silver strands back from Dusty's brow.

"What are you doing?" Dusty asked. "Looking for the lightning bolt?"

Blue laughed. "It does sound like something out of a book."

"Really? I've always thought of it more like"—he paused to yawn—"a convenient plot twist to a cheesy soap opera."

"That too." On impulse, Blue pressed a kiss to Dusty's brow. "Get some sleep," he said, suddenly self-conscious of the way he cuddled with his friend under the covers. "And try to have a nice dream this time."

Dusty uttered something noncommittal. Blue stared up at the ceiling.

Abandoned in a bus station bathroom? It really was like something out of a book or soap opera, but having read of such incidents in the news, Blue supposed the story to be probable. Someone as unique and special as Dusty didn't need to fabricate tales for attention.

As for Dusty's claim of psychic ability, Blue didn't dispute it, but he couldn't exactly accept it, either. He still suspected the nightmare had been induced by stress, while Dusty's history of them could be attributed to abandonment issues. One thing was certain—Dusty believed the dream stemmed from something more, and Blue was not one to argue with someone's feelings. The other man was clearly in need of comfort, and understandably so. He stroked Dusty's hair, listening as his friend's breath slowed and deepened. As Blue sought to calm and soothe, the rhythm of Dusty's breath had the same effect, lulling Blue into a state of trance.

Dusty shifted. At the feel of one leg crooked up between his thighs, Blue was beyond caring. He pulled Dusty closer, content with simply snuggling and sleeping.

* * * *

Bleary-eyed, Derek stretched his arm toward the coffee table and fumbled for the cell phone. “Yeah?”

His eyes focusing in the morning light, he sat straight up, alerted as much by the sight on his bed as he was the voice on the other end of the receiver.

“Sure,” he told his caller absently. “Three o'clock is fine. See you there.”

He ended the call, then tossed the phone back onto the coffee table and rose from the couch. He padded across the loft and came to stand by the bed. He stared down, stunned by the breathtaking display that proved both touching and arousing at once. Part of Derek wanted to join the two beautiful boys entwined on his bed; another part of him wanted to leave them untouched in such an innocent moment while he simply drank in the visual.

He sat carefully on the edge of the mattress. He caught his hand trembling as he stroked a cobalt strand from Blue's cheek. The boy's eyes fluttered open; sometimes gray, others blue, they never failed to draw Derek in.

“Hey,” Blue said, his words slurred from slumber.

“Hey,” Derek murmured back. “You two look cozy.”

Blue's biceps bunched and flexed as he tightened his embrace on his sleeping friend. Derek recognized the gesture as a protective one.

"He had a bad dream," Blue said in hushed tone. "I took him out on the balcony and talked him down before we went back to bed."

"I suspect the fire stressed him out more than he let on."

"That's what I thought," Blue said. He appeared ready to say more, then pursed his lips. Derek wondered what, exactly, they'd discussed on the balcony, yet he felt neither threatened nor jealous of the obvious intimacy between them.

But God, the outline of their bodies joined beneath the covers was really getting to him. Derek shifted his legs, ignoring the discomfort of his prick tightening against his slacks.

Blue smiled slyly. "You like what you see?"

"I won't deny that the two of you make an alluring sight."

"Alluring, huh?" Blue's brow furrowed, yet mischief sparked his eyes. "You wouldn't say that if you found Cameron lying here in bed with me."

"I'd kick his ass," Derek admitted.

"What if it were Sasha?" Blue taunted, referring to the adventurous detour they'd shared together the past spring.

"Sasha respects the boundaries. I wouldn't find him like this with you in the first place."

"So what makes Dusty different?"

Brat. Derek opened his mouth to reply, but was cut short as a third voice chimed into the conversation.

"Who's Cameron and Sasha?"

Blue's eyes went wide while Dusty's remained closed. "Long story," Blue said. "I thought you were asleep."

Dusty untangled his limbs from Blue's and sat up. "I'm blind, not deaf. How's a guy supposed to get any sleep with you two running your mouths?" Scowling, he angled his head toward Derek. "You got any coffee?"

"You're not a morning person, I take it."

Dusty cocked a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I don't mean to sound pissy. I appreciate you and Blue letting me crash here. I won't impose on you for too long."

"Stay as long as you need." Derek rose, resisting the impulse to ruffle Dusty's hair, less concerned about Blue's reaction than that of his groggy, sleep-deprived houseguest. "I'm grabbing some Starbucks. Anything you two want in particular?"

"White chocolate mocha," Dusty said.

"That sounds good. Me too," Blue said, glancing at the clock. "Shit, good thing we're awake. We have to leave in an hour. The fireman said it would be okay to get stuff from the apartment today, so the landlord arranged for Dusty and his roommate to meet her at ten." He looked at Derek. "Want to do lunch when we get back? At noon like normal people?"

"I already have a lunch date this afternoon." Derek went to the door and slipped his shoes on. He normally didn't go out in the same clothes he'd slept in, but as he stole another glimpse of the boys in his bed, he found himself in sore need of a brisk walk around the block.

"Business again?" Blue asked, his tone tinged with disappointment.

"Something like that." Derek headed out the door before Blue could question him further. He walked swiftly down the hall to the elevator, running his fingers through his hair as he went.

Between his father's phone call and the tempting possibilities back at the apartment, what Derek really needed was a damned cigarette.

Chapter Ten

The brunette's eyes flicked back and forth between the two gentlemen seated at the table. She addressed the older of the pair as she poured bottled mineral water into a tall glass of ice. The clear liquid bubbled and hissed.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like Peter Fonda?" she asked.

"Him or Keith Carradine. I'm surprised someone your age knows that name." Austin grinned up at her, ever the charmer. His ginger hair had faded to gray since Derek had last seen him, yet it was still full and swept back from his face in a fashionable style. Gaunt where he was once slender, his skin bearing the telltale signs of former alcohol abuse, the six-foot-tall photographer still managed to cut a striking figure. Add in his designer glasses and casual chic attire, and the fifty-something gentleman indeed passed for an aging movie star with the charismatic vibe to match.

The waitress smiled back. "I've watched *Easy Rider* with my grandfather a few times. It's one of his favorite movies."

"Your grandfather?" Austin laughed with a mock wince. "Ouch."

The waitress smiled slyly. "Hey, Peter Fonda is still hot."

"For an old guy, right?"

She giggled. "That's not what I said!" Her gaze shifted back to Derek. "Are you two related? You sort of look alike except—" She paused, her cheeks flushing pink.

"The eyes," Derek finished, fixing his gaze back on the menu. It wouldn't be the first time he'd gotten that comment while in his father's company—as rare an event as it was to spend time with the other man.

"Well, no, you both have green eyes." The waitress laughed, attempting to cover her inadvertent rudeness. Not that Derek took offense; he simply found it tiresome. The mix of white with a hint of Asian features always threw people off.

The waitress took their meal orders, flirting with Austin as she answered his questions regarding the restaurant's organic vegetarian selections. She cast a few admiring glances toward Derek before sashaying off with a wiggle of her skirt-clad hips.

"She's angling for a big tip." Austin's gaze trailed wistfully after the young woman's ass. "I hope you don't mind eating at such an odd hour of the day. I'm still on Tibetan time. According to my inner clock, I should be having breakfast at sunrise right about now."

Derek shrugged. "This is my normal lunchtime."

"You're a night owl like your mother." Austin chuckled, his voice gravelly from his former smoking habit.

"I suppose." Derek sipped his drink. He'd skipped the wine list and opted for iced herbal tea out of respect for Austin's pledge of sobriety.

Austin took a swig of his mineral water. "Speaking of Sandy, how is she?"

Derek hated answering questions of that ilk from either parent. They'd been apart for over two decades; what did it matter to either of them how the other was doing? Yet each always asked.

"Haven't heard from her in months." Derek didn't bother explaining how she'd taken to e-mailing once a week the first several months after she'd personally witnessed the Twin Towers fall, the contact eventually waning back to the usual random correspondence.

"You should stay in touch with her better," Austin said. "You never know what might happen."

"You're one to give advice in that department," Derek said with a smirk.

"Point taken," Austin said. "I could have done better. Let me rephrase that—I *should* have done better. It's one reason I wanted to see you today."

"Let me guess," Derek said dryly. "This is the part where you tell me you're dying."

Austin folded his hands under his chin and smiled. "As a matter of fact, I am."

Derek froze, his tea an inch from his mouth. He set the glass back on the table and stared at the father he both loved and despised.

"From what?" Derek asked, his voice ringing hollowly in his ears.

“Pancreatic cancer. One doctor told me it's from the drinking. Another told me there's no link to alcohol use at all. Either way, seems my last ten years of sobriety was too little too late.”

“How long do you have?”

Austin shrugged. “Doctors gave me six months. That was three years ago. I went into remission for two, but the cancer's back, and it's spreading. I refuse to do chemo again.”

“Chemo?” Derek said. Austin had failed to mention any of this in his sporadic postcard mailings.

“Yeah. I gave Western medical science a try, but it made me feel worse, so I went in search of a more holistic approach. It worked, at least for a while. The monks gave me two full, healthy years the doctors didn't think I had.”

“That's what prompted your grand tour through the East,” Derek observed. “And here I thought you went to see Buddha on the mountaintop.”

Austin laughed. “Did that too. Buddha sends his regards.”

He looked out the window. Sunlight spilled unkindly over his face, exposing drawn, haggard features, ones which Derek now realized were due to more than the excesses of youth.

Austin's smile faded, his eyes dimming to weary resignation. “Nothing like a death sentence to put things in perspective. I've done some things I wanted to do, seen some places I wanted to see. Now it's time to let go.”

“What do I need to do?” Derek asked. “Any papers to sign or accounts to settle?”

Austin shook his head. “It's all taken care of. The only material possessions I've ever owned are the beach house and the cameras. I've already turned the house over to my last wife, seeing as she paid for it. I'm flying back to Tibet tomorrow to finish my 'grand tour,' as you've aptly described my life.”

“I've heard foreign journalists have recently been banned entry into the country.”

“You saw my *National Geographic* feature?” At Derek's nod, Austin smiled and took another sip of his water. “I've been sneaking in under my tourist visa rather than my media pass. As far as the authorities know, I'm a sightseeing *mei guo ren* with a fancy camera.”

“Sightseeing.” Derek gave a wry snort; inwardly, his growing sense of concern for his father's welfare caught him off guard. “I suppose you'll enjoy the view from your prison cell.”

Austin smiled patiently. “The monastery sits high in the Himalayas and is considered safe haven from the current upheaval. The monks will make my last days comfortable and allow me to depart this plane in peace and dignity.”

“And your body?” The question came out more brusquely than Derek intended, the reality of his words weighing heavily as he heard them escape his lips.

“I’ve arranged for my ashes to be scattered there.” Austin studied his glass a moment, then looked back up at Derek. “I’d say something corny, like I’m sorry I fucked up and wasn’t there for you. But you and Sandy did better without me.”

Derek nodded. “We did.”

Austin gave another chuckle. “I’ve always liked your ‘no bullshit’ attitude, Derek. It’s nice to know your mother and I did something right.” Austin slid an envelope across the table. “Open this with Sandy a few months from now.”

Derek studied the envelope. “I don’t like surprises. What is this?”

“Instructions.”

“You said everything was taken care of.”

“Everything but the photos. When I moved out of the beach house, I put the collection in storage. I don’t know that Sandy ever believed in me, but she believed in my talent. She recognized my vision. She’s the only one I trust with my work.”

Derek set the envelope aside. “After all these years, you think she’ll do this for you.”

“I know she will. There’s some good stuff in there, Derek. Negatives, contact sheets, candids, test shoots, the galley proofs of my book. All the usual suspects are accounted for, from John and Yoko to Sid and Nancy and everyone in between.

“No one wanted my work then, but they’ll want it now. I know through the grapevine that Sandy still has connections in the New York scene. I want her to auction off what she can and split the profit with you. Let your banker stepdad shuffle the funds around to keep Uncle Sam’s fingers from dipping too deep in the pie. Maybe that’ll make up for all the ramen you two had to eat when no one was buying my work.”

“My boyfriend eats ramen by choice,” Derek said stupidly, trying to absorb everything his father had just piled on him. “He can’t get enough of it.”

“You're in a relationship?”

“Yeah.”

“What's his name?” Austin asked.

“Blue.” Derek had no idea why he should divulge any details of his personal life to this man he hadn't seen in several years, but before he knew it, he was describing the sheltered DA's kid-turned-blue-haired cosmetology student.

Austin listened with rapt attention, nodding and smiling all the while. “Sounds like you've got quite the rebel on your hands. It's good to have someone around to keep you on your toes, make sure you don't grow too complacent.”

“Blue definitely excels at that,” Derek said.

The waitress returned with their food, then bounced away, her perkiness grating on Derek's nerves in light of his father's somber announcement. Austin picked at his salad of spinach and feta topped with dried fruit, a cup of plain yogurt on the side, making small talk in between bites about his delicate balancing act between fat, carbs, and enzymes since his body no longer processed food properly. He eyed Derek's plate and casually suggested a change in diet to avoid a similar fate down the road.

Derek's gourmet fare might as well have been cardboard. Each bite only served as reminder that it would be his last meal shared with the dying man across the table.

Plate half-finished, Derek pushed back his chair and started to pull out his wallet. Austin stopped him.

“This one's on me.”

Outside at the curb, Derek awkwardly took his father's extended hand. He stiffened as he found himself pulled into the other man's embrace.

Austin spoke in his ear. “None of us knows how much time we have. Make the most of it, Derek. Don't wait until it's too late like I've done.”

Derek looked at the envelope clutched in his hand. “How long should I wait on this?”

“I'll send you one last postcard.” With a wink, Austin ducked into the cab. As the driver eased into traffic, Austin looked out the rear window and gave a small wave.

A memory slammed Derek full force. The day he and his mother had moved out of Austin's loft to live across the city in another man's house, Derek had looked out the back of the cab and up at the loft window. Austin stood on the other side of the glass, peering through the gauze curtains Sandy had haphazardly tacked up. Derek had waved. Austin had raised his bottle of vodka in farewell, then turned and disappeared.

"Bastard," Derek mumbled. "You didn't even try to stop her."

Walking down the sidewalk, he fumbled for his keys. He gave the parking meter a precursory glance before slipping into the Porsche.

He looked at the envelope again, Dusty's rune reading playing through his mind.

"The one who wronged you will set things right."

When it came to Austin, no amount of money could ever set things right. Derek tucked the envelope into the glove box and then sat a moment, clutching the steering wheel, the engine idling.

Dimly, he grew aware of the radio broadcast. Some local televangelist's son had gone missing the night before under what the reporter termed "suspicious circumstances," prompting police to scour the city for clues. Apparently "suspicious" included drinking and partying in the Crossroads District, a favorite haunt of the frat boy set, making for a bit of scandal. Derek hated to think it, but maybe the press would latch onto the preacher's kid story and leave Blue alone.

He changed the station and wheeled away from the curb. Another news report mentioned police still had no leads on a mugging from the week before, the victim found with his throat slashed on the wrong side of town known ironically as Park Row.

Derek flipped through the stations, greeted with more news of local crime and corruption. It seemed music was off the roster for the day, with one DJ turning his daily retro '80s hour into an impromptu call-in session. Derek's ears perked at mention of the District Attorney.

"The way I see it," the caller said, "Jimmy Mack can't keep his own kid under control. How can we expect him to clean up this cesspool of a city?"

Fuming, Derek turned the radio off and drove in silence. He'd have to agree that Jim McGowan hadn't exactly lived up to his mission statement, but Blue didn't deserve getting lumped in with the DA's shortcomings.

His sense of protectiveness spurred, Derek wondered what Blue and Dusty were doing. He wished he'd had lunch with them instead. Coming up on a yellow light, he floored the accelerator and hurried through the intersection, ready to get home to the man he loved and their interesting houseguest.

Chapter Eleven

Blue helped Dusty run his laundry through three wash cycles with extra detergent before the garments smelled clean. Once they returned from the laundry room, Blue peeked out onto the balcony to see if Derek had arrived home. Finding the balcony vacant, he surveyed the few modest belongings Dusty had retrieved from his apartment. Blue had dusted the soot from the teddy bear as best as he could, fearing the worn, patched toy wouldn't survive the washing machine. Glass figurines, each in the shape of an animal, simply needed a soak in the kitchen sink. Other items, like the bouquet of white silk roses turned dingy gray, should likely be trashed, but Blue figured he'd give Dusty time to think on it.

He went back inside to find Dusty folding the laundry into tidy stacks on the bed. Dusty paused between T-shirts, feeling for the beaded safety pin hidden in the hem of each article of clothing. The white T-shirts went in one stack, the black shirts in another.

Back at the laundry room, Dusty had joked that he kept his wardrobe colors simple so that if he lost a safety pin, he didn't embarrass himself with clashing combinations. In turn, Blue joked that Jodi ought to use a similar system to combat her color-blind wardrobe choices. From there, Blue spent the next several minutes describing Jodi's unique sense of style to a fascinated Dusty.

"Her clothes suit her colorful personality," Dusty had said with a laugh. Blue agreed.

Taking inventory of the clothes on the bed, Blue opened the dresser and started clearing some space. He and Derek could share a sock drawer for the time being.

As he showed Dusty where to put the clothes, Dusty wrinkled his nose. "You stink."

Blue laughed. "So do you. Smells like you slept in a smoke pit. I guess we can take turns grabbing a shower."

The clothes put away, Blue opened the bathroom door and stood aside. Dusty brushed past, carrying with him a whiff of charred wood. Flicking his wrist left and right, the blond tapped the red-tipped cane against the travertine floor, sending short, crisp echoes through the room.

"Let's see how good my memory is." Dusty paused and touched the cane to the shower stall door. "There's the shower." He made his way across the room. "Sink...toilet...bathtub." He slipped the cane into the oversized tub and tested the basin's perimeter. "Wow. That's pretty deep. Is it marble?"

"Yeah. It's really nice. You want a bath instead of a shower?"

"A shower would be safer but...I've always wanted to take a bath in a tub like this." Dusty canted his head toward Blue. "Want to take one with me?"

Blue took a second to respond. He gave a nervous laugh. "Seriously?"

"We're all boys here. Jodi says Japanese men bathe together in public bathhouses."

"I'm sure she has some wild ideas about what goes on between men in Japanese bathhouses."

Dusty laughed. "Apparently so, judging from the direction the conversation took from there."

"That's our girl." Aware that Jodi made for a convenient topic of discussion between them, Blue considered Dusty's suggestion. The guy was basically homeless. It might be comforting to enjoy a little taste of luxury. "I guess we could hang out Jacuzzi style and relax awhile."

"All right." Dusty smiled. He collapsed his cane and passed it to Blue. "I think I've got the layout of the loft down. I shouldn't need the cane so long as you keep the floor clean and don't rearrange the furniture while I'm sleeping."

"Don't worry," Blue said. "Derek is a neat freak and likes everything in its place."

"Including you?" Dusty teased.

"Especially me." Blue laid the cane on the counter by the sink, then perched on the edge of the tub's platform. He started the water. Satisfied with the temperature, he rummaged through the selection of body washes for a scent that Dusty might like. "Here, smell this."

He turned to see Dusty had stripped down to boxers with both thumbs hooked in the waistband. Blue felt his face go hot.

Dusty paused from tugging down his underwear and leaned forward. He sniffed the opened bubble bath. “Mmm. Lemon and eucalyptus.”

“You've got a good nose.”

“Not really. I just pay more attention to smell.” Dusty stood straight and shucked off his boxers with no display of shame or modesty.

Blue guessed that being sightless eased any taboo concept toward nudity. And as Dusty had pointed out, they were both guys. Bathhouse patrons aside, athletes showered together in the locker room, so what was the harm of Dusty and Blue taking a bath together?

I'm supposed to seduce him for Derek, that's the harm, Blue thought, mortified, his face burning hotter. Yet even on a casual platonic level, Blue couldn't help but stare at his friend's smooth, pale body. His gaze drifted down Dusty's flat stomach to the nest of hair, the curls tinged with that same strange silver hue as the hair on Dusty's head. His cock lay flaccid, while Blue's suddenly became anything but. Blue's normal type or not, the other man was simply a sensual delight to look upon.

Dusty reached out his hand. “Help me in.”

Blue caught a glance of Dusty's ass before it slipped into the water, noting it was small but nicely rounded. At his errant observation, Blue's prick elongated another inch. Thankful Dusty couldn't see, then immediately berating himself for such a horrible thought, Blue slipped out of his clothes and joined his friend in the water.

Dusty pinched his nose, closed his eyes, and dunked under the water for a second. He popped back above the water's surface with a splash. He laughed. “It's like a miniature swimming pool.”

“Yeah, kind of.” Blue gave a tight laugh. Dusty looked really sexy with his hair soaked wet and plastered to his face. As Dusty raised his arms and combed his hair back, water glistened and dripped down his lean torso.

This is what Derek sees when he looks at me, Blue realized. Could this explain part of Blue's undue attraction to the blond? That in assessing Dusty as a potential playmate for Derek, Blue was coming to see him through Derek's eyes?

What would Derek do if he were presented with this beautiful, naked boy in his bathtub?

His cock now standing at full mast, Blue selected a bottle of shampoo and waded across the tub to Dusty. "Smell this," he said.

Dusty took a whiff of the shampoo. "Is that the overpriced strawberry stuff?"

"Mmm-hmm." Blue squirted a dollop in his hand and set the bottle aside. "It's also the best thing we have for fine hair like yours. Turn around and tilt your head back."

Dusty scowled. "I don't need help washing my hair."

Blue kept his tone patiently playful. "I know that, you goof. You can wash mine too."

"Oh." With a sheepish smile, Dusty turned and arched his throat. Blue lathered the shampoo between his hands and worked the suds through Dusty's baby-fine hair. He took care to stand at arms' length lest his wayward prick brush the other man's ass.

And what if it did? Blue thought. He wondered how Dusty might react. No, that approach would come off as too obvious and bordered on sleazy. Dusty seemed to be the type to respond more to a slow, sweet seduction. Bearing this in mind, Blue took his time massaging Dusty's scalp, his libido gradually cooling in the process.

"That feels good," Dusty said.

"We spent a week on shampooing at school," Blue said. "The masseuse instructor came in one day and showed us how to integrate elements of massage."

"Should I tip you when you're done?"

"You can pay me in ass," Blue quipped.

"You wish," Dusty shot back with a laugh.

Blue flicked on the showerhead and rinsed Dusty's hair, then followed up with conditioner.

Dusty sniffed. "Spearmint? I'll smell like a stick of gum."

"That's what I told Derek the first time he used this stuff on me. Is your scalp tingling yet?"

"Ooh, yeah. It feels neat."

"We'll leave that in for a few." Blue nudged Dusty around by the shoulders. He pressed the strawberry shampoo into Dusty's hand. "My turn." He took a breath and dunked below the water.

"Make sure I don't get any in your eyes," Dusty said after Blue surfaced. "Don't need the blind leading the blind."

Blue chuckled at Dusty's self-deprecating remark. He was truly coming to respect Dusty's way of playing the cards that had been dealt him in life. With that respect was a growing sense of affection laced with attraction. Blue may have agreed to seduce his friend for Derek, but he was beginning to feel something deeper for Dusty, both physically and emotionally.

They laughed together when Dusty slapped a handful of shampoo against Blue's ear, laughed again when he flicked on the showerhead and shot water across the room. Other than those two mishaps, the process went smoothly, until they'd taken turns rinsing the conditioner from one another's hair.

"Back scrub," Blue announced.

He slid his soapy hands in a circular motion between Dusty's shoulders. The other man's skin proved smooth to the touch. Growing aroused again, Blue considered making his move, but as he rinsed the soap away, Dusty gave a tiny shiver. Noting a slight chill to the water, Blue pulled away to unplug the tub.

At the sound of the drain opening, Dusty turned, a stricken expression flitting across his features. "Done already?" he said, his laugh strained with a nervous edge.

Blue found the reaction odd. "I'm letting some of the water out to run more hot."

"Oh, okay." Dusty eased back against the edge of the tub and slouched a little deeper into the water, his cheeks mantling with a soft rosy hue.

As the tub warmed, it struck Blue that Dusty had shivered from pleasure, not cold, and that there was a reason his friend didn't want to get out yet. He turned off the faucet and plowed back through the water.

"Fuck subtle," Blue said.

"Huh?" Dusty asked.

Blue dove in for the kill. He pressed against Dusty, his cock brushing an equally rigid length. His suspicion confirmed, Blue took advantage of Dusty's open-mouthed surprise with a kiss.

Dusty's body tensed, then yielded. His tongue slid into Blue's mouth while his hands slipped up Blue's back. He pulled back a moment, his expression puzzled.

"What's wrong?" Blue said, fearing Dusty might change his mind.

“Your tongue is pierced,” Dusty said. “That’s what you click against your teeth all the time.”

Blue laughed softly. “It’s a bad habit.” He pried Dusty’s mouth with another kiss, taking it slower, sliding his tongue deeper.

Dusty met the kiss and slid his hands around to Blue’s ribs, emitting a startled sound when his fingers came into contact with a pierced nipple. He found the second piercing and offered each a tug, sending a zing of pleasure to Blue’s already throbbing prick. Blue moaned into Dusty’s mouth and eased his hands down to cup an ass cheek in each palm. He gave an experimental squeeze. *Nice.*

Dusty pulled back again. “Is Derek cool with us doing this while he’s not around?”

“What makes you think he’d be cool with it at all?” Blue found the wording of Dusty’s question rather interesting.

“You wouldn’t do this behind his back. You love him too much.”

There was a time when I almost did, Blue thought with a twinge of guilt. But that was in the past, and Dusty was right—Blue wasn’t doing anything Derek hadn’t already approved in advance.

“Trust me,” Blue said. “He’s completely cool with it.”

“Good.” Dusty sighed. He offered the next kiss, brief but searing, catching Blue off guard this time, only to stop once more. “It’s been hard to hold back from hitting on you. I wasn’t sure if you and Derek play that way, or if you’d even want me.”

“Derek and I both want you,” Blue murmured. He started to work his lips down the column of Dusty’s throat, taking in the fresh scents of soap and shampoo on the other man’s skin. “Does that bother you?”

“No.” Dusty sighed, dipping his head back. “I’m flattered. I have it on good authority you’re both hot as sin.”

“Well, Derek is.”

“So are you. I can tell by the way voices follow you when we walk through a crowd.”

“It’s because of my hair.”

Dusty smiled. “No, they’re usually talking about your butt.”

“Really?” Blue pressed his lips to Dusty's rapidly thumping pulse point. “What about Derek? How do people react to him?”

“They, um—” Dusty's breath hitched at the flutter of lips across his collarbone. “They stop talking altogether. He makes them forget themselves for a moment.”

“That's Derek all right,” Blue murmured. “So now that we've got all this out in the open, let's stop discussing what we want and just do it.”

“You mean shut up?”

“Something like that.” Blue ducked his head lower to toy with Dusty's nipple.

Dusty let out a hiss. Encouraged, Blue teased the pink circle of flesh with short, rapid flicks, relishing the way the nub of the nipple stiffened with each dart of his tongue. He nipped and sucked and licked some more. Dusty's breath quickened, his cock twitching with each ministrations.

“Sit up here,” Blue instructed. He supported Dusty under the arms and gave a quick heft. In turn, Dusty lifted from the water and rested his rump on the platform.

Blue was fascinated. The things he could do with someone his own size, with the water to buoy their weight. He hooked a hand under each of Dusty's knees and pushed back, propping Dusty's feet on the ledge of the platform, leaving the other man's thighs spread wide.

“I'm cold.” Dusty's teeth chattered slightly, his flesh dusting with goose bumps. He leaned his head against the wall.

“Not for long.” Blue kneeled down in the water, bringing his face level with Dusty's prick. He traced his tongue up the line between Dusty's balls, continuing up the length of the shaft. Reaching the crown, he parted his lips and began to suck.

“Oh God,” Dusty moaned. His fingers wove through Blue's damp hair with a gentle tug to the scalp.

Blue sucked harder, making strategic use of his tongue ring to enhance the experience for Dusty. Finding he wanted to show his friend the ultimate pleasure, he paused long enough to wet his fingers with spit before teasing the middle one against Dusty's hole.

Dusty groaned. “Stick it in,” he urged.

Goaded by the blunt request, Blue complied. Having never fingered anyone's ass but his own, he noted the texture of the tight, hot passage with curiosity. He plunged his finger in and out, all the while sucking the cock in his mouth, matching Dusty's subtle thrusts as he moved his head back and forth. Sensing that Dusty wanted more, Blue introduced his index finger and sought the sensitive spot that he knew, from his own experience on the receiving end, would bring the other man over the edge.

The grip against Blue's scalp tightened; the muscles around his fingers squeezed in time to the rising moans that filled the air. Blue knew he'd hit the spot. He increased the pressure, fingers curling back and forth. At the cry that echoed through the room, hot cum washed over the back of Blue's tongue and filled his mouth. He gulped down each slick, salty drop in triumph until nothing remained to be swallowed.

Breaking suction, Blue rose from the water, one wet body sliding up the other. He kissed Dusty again, delighting in the pliant mouth yielding to his. It was Blue's turn to gasp at the hand encircling his cock.

Dusty worked him, pumping the shaft with short, sharp jerks, the suds from the bubble bath serving as lubricant. He squeezed and tugged the crown almost painfully with each upstroke, a method which appealed to Blue's masochistic urges. As Blue let out a satisfied hiss, it struck him that Dusty must jack himself off that way—which meant the blond liked a little bit of pain mixed in with his pleasure as well. Blue's friend was surprising him more and more by the second.

Nearing climax, Blue locked his knees and buried his face against Dusty's throat. "Harder," he whispered. "Pull harder."

At the first wave of release, Dusty gripped just below the cockhead and held tight. Blue yelled out, his body trembling, his cum spilling over Dusty's fist. He collapsed forward, pulled in by the arms and legs that wrapped around him in a tight embrace. As he caught his breath, he felt Dusty's frame flinch, then relax.

"We have company," Dusty calmly stated.

Head pressed beneath Dusty's chin, Blue turned to see Derek leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed. Acting casual, as if Derek shouldn't be surprised to arrive home and discover his

boyfriend in the heat of passion with another man in the bathtub, Blue studied his master's expression, one which currently hovered between bemused and aroused.

"We're taking a bath," Blue told Derek.

"I see that."

"Jodi says Japanese men bathe together in public bathhouses."

"I'm sure Jodi-chan entertains rather interesting notions as to what, exactly, goes on in a Japanese bathhouse."

"That's what I said. Are you okay with the two of us like this?" Blue asked.

Derek arched one eyebrow. "Is this a trick question?"

Blue laughed with relief. He turned his face back toward Dusty's throat. "I told you he'd be cool with it."

Derek's shoe heels echoed off the tile as he crossed the room. He rarely wore shoes in the house, a fact which indicated the rather vocal encounter sounding from the bathroom had prompted him to investigate upon entering the loft.

Derek sat on the edge of the tub without looking at either of the men clinging together beside him. He unbuttoned his right sleeve cuff. Rolling the sleeve just past his elbow, he skimmed his fingers back and forth through the water's surface. "The water's freezing, Blue," he scolded.

"I'm nice and warm," Dusty said, still wrapped around Blue.

Blue watched Derek closely. Here Dusty's naked body sat in full view, entwined with Blue's no less, yet Derek's gaze landed anywhere but. "Run some more hot water and join us," he suggested.

Derek unplugged the water. "You two will turn into prunes. Get out."

"And then what?" Blue flashed Derek a coy grin.

"Get dressed. I'm taking you two out for Mongolian grill. I'm curious to see how our bottomless pit here fares with the all-you-can eat buffet."

"I am kind of hungry," Dusty said.

"Didn't you just have lunch?" Blue asked Derek.

"My meal was a bit lacking."

Noting Derek's reticence, wondering what had happened at lunch, Blue made a mental note to pry for details at a more private time. He stepped out of the water and into the towel Derek held open for him. "Let me get this straight. You just walked in on us fucking around, and you're taking us out to eat?"

His question met with silence, Blue extended his hand and led Dusty out of the tub. As Derek passed Blue a second towel, he finally looked, his eyes sweeping longingly over Dusty's body before fixing on Blue with a level gaze.

"I'm taking the day off tomorrow." Derek turned on his heel and strode out of the bathroom.

"Oh." Smiling, Blue wrapped Dusty in the towel. He pulled his friend close to murmur in his ear. "Better get your strength up. That man can go for hours."

Chapter Twelve

Blue toyed with his third plate of food, his stomach heavy from beef, followed by chicken, and now shrimp stir-fried with vegetables and rice. He forked a shrimp tail into his mouth and looked across the restaurant toward the grill station.

Dusty had prepared his fourth plate of raw ingredients with assistance from Derek, who still seemed distracted by whatever had gone down at lunch. Plate full, they leaned together against the bar and waited while the cook cracked an egg onto the hot grill. With a hiss and sizzle, the cook added in Dusty's mixture of meat, noodles, vegetables, and seasoning oils with a dexterous scrape of double-wielded spatulas.

One of Derek's earlier concoctions had momentarily caught fire thanks to the chili oil he saturated it in. Shaking his head at the recollection, Blue studied his tall, handsome master with the pretty, silver-haired youth. The two made an attractive pair as Derek casually gripped Dusty's elbow and murmured in his ear. They drew stares from their fellow restaurant patrons, ranging from curiosity to shock to hostility; but as had been the case when Blue had helped with Dusty's previous three plates, the gawkers turned away once their eyes found Dusty's. Sad, Blue thought, that blindness allowed for two men to touch in public without recrimination.

Dusty turned his face up to Derek and said something back. As his lips moved, his cheeks flushed pink. Blue wondered what the two were discussing to garner such a reaction. He experienced a sudden flare of jealousy; to his surprise, it was directed at his master rather than his friend. Blue had spent more time with Dusty, slept in the bed with him, comforted him after a nightmare, and seduced him in the bathtub. Who was Derek to step in and start laying on the charm?

I agreed to seduce Dusty for Derek, Blue reminded himself. To successfully maneuver a threesome, he knew he'd better get past the possessiveness Dusty had inadvertently brought out in him.

The cook returned the steaming plate of food with a wide smile. Derek nodded in thanks, then led Dusty through the maze of tables, drawing a few more glances in passing. Once Dusty was situated, Derek took his seat across the table beside Blue. Together, the couple watched in amazement as Dusty plowed through the heaping pile of stir-fry. Dusty paused long enough to breathe and wave his chopsticks in the air.

“The best thing about Mongolian grill is I never know what I’m biting into next.”

“I thought *you* ate a lot,” Derek murmured in Blue’s ear. “You must have worked a number on him in the tub.”

“I heard that,” Dusty muttered between bites. Several minutes later, he cleared his plate.

Blue pushed his own unfinished plate away. He found himself in the rare position of declining dessert, while the next item on Dusty’s menu proved to be a do-it-yourself sundae from the dessert bar.

Blue dispensed the chocolate-and-vanilla soft serve ice cream into a small bowl. He studied the selection of toppings. “What do you want on this thing?”

“Surprise me,” Dusty said.

Blue treated his friend to a little bit of everything with a sloppy, colorful sundae that rivaled any grade-schooler creation. Though the button on his shorts threatened to pop, he shared a few bites of ice cream at Dusty’s behest. Derek sat back and quietly took in their playful banter.

Blue left the table with the thought that it had been one of his more enjoyable dining experiences. As he popped a complimentary breath mint into his mouth, he wondered what lay in store after the trio arrived back at the loft. At the thought, a shiver of anticipation coursed through his limbs. He slipped his hand into Dusty’s, resisting the urge to kiss his friend in the parking lot.

Derek took the wheel behind the Mustang. Blue opened the passenger door and pushed the bucket seat down.

“Who gets shotgun?” Dusty asked.

In a moment of inspiration, Blue tugged Dusty after him into the backseat. “Neither of us.”

They tumbled into the car together with a twist and clash of limbs. Blue gave Dusty a quick kiss on the mouth.

“Mmm, minty fresh,” Dusty said. He licked his lips, then traced the tip of his tongue across Blue's lower lip. Blue nipped Dusty's tongue between his teeth and sucked it into his mouth. The remainder of his breath mint tingled and melted between them.

The Mustang rumbled to life; radio music wafted from the speakers. Blue broke the kiss to catch the narrowed green eyes staring back at him from the rearview mirror.

“You two should be wearing seatbelts,” Derek said.

“You should keep your eyes on the road,” Blue shot back, but he buckled himself in while Dusty did the same. Leaning across the seat, Blue murmured in Dusty's ear. “What do you want to do when we get home?”

“Anything you and Derek want.”

Blue could work with that. “You like it rough?”

“A little.”

“Ever tried bondage?”

Dusty appeared unfazed by Blue's suggestion. “No. Guys are always scared to try anything adventurous with me. They think I'll break.”

“I don't think you'll break. You want to try? Derek's great at tying knots.”

“Maybe. I'll try anything once. Maybe twice.”

They kissed some more, the cool, crisp taste of mint lingering on their tongues. Fingers threaded Blue's hair. In turn, Blue slipped his hand under Dusty's shirt, vaguely aware that the music had stopped. They froze at the news broadcast.

“—body of the local televangelist's son was found early this morning in a grassy vacant lot behind a construction site. The 22-year-old was last seen Monday night leaving popular dance club Planet Z in the Crossroads district. Witnesses report Rhodes was seen getting in a brown four-door sedan with an unknown white male of indeterminate age.”

“The Crossroads,” Derek muttered. “Where the rich kids play.”

“At least it didn't happen in Oakwood for a change,” Blue said. “Not that it makes any difference,” he added, immediately regretting the irreverent tone of his comment. As his father often said, murder was an equal-opportunity crime, and death discriminated against no one.

“Police aren't releasing official details at this time, although one source says the victim died from apparent strangulation and appears to have been sexually assaulted.”

Blue felt his friend's chest deflate. “Oh God,” Dusty said.

“One unidentified witness has come forward with claims that the victim was a closet homosexual and often left the club with strangers for random sexual encounters. Pastor Reginald Rhodes, known for his outspoken views and public campaigns against gay marriage rights, has declined comment on speculation regarding his son's activities the night of the murder and requests that his family be left to mourn their loss in private.”

“Great way to be outed to your family,” Derek muttered.

“I don't feel so good.” Dusty's complexion blanched, his voice quavering.

“Should I pull over?” Derek calmly asked.

“No, my stomach's fine.” Dusty gave a dry laugh, his face unsmiling. “Me and my stomach of steel.”

Blue held Dusty's hand in silence for the rest of the car ride. It looked like the night's festivities had been called off.

* * * *

Dusty curled against Blue on the couch, listening quietly to the television documentary on feudal Japanese samurai. In turn, Blue leaned against Derek and stroked Dusty's hair, the pleasant scent of spearmint wafting from the fine blond strands. Blue wondered if his friend was truly paying attention to the drone of the narrator.

Derek, on the other hand, seemed a little too purposely immersed in the show, though Blue suspected his master shared the same reservations against taking things further with Dusty that evening. Blue still wasn't sold on the idea that Dusty had somehow “seen” the murder, but there was no denying the eerie coincidence of the timing, or the details of Dusty's nightmare when compared to those divulged by the police.

One fact was certain—the news report had left Dusty visibly shaken. He clearly needed comfort, and Blue offered it as best as he could.

The narrator launched into a discourse on homosexual practices among samurai. In his modulated voice, he blandly explained how young warrior progeny slept with their seasoned

masters as part of their training. The custom lay in the belief that sex with women feminized and thus weakened the developing warrior, while relations with another man only served to bolster his masculinity.

“Sounds like a valid argument to me,” Blue said.

“I wonder if Jodi's watching this,” Dusty murmured.

Derek chuckled. He shifted his legs, causing Blue's upper body to slide down. Dusty readjusted his limbs, twining one hand through Blue's hair while crooking his knee to Blue's ribs.

Blue peeked up to catch Derek's lingering gaze before it shifted back to the television. His master was holding back. They both were.

Blue's breath rushed from his lungs at the unexpected kiss. He returned the favor, matching Dusty's desperate urgency as their tongues twined together.

“You sure?” Blue managed to ask.

“Yeah,” Dusty murmured. “I just want to forget everything for a while.” He dove in for another kiss.

Blue opened his mouth and accepted it with another clash of tongues. He heard the TV turn off and felt Derek's legs shift again. *Gotcha*, he thought.

As Dusty slipped Blue's shirt up his ribs, Blue curled forward to tug it off. He went to help Dusty do the same but saw the blond already halfway there. He lay back against Derek and smirked up at him. Derek's eyes sparked in return with the sheer fire of lust, then roved down to where a topless Dusty helped Blue out of his jeans.

Naked, Blue felt vulnerable and aroused at once. He'd quite enjoyed playing nude submissive between two dominant men, but with an equal partner like Dusty, the imbalance proved discomfiting. Seeking to remedy the situation, he tugged Dusty's boxers and shorts down together.

Blue sighed at the brush of lips following his treasure line. As Dusty's mouth lit on the crown of his cock, Blue arched his back and thrust upward. He groaned at the sensation of his shaft sliding into Dusty's hot mouth, then gasped sharply at the tug of suction.

Dusty gave head like he did handjobs, with hard, swift, almost painful ministrations. Blue liked it, so much that he soon found himself on the verge of climax. He cried out in protest as Derek stopped Dusty with a firm grip against the scalp.

“Slow down,” the older man said with controlled ease. “Make him wait.”

Dusty complied; Blue moaned with a smile. Derek had stepped in and taken charge, just like he'd wanted.

Blue held back from coming as long as he could, reveling in the long, lingering glide of Dusty's tongue up his shaft, grunting with each nip of suction against the crown. Letting himself go, he bucked his hips and pumped his cum down Dusty's throat.

Dusty swallowed every drop. Licking his lips, he slid back up Blue's body, their lips meeting in a salt-tinged kiss.

“So whaddya want to do next?” Blue asked, breathless, excited by the knowledge that the night's festivities had just commenced.

Dusty gave a sly smile. “I want to get fucked.”

Blue had to hand it to his friend—once they got started, the guy held nothing back. He shifted his gaze back up at Derek. “That would be your field of expertise.”

Derek cocked an eyebrow at him. The rules stated that Blue couldn't be fucked by anyone else. They'd never set any restrictions for Derek, and Blue had just granted the master permission to do with Dusty as he pleased.

* * * *

Blue stretched on the mattress, hands crossed above his head. When they'd first transferred their activities to the bed, Derek had glanced at the toy box, then looked at Blue with a subtle shake of the head. Considering Dusty's upsetting dream, Blue had silently concurred that bondage might not be the most appropriate element to throw into the mix.

The scene playing out before Blue's eyes proved delicious enough. Dusty straddled Blue's thighs, his cock glistening with lube. Derek kneeled upright behind him, shirt unbuttoned, trousers open and barely clinging to his hips. Derek's right hand deftly worked Dusty's prick, while the left slipped up and down the crack of Dusty's ass. Just when it seemed Dusty would come, Derek skillfully stalled the process. Dusty moaned, his cock swollen and twitching.

Blue's prick surged in turn, his inner voyeur intrigued. He was content with watching, but didn't complain when Derek pushed Dusty's head forward.

"Get Blue wet," Derek instructed.

Dusty wrapped his mouth around Blue's cock for the second time that evening. Readjusting his technique from their earlier encounter on the couch, Dusty took it slow and sweet as Derek guided his head but added his rough trademark suck around the crown before sliding back down.

Through hooded gaze, Blue saw Derek working his fingers in and out of Dusty's slicked ass. Blue wanted to watch his master fuck the other man, wanted to feel the moans of pleasure resonating through his prick as Dusty continued to suck him off.

Without warning, Derek jerked Dusty back. The break of suction sounded, leaving Blue's prick throbbing in the cool air of the loft. Derek whispered something in Dusty's ear, his narrowed gaze fixed on Blue all the while.

Dusty's lips curled in a slight smile, a sense of mischief playing across his features. He leaned down and crawled up Blue's body.

"What are you two up to?" Blue asked, his suspicion piqued.

Dusty ground his slicked ass against Blue's prick. "I'm not supposed to tell you."

Blue gasped at the friction, unconsciously thrusting up against Dusty. At the feel of the hand around the base of his cock, Blue peered over Dusty's shoulder. "Derek, what the hell are you doing?"

Derek met Blue's question with a wicked smile. "Giving you the one pleasure I've yet to show you."

Blue felt his cock shift, the head coming to rest between the cleft of Dusty's ass. On some unspoken cue, Dusty lifted his hips, then lowered back down. Something hot and wet and tight gripped the crown of Blue's cock.

Blue's eyes went wide. He gripped Dusty by the shoulders, attempting to push his friend away. "Fuck. No. I can't do this."

Dusty grimaced as he slid down another inch. "It's okay, I'll do the work." He slammed down, head whipping back with a flash of silver, and cried out. Blue reacted in kind, head

pressed back into the pillows, his breath rushing from him as he clawed his nails into Dusty's flesh.

He didn't have time to think on it, his mind barely registering that he was inside Dusty—*oh God, he was inside Dusty*—and it proved the most exquisite sensation ever. Surrendering, he lost himself in the rhythm of muscles clamped around his prick, the passage plush, wet, and welcoming where it enveloped him, then hot, tight, and merciless where it pulled against him.

Spiraling closer to climax, Blue peered over Dusty's shoulder. Pants to his knees, Derek rested back on his haunches, jacking off with slow, methodical strokes as he took in the two men fucking on his bed.

Dusty ground his hips on the downslide, quickly distracting Blue from Derek. “You like it?” Dusty asked through gritted teeth.

Blue answered between moans. “God. Yes. You feel good.”

“So do you.”

Dusty took Blue's hand from his shoulder and guided it to his cock, still sticky with lube. Taking the hint, Blue managed to focus as much on Dusty's pleasure as his. He spit in his hand to recharge the lube and started jerking Dusty off with a sure, steady grip.

Dusty planted his palms against Blue's chest and dropped his ass down with the hardest slam yet. He held there, muscles squeezing impossibly tight, his angelic face turned heavenward as he emitted a series of short, ragged moans. Hot spunk dribbled down Blue's hand, the bursts coming in time with his own as merciless waves of pleasure coursed through him and sent his senses reeling.

Dusty curled forward and nuzzled his face against Blue's throat. Breath came in warm, rapid puffs against Blue's ear. “Told you...I wanted to get fucked.”

Still inside Dusty, Blue opened his mouth to respond but stopped short at the muffled groan that sounded from the foot of the bed.

He peered at Derek. The half-dressed man sat with a dazed expression, hand glistening with cum, his handsome features suffused from the glow of climax.

Blue cocked a smile. “Hey, forgot you were there.”

Derek's eyes focused and cut Blue with a sharp glare. “You won't next time.”

Next time. With smug triumph, Blue angled his face toward Dusty's. Meeting his friend's lips, he found himself lost in a long, languorous kiss.

* * * *

The dawn breeze teased Derek's hair back from his face, its kiss cool against his brow but damp with the promise of humidity. A bird nesting in a nearby balcony greeted the early hint of sunlight with its song, while the beginnings of morning traffic stirred several floors below. As one who preferred a nocturnal schedule, Derek bore a particular affection for this almost mystical time of day, before the sun fully rose and shed its unforgiving pall across the city. He looked away from the laptop and stared out past the balustrade at the mirrored skyscrapers, the dusky hue reflected in their glass panels a scant shade brighter than the sky behind them.

The balcony door clicked open, redirecting Derek's attention. Blue stepped outside in his robe. Toweling his hair, he padded across the concrete with the lithe, smooth gait that had caught Derek's eye nearly a year before in a seedy little bar that had since burned down.

Blue took a seat across the table. "I thought you were taking some time off," he said, his tone accusing.

"I'm checking my e-mail. Dusty still in the shower?"

Blue smiled slyly, eyes gleaming like the cat that ate the canary. "He needed to recoup. We got creative with the conditioner and traded handjobs. You missed it."

"The stamina of youth." Derek closed out the message from his father. Austin had touched down in London and was waiting to board his flight to Bahrain. He promised to send a final e-mail once he reached Kathmandu, before he went offline and took a small plane across the mountains into Tibet.

Blue pursed his lips a moment. "I wanted to talk to you alone."

"About..."

"I don't get it. According to our rules, Dusty can't fuck me, right?"

"Correct."

"But I can fuck him?"

"You didn't enjoy yourself earlier?"

"It was..." Blue paused, seeming to be at a loss for words. "Incredible. But don't answer my question with a question. That's worse than you asking one without a question mark."

"I discussed it with Dusty at the restaurant. He prefers to bottom."

"Okay, but when the hell did we decide I top?"

"I believe Dusty was on top."

"Smartass. You know what I mean." Blue leaned across the table, his expression earnest, his volume lowered. "I gave you permission to fuck him. I *want* you to fuck him. I want to watch."

Derek pondered his pet's words. He wanted to make Blue happy, but that was one request he refused to honor. Just as Blue's ass had belonged exclusively to him from the moment he'd stolen the boy's virginity, Derek had vowed to take no other. Tempting as Dusty's tight, scrumptious ass had proved earlier in the bed—and God, it had been tempting, with Blue urging them both on—Derek refused to cross that line. A brat like Blue needed a firm hand lest he take an inch then run well past a mile. Somebody in their relationship had to maintain order, and as the dominant partner, Derek accepted that the responsibility lay with him. He'd be hard-pressed to keep Blue in line if he didn't keep his own desires in check.

"Those are the rules," Derek said simply. "Follow them, or no one plays."

Blue gave an exasperated sigh. "Fine. But I learned something tonight that you should bear in mind—I liked being inside Dusty, but I'd rather have you inside me."

"Does that mean you don't want to top Dusty again?"

"I didn't say that." Smirking, Blue rose and stalked back toward the door. He glanced over his shoulder. "Turn off that laptop, or you don't play, either." He stepped inside and shut the door with a decisive click, windowpanes rattling from the slight show of temper.

"Yes, Sir," Derek said, his brat safely out of earshot.

He saved the draft for the e-mail he'd started to his mother in another window, then powered the laptop down and went back inside before his lover and their guest took anymore liberties without him.

Chapter Thirteen

"Dusty, wake up!" Blue pled. Dusty flailed back at him.

"No, let me go! Let me go!"

Derek sat up, the sheets dipping down his waist. "What the hell—"

"He's dreaming again. Help me!" Blue struggled to hold Dusty's hands down before he got smacked and scratched again.

"*Dusty.*" Derek spoke with commanding authority. He wrapped his arms around Dusty from behind and held firm.

"It hurts!" Dusty strained against Derek's grip, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. "Make him stop! Please make him stop!"

"What do you see?" Derek asked.

Blue jerked his gaze to Derek. "What the fuck? He needs to wake up!"

"Grass. Tall grass. The man. He has me down on the ground. He's wrapping something around my throat." Dusty gagged for air. "Can't...breathe..."

"What is it?" Derek asked.

"Goddammit!" Blue cried. "Wake up!"

"Hot," Dusty said, his face contorted in a grimace, the veins bulging in his throat. "Ribbon."

Desperate, Blue reared his hand back. "If you don't snap him out of this, I'm slapping him."

Derek turned Dusty in his arms and gave a firm shake. "Dusty. Wake up."

"Dying...can't breathe..."

"Now," Derek growled. He gave another shake.

Dusty's head whipped from the force. Eyes flying open, he gasped like a drowning man coming up for air. His hands free, he gripped his throat. Ribs convulsing, he let out a series of short, barking coughs which turned to hoarse, ragged sobs.

"Blue," he called, feeling frantically around the bed.

Blue took his hands, then pulled Dusty into his arms. "I'm right here. Derek too." He cast Derek an accusatory glance. What the hell had Derek been thinking, prodding Dusty for details like that?

"It's happening again," Dusty whispered, tears hot against Blue's chest. "There'll be another body found, in another grassy lot."

"*Shhh*. It was just a dream."

"It was more than a dream!" Dusty tore away from Blue. "You don't believe me!"

"I believe that you believe," Blue said patiently.

Dusty's lips curled in a smirk. "In other words, you think I'm batshit insane."

"I didn't say that." Blue threw his hands up and looked to Derek for support.

Derek rose from the bed and slipped into his robe. Tying the sash, he strode into the kitchen. "I'm getting you a drink, Dusty. Something to calm you down."

Refrigerator light spilled into the kitchen, silhouetting Derek's form. Blue stared, incredulous, at the bottle that Derek set on the counter. "Vodka?"

"The vodka's for me." Squinting in the light, Derek checked the expiration date on the quart of milk before setting it on the counter beside the liquor. He took a cup from the mug rack. With quiet amazement, Blue watched Derek proceed to do something never witnessed before.

"You want some too?" Derek asked Blue.

"Sure."

Minutes later, Dusty cradled the mug of instant hot chocolate between his hands. *What, no marshmallows?* Blue nearly quipped. Instead, he thanked Derek and took his own cup. He breathed in the scent of warm cocoa, then blew gently across the beverage to cool it.

Back in the kitchen, Derek poured himself a shot of vodka on the rocks before stepping out onto the balcony.

Dusty took a tentative sip of his milk, coating his upper lip with chocolate. "I'm sorry for making a nuisance of myself," he said. "What the hell time is it, anyway? Or day, for that matter?"

"That's a good question." Blue squinted at the clock. After their shower, he and Dusty had slept most of the day while Derek worked, then the three of them had fucked around most of the night. Blue had played bottom to Derek, getting pounded from behind while simultaneously fingering and sucking Dusty off. He'd wanted to come in Dusty's mouth, but in his excitement over bringing his friend to climax, Blue came all over the sheets, earning a sound smack on the ass from the master. From there, he'd been "forced" to go at Dusty with a dildo, his own climax restricted by the cock ring while Derek sat back and watched. The experience had been pleasant, but the timeframe disorienting. "Four in the morning. Monday—I think. At least I hope, or I've missed a day of class."

"Wow," Dusty muttered. "You have to be at school in a few hours, and Derek's only slept a little after being up for, what, two days straight?"

Blue shrugged. "It's okay. Derek's on what I call 'Vampire Standard Time,' and I'm used to pulling all-nighters with him."

"Does he wake up yelling and hit you in his sleep?"

"That? No, can't say he's done that. He's found other creative ways to wake me up, though. Found myself handcuffed a few times so I couldn't get away—not that I usually want to."

Dusty laughed wryly. "You two make a perfect match. I'm honored you've let me in on things." He sipped his drink again, his brow knitting thoughtfully. "I start taking phone calls today at eleven. Are you sure that won't interfere with Derek's schedule?"

"Derek sets his own hours," Blue said. "He'll work around you, don't worry."

"I know we've decided Derek and I won't play while you're gone, but aren't you, I don't know, worried about leaving us two together? I mean, you and I've messed around without him."

"It depends. You gonna ask Derek to take a bath with you?" Blue teased.

Dusty laughed again, his tone warming up. "I don't think the Japanese bathhouse line would work on him."

"Derek's better behaved than I am," Blue said, meaning it as a joke but knowing it to be true. "That's not what you're worried about though, is it?"

“No,” Dusty confessed. “It’ll be kind of weird spending the day here with him. I like Derek and all, but he’s kind of quiet. I’m more comfortable around you. I’m used to spending time with you.”

“You’ll be fine,” Blue said. “You’ll be busy working and eating expensive takeout while I’m on my feet cutting hair all day. It’s me coming home that you have to worry about. I suspect Derek’s gonna wear both our asses out tonight.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll sleep better afterward.” Dusty’s smile faded. “I’m sorry I snapped at you while ago. I know it’s hard to believe I see these things. Hell, if I was in your shoes, I’d be skeptical. I know you’re trying to understand, and I appreciate that.”

“It’s okay,” Blue said.

“What did I say in my sleep?”

“You said you were down on the ground in some tall grass. You said you saw ‘the man’ and that he wrapped something around your throat.”

“Anything else?”

“You said ‘hot,’ and then ‘ribbon.’ Same thing you said last night.”

“Hot ribbon,” Dusty muttered. “You’re not the first person to tell me I’ve said that in my sleep.”

“So this is a recurring theme?”

“Yeah. I think it’s my way of saying ‘red ribbon.’ I associate the word ‘red’ with heat. It’s how I see colors, by associating them with a tangible sensation.”

“So what’s the significance of the red ribbon?” Blue asked, playing along, trying to help Dusty rationalize his dream.

“I don’t know. Are you still in touch with the detective from the Maple Street case?”

“I have his private cell number,” Blue said, guessing why Dusty asked. “I could arrange a meeting.”

“Could you? I can’t see things before they happen, but maybe I could help the police find this guy before he acts again. If I tell them about the murder before they find the”—his words caught with a visible shiver—“the body, do you think they’ll listen to me?”

“I don’t know,” Blue said, “but it’s worth a shot.”

Setting his mug on the nightstand, he picked up his cell phone. He considered calling his father first, just to exert a little more pull, but lately it seemed Blue had a little pull of his own. He hoped Detective Thomas didn't mind a pre-dawn telephone call, particularly given the psychic mumbo jumbo Blue meant to sell him on, but in the event Dusty was truly on to something, timing was of the essence.

"Thomas here," the familiar voice answered on the other end of the line.

"Hey, this is Blue, er, Shane McGowan. I hope you don't mind me calling so early."

"That's okay, son. I'm already up and on the job. What can I do for you, Shane?"

Blue smiled. He liked Detective Thomas. Just a few years from retirement, the older gentleman played the role of "good cop" and had been supportive of Blue during the Maple Street investigation.

Taking a deep breath, Blue gave the detective his pitch. He finished his summary of Dusty's dreams with a speculation of his own. "This may sound like a strange question, but was either of the victims strangled with a red ribbon?"

Thomas remained silent on the other end of the line. *He doesn't believe me*, Blue thought. *This must be how Dusty feels all the time.*

Thomas finally spoke. "I'm at a crime scene now, Shane. We got a call late last night from a convenience store clerk who takes a short cut home through a vacant lot. Victim's still fresh, already been ID'd. He was last seen at the Crossroads, just like the one we found night before last under similar circumstances."

"Was he gay?" Blue asked, stomach sinking at the possibility of another young man made to die in fear and pain simply due to his sexual orientation.

"The grieving fiancée claims her man was straight as a board, but one of his frat buddies says it was a different story when alcohol was involved."

So the killer was targeting and luring collegiate closet cases. Blue's mouth went dry. "Was he strangled like the preacher's son?" he asked. "And is there a red ribbon involved somehow?"

"Press botched details on the first case. They were more interested in the preacher's kid angle than getting their facts right. Neither victim was strangled. "

"Oh."

“Their throats were cut from ear to ear.”

Blue opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. *Red ribbon. Hot blood.*

Thomas's voice drifted a moment as he addressed another person on his end. “Shane, I'd like to talk to your friend.”

His bearings regained, Blue found his voice. “You think he can help?”

“Maybe. I've got to clear him as a suspect first, seeing as he knows things he shouldn't.”

“He's got a solid alibi for both nights. And—” Blue covered the receiver with his thumb and squeezed Dusty's hand. “Sorry, Dusty, but I have to say this. It's important.” He spoke back into the phone. “He couldn't have done it. He's blind.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sergeant James let out a long, low whistle at the Mustang. “What a beauty. Where'd you hijack a sweet ride like that?”

“My boyfriend,” Blue said. “He lets me borrow it.”

James's lip curled in distaste. “We can only imagine why,” he muttered.

“You're just jealous because your boyfriend doesn't let you drive his car.”

James's lewd snort almost passed for laughter, but the sneer that twisted his face was anything but amused. He lifted the yellow tape. “Come on. We don't have all day.”

Taking Dusty's elbow, Blue led his friend under the tape. They'd been advised to wear long pants in the knee-high grass, and Blue was sweating under the late afternoon sun in his tight black jeans paired with matching T-shirt. Dusty looked a little more aerated in his baggy cargo pants and oversized white tee, but a swath of silver bangs lay plastered to his forehead. Blue reached out and brushed the hair from Dusty's face. Sergeant James rolled his eyes at them and looked away.

Fucking homophobe. Ignoring the slight, Blue welcomed the sight of James's more considerate partner.

Lieutenant Thomas extended his hand to Blue with a firm shake. “Hello, Shane. I'd say it's good to see you again, but I sure as hell wish it were under better circumstances.” His gaze shifted. “You must be Blue's friend, Dusty.”

“Yes, sir.” Dusty extended his hand toward the detective. As Thomas took it, he studied Dusty curiously. “Can you see at all, son? Shapes? Light?”

“No, sir. The cause is brain-based, not ophthalmological.”

“Is that so?” James stepped in and rudely waved his hand in front of Dusty's face. The lieutenant shot him a stern glance of warning.

"Nope, didn't see that," Dusty said with a slight smile. "But thanks for cooling me off a little. It's pretty hot out here today."

"I'll have to apologize for my partner," Thomas said. "He's a bit skeptical about your claims."

"And you?" Dusty asked.

"I'm open to possibility."

"I'm surprised you agreed to see me so early in the case," Dusty said. "Don't you usually call in psychics as a last resort or after the case goes cold?"

"Off-the-record?" Thomas said. He cast another look of warning at James, who stood quietly by, his mouth pressed shut in a firm line. Thomas turned to Blue. "There was more than one killer behind the Maple Street Murders. I think the copycat is back."

A rush of vindication flooded through Blue. "I tried to tell you Zack didn't commit all the murders! And no one listened! Not even you!"

"I listened, Shane. I believed you, because I already knew that fact myself. But my hands were tied. My superiors wanted the case wrapped up nice and tidy with a neat little bow, and Smith gave us a full confession."

"A coerced one," Blue snapped.

"I had nothing to do with that," Thomas said, patient as usual. "Someone got to Smith in the jailhouse. He came to me with the confession, and the higher-ups told me not to question it. And so I played along, knowing full well another killer was on the loose. Unfortunately, the only course of action left was to bide my time and wait for the bodies to start turning up."

Blue tried to remain calm, reminding himself that Thomas was a good man who'd been forced to deal with a case of politics-as-usual. "So you think Zack's copycat is behind these new murders. Why?"

"Every serial killer leaves a calling card. Contrary to common belief, they don't use the same methods every time, but their narcissism dictates they leave their personal mark on the scene in other ways. It's those little details that tip us off to a serial case, and it's those elements that help us tell a copycat from the real deal. Those are the details we keep from the press and the public, so as not to compromise the investigation."

“So there's a link between the copycat murders and these recent ones,” Blue said.

“Exactly. I can't tell you what that link is, but I assure you, one exists.” Thomas turned back to Dusty. “Shane tells me you usually 'see' in your dreams, but sometimes pick up impressions when you're awake. I'm going to give you a starting point and then stand back and let you have the run of the scene.”

James grunted. “We should get official department approval on this freak show before we let him take another step across that field.”

“I'll worry about that if I'm asked,” Thomas said. “I didn't get where I am by following protocol these past thirty years, son, and neither will you.”

Turning his back on his younger partner, Thomas led Dusty by the elbow across the field. Blue stood back and watched, James waiting beside him.

“I ain't his 'son.' I can't believe that old fart's wasting our time with this spooky *X-Files* shit.”

Blue smiled thinly. Where Thomas had taken on the stereotypical role of fatherly “good cop,” James proved the bad one and played the sardonic factor to the hilt. “You made detective yet, Sarge?”

“Take my test next week.” James pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and lit one up.

Blue wrinkled his nose at the smoke. Stepping a few feet away, he watched Dusty. The blond took the folded cane from his pocket and whipped it open with a flick of the wrist. He made his way cautiously across the field.

Thomas had arranged a meeting at the scene of the first murder since all evidence had been gathered by the police, followed by a private cleanup crew brought in by the city to disintegrate the blood with a special enzyme solution. Looking at the field now, the green grass rippling in the scant breeze, a flurry of butterflies flitting around a patch of goldenrod, it was hard to imagine a gruesome murder had been committed here only a few days before.

James chuckled under his breath. “I'll be damned. Maybe Thomas isn't getting as loony in his old age as I thought.”

“What do you mean?” Blue asked.

“Keep watching.”

Dusty paced a few feet, then stopped, brow furrowed. “I feel...fear. He was scared.” He turned in his steps, a troubled expression marring his features. “He shouldn't have come. He should have known this could happen. It's what he gets for being sick, for wanting another man.”

James snorted. “It's a scam. Your friend doesn't 'see' shit.”

“How do you know?” Blue asked, his ire raised a notch. Dusty had risked accusations of insanity, of even partaking in the crime, and offered to assist the police out of the kindness of his heart. James would do well to show a little more respect.

James's face spread with a smug smile. He nodded back toward Dusty. “Like I said, keep watching.”

Dusty froze. He dropped his cane and resumed walking, hands out, stumbling in the opposite direction from which he'd been steered. Thomas stared after him, a hint of surprise ghosting his stoical features.

Dusty cried out and dropped to his knees. Blue tore through the grass before James could hold him back.

“Oh, God.” Dusty trembled, face gone ashen. “It happened here.”

Catching up, James jerked Blue back by the shoulder. “No, stay back.” He stared down at Dusty. “No fucking way. Thomas is screwing with me. Only explanation.”

Blue looked down to see Dusty kneeling, legs splayed, hands between his knees, in a circular patch of mowed grass, the surrounding stalks bent, crushed, or uprooted in various places. Blue peered back to his right at James, realization sinking in.

Thomas had started Dusty off in the wrong spot, to test the validity of his abilities. And Dusty had just proved himself. Thank God the cleanup crew had cut the grass and cleaned the blood, at least what hadn't soaked into the soil beneath where Dusty fell.

Dusty's lip quivered. “Feel dizzy. He had too much to drink.”

Thomas came up to Blue's left and peered down at Dusty with awe. “What do you see, son?” he asked, his tone calm, soothing.

“A man. A tall man. He seemed nice at first. That's why they trust him. They always trust him.”

Thomas nodded over at James. “You getting this down?”

“Yeah,” James muttered absently. He pulled a notepad and pen from his jacket pocket and started writing.

“What else?” Thomas asked Dusty. “We know about the victim. Can you sense anything else about the killer?”

Dusty shivered, arms dimpled with gooseflesh in the sweltering afternoon heat. “I can't. It's too horrible.”

“I've seen it all, son. Tell me.”

Dusty's voice lowered to a whisper, tears pooling in his eyes. “He takes them while they're dying.”

“Why? To punish them? Redeem them?”

“No. Because he can. Because he likes it. Just because he likes it.”

Thomas wiped his hand down his face. He turned to James. “Got all that? Gives us a new angle to work from.”

“Whatever,” James muttered, scribbling furiously in his notepad. “Nothing a profiler couldn't have told us.”

Blue looked with worry at Dusty, who appeared to be going faint. “He needs to stop.” At Thomas's nod, Blue reached out to Dusty. “You gonna be okay?” he asked, supporting his friend.

As they walked back across the field, Dusty spoke in Blue's ear. “I know this sounds awful, but I'm hungry. Starving. Doing this took everything out of me, and I just want to eat now.”

Reaching the cars, Thomas handed Dusty his cane. “You boys like Tex-Mex? Great place just up the road, everything made from scratch. Even Mr. Food Critic here approves.”

James opened the passenger door of the police issue sedan. “It's not bad.”

“I love Tex-Mex,” Dusty said.

“How can you guys go straight from a crime scene to dinner?” Blue asked.

Thomas shrugged. “It's all in a day's work, son. Can't think on an empty stomach.” He swept an envious gaze over the Mustang. “You want to trade cars?”

Blue laughed in spite of the sickening aura of violence that seemed to permeate the hot, humid air. “Only if you want to trade boyfriends.”

Thomas winked. "Guess I'll pass. James has kind of grown on me."

Grim-faced, James ignored the three men sharing a laugh at his expense and slammed the sedan door shut.

* * * *

Blue's not-so-empty stomach roiled and gurgled with the lurch of the elevator. "That burrito was huge," he moaned. "I can't believe you ate a dozen tacos and wanted more."

Dusty's T-shirt pulled up where he patted his own stomach, flat and smooth as ever. "Thomas said that's what his expense account is for." His face grew somber. "I wonder if he'll make good on our deal."

"He will. Thomas is a good man."

When the detective had asked Dusty what he'd like in exchange for his services, Dusty had initially stated he just wanted to see the killer caught. Before the meal was over, however, he'd asked if Thomas could find out about his mother.

"Left at the bus station?" Thomas had asked, James smirking in disbelief in the background. *"There's a police report stashed in a box or on microfiche somewhere, son. I'll see what I can turn up."*

While Blue thought it was a gracious bargain on the detective's part, he hoped Dusty didn't learn something truly horrific about his heritage, like that his mother had been a drug-addicted prostitute, or his father a wanted criminal for rape or murder. Nightmares and purported psychic abilities aside, Dusty was one of the most kind, caring, and responsible people Blue had ever met. It seemed he'd grown up just fine in foster care without his baby-dumping mother to thank for his upbringing. Why find the woman now?

Blue kept these thoughts to himself. "We haven't had a chance to talk about personal stuff since Derek dropped you off at the salon. How'd it go with him today?"

"We pretty much stayed out of each other's way. He worked at the computer while I sat on the bed and cast runes for my clients."

"That's no fun." Blue tugged Dusty by the belt loop. "I didn't get to do this today, either."

Their hips met, bringing their groins together with a spark of friction. Blue coaxed a kiss from Dusty with a brush of the lips and a flick of the tongue.

Dusty pulled back and laughed. “You taste like tacos.”

“So do you.”

Blue gave another kiss, tugging Dusty's lower lip between his teeth, enjoying the sense of playfulness the two of them seemed to share. The elevator dinged, prompting them to pull apart. Blue's neighbor Sadie stepped in, tall and svelte in her high heels and usual black clothes. The attractive thirty-something photographer had updated her look for summer with fresh blonde highlights in her pixie cut hair, her willowy limbs lightly tanned and displayed by a tight sleeveless top and hip-slung Capris. Open-toe sandals displayed a cherry red pedicure to match her sculpted fingernails.

“Blue,” she said with the bright, dazzling smile that always left him feeling warm and fuzzy. Her gaze swept openly over Dusty.

Blue made introductions. Sadie took Dusty's hand with a bangle of silver bracelets. A look of sympathetic realization sank in as she studied her new acquaintance's face.

Which was why Sadie's next statement caught Blue wholly by surprise.

“God, you're gorgeous. Have you ever modeled?”

Chapter Fifteen

Derek teased his lips down a smooth curve of ear. “You as hot as I am?”

Sadie's long, lithe frame melted back against him, her head level with his. She murmured, her voice deepening to a raspy *mezzo soprano*.

“You sly devil. You've been holding out on me, Derek.”

“If you only knew.” Cupping one hand at her hip, Derek threaded his opposite arm around her waist. With his fingertip, he zoomed in on the source of Sadie's pleasure.

“God yes,” she said, her whisper almost a moan. “Right there. Perfect.”

She snapped the shutter, capturing the pose. Derek zoomed the camera shutter back out.

“You have a good eye for composition,” she said, snapping the next shot. “Looks like you picked up a few tricks of the trade from your father.”

“I suppose I learned through osmosis.” Derek's gaze drifted from the scene in the digital viewfinder to the live models posed on the velvet-draped platform. It was a wonder either he or Sadie could focus at all.

The photo shoot had started innocently enough. Somewhere along the way, the boys had lost their clothes, the less modest Dusty spurring Blue's sense of challenge. Now they lay together, pale limbs entwined, their groins and asses strategically hidden under a black satin sheet.

God, they were beautiful. A shame Sadie would have to crop out their faces with the focus strictly on those smooth torsos and locked limbs, but Sadie agreed that Blue's identity remained best protected.

“So who are you marketing this set to?” Derek wondered aloud. “The gay market?”

Sadie let out a soft laugh. “You'd be surprised. I know a few Midwestern housewives and career girls who'll eat this up like candy. Slide your left leg higher, Blue. Flash me some thigh.”

Blue's cheeks flushed even as he brazenly complied. He fixed his gaze on Derek with a taunting smirk before nipping Dusty's earlobe between his teeth.

Brat, Derek thought. Blue had it coming later; he and Dusty both did.

* * * *

"Check this one out." Blue passed Dusty the next item in their guessing game.

Dusty traced his fingers around the outline of the blister pack, following the length up and down, then testing the girth between thumb and forefinger. His brows drew up in surprise. "My God. It's huge."

"That's why it's still in the package. I won't let Derek near me with that thing. He threatens me with it, though."

"I bet you could take it," Dusty teased.

"How about I use it on you?"

"No, that's quite all right." Dusty hastily passed the oversized dildo back to Blue.

Blue returned the unopened package to the black leather travel trunk that doubled as his and Derek's toy box. He pulled out the next item. "Don't worry, it's been sanitized."

He placed the silver bullet-shaped egg in Dusty's waiting hands.

Dusty's brow knitted. "What do you do with this?"

Blue flicked on the accompanying wireless remote unit. The egg buzzed. Dusty cried out in surprise and dropped it. The egg hit the floor and vibrated across the hardwood planks.

"It's getting away!" Blue grabbed it and clicked off the remote. He and Dusty laughed together.

Blue rummaged through the box some more. "There's got to be *something* in here that hasn't been in my ass yet."

"Besides the monster dildo from hell?"

"Yeah, besides that." Blue's eyes lit on a new toy still sealed in plastic.

Perfect. He found the special package cutter stashed in the box and opened the anal plug with ease. He placed it in Dusty's palm and folded their fingers around it together.

"This one?" Blue asked. "It's not too big."

“But not too small.” Dusty gave a sly grin of approval.

“Get on the bed, Goldilocks.”

Halfway to the bed, Blue had a better idea. He grabbed the newly-purchased raspberry lube from the nightstand and steered Dusty to the den area.

Wrestling on the couch, they laughed and sighed between kisses, tossing clothes left and right until they both lay naked. Blue skimmed his hands up and down the lithe body stretched beneath him. He tickled his fingers over Dusty's ribs to the smooth plane of abdomen. He followed with his mouth, leaving kisses and eliciting tiny gasps until he reached the dip of Dusty's navel. He swirled his tongue, tasting the salt of the other man's skin. Dusty sucked in his breath and gripped Blue by the hair.

Blue teased with more flicks of the tongue, circling closer and closer around Dusty's navel. “You should get a belly-button ring,” he murmured. “It'd be sexy.”

“That's okay,” Dusty said. “I like piercings, but on other people.”

“Chicken.” Blue slid his body back up. Braced on knees and elbows, he humped his cock against Dusty's.

Dusty gasped and bucked his hips upward. Inspired, Blue reached for the lube where he'd set it on the coffee table. He squirted the flavored substance in his hand, catching a whiff of raspberry. He rubbed it up and down his shaft, then transferred his hand to Dusty's prick.

“That feels great,” Dusty said with a gasp. “Smells good, too.”

“I picked it out just for you,” Blue said.

They humped against each other, their slicked lengths sliding up and down one another. The exquisite glide of friction sent shivers through Blue's spine. He looked down to see Dusty's face flushed pink, indicating the pleasure was mutual. Sighs deepened to moans, the mood shifting from playful to hot.

Blue sat up, pulling Dusty with him. “Bend over the back of the couch,” he instructed in a breathless murmur.

Down on the floor, Blue lubed the tapered plug. His fingers slicked, he worked one and then two into Dusty's hole.

Dusty gasped, thighs quivering, his fingers gripping the couch for support. Blue pulled out his fingers and worked in the plug. Dusty's muscles resisted near the widest part of the silicon.

"Take a deep breath and bear down," Blue said.

Dusty gasped as the plug plumbed in to the flared end.

Blue climbed up on the couch behind Dusty. He slipped his hands around to tweak Dusty's nipples and stroke Dusty's cock.

He trailed feathery kisses up the side of Dusty's neck. "Feel okay?" he asked.

Dusty moaned in reply. Blue took that as a yes.

Inspired, he maneuvered Dusty into a sixty-nine position. On top, Blue moaned around Dusty's cock, tasting the edible raspberry lube. The downward angle of his own prick made for an agonizing pleasure where it slipped in and out of Dusty's mouth. He thrummed his fingertips against the end of the butt plug. In turn, Dusty clawed at Blue's ass.

The balcony door clicked shut. "You two playing without me?"

Blue looked up. "Done...working?" he asked in turn, grunting mid-question as Dusty's mouth drew against him with increased suction.

"I could stand a break." Eyes firing, Derek crossed the loft in a few easy strides. He stood at the end of the couch and opened his trousers. Gripping Blue by the hair, he whipped out his cock and shoved it in Blue's mouth. He gave a few thrusts, then pulled out and guided Blue's head back down.

Blue alternated between pleasuring each man's cock. He treated Dusty to short, hard sucks against the crown, eliciting a series of muffled moans, then circled Derek's shaft with long, languorous sweeps of the tongue, his master grunting in approval.

Just when Blue thought he or Dusty might come, Derek withdrew abruptly. "Get up," he instructed. Blue did as told, eager to see what his master had in mind.

A few minutes and several squirts of lube later, Dusty lay supine across the coffee table, thighs spread wide and feet in the air, the butt plug thrown aside. He gripped the end of the table, holding his ass flush with the edge of the wood.

Kneeling on the carpet, Blue worked his slicked cock into Dusty's hole an inch at a time, until he slipped completely inside and lost himself to the tight, welcoming heat.

Dusty's back slid up and down the polished table with each thrust. "Harder," he hissed, teeth gritted.

"I'm trying." Frustration warred with Blue's libido as he shifted his weight to deepen the angle of his descent while easing the stress on his knees. As good as Dusty's ass felt clamped around his prick, Blue found topping to be quite the workout. He didn't know how Derek kept at it all night.

He gasped at the feel of a finger breaching his ass, followed by a second. Derek flexed his fingers in time with Blue's thrusts, the pressure against the prostate intensifying the pull and tug against Blue's prick.

"Fuck," Blue hissed, plowing deeper and harder, garnering a grunt of approval from Dusty. God, that felt good.

"Hold still," Derek said. Blue stopped, limbs trembling, cock sheathed to the hilt. The room reeked of raspberry.

Dusty groaned in protest, ribs fluttering with shallow gasps. "I'm about to come."

"Good," Derek said.

Blue gasped at the feel of Derek's cockhead prodding against his ass.

"What are you two doing?" Dusty asked.

Blue cried out as Derek's cock stretched and filled him. "He's fucking me...while I fuck you," Blue managed to explain.

Dusty's face spread with a wicked grin. "That, I wish I could see."

Blue resumed thrusting, his movements awkward at first as he gauged how, exactly, to stay inside one man without losing the other, but with Derek's guidance and Dusty's urging, he soon fell into a fluid rhythm.

Their bodies slapped together, Blue pounding Dusty's ass, Derek grinding into his. Caught in the middle, Blue reveled in the wanton sensation of taking one partner while being claimed by the other. Derek's fingers toyed with his nipple rings, adding to the indescribable pleasure that threatened to consume him. Remembering to bear Dusty's pleasure in mind too, Blue grabbed his friend's cock and worked it with rapid strokes.

With so many elements happening at once, Blue found it difficult to concentrate and maintain his rhythm. Overwhelmed, senses reeling, he reached climax first. He cried out for both men, melting back against his master for support as he succumbed to the relentless grip of Dusty's passage around his cock.

Through half-lidded eyes, he watched Dusty come next. Head thrown back, Dusty cried heavenward, hot white spunk shooting all over his chest from where Blue held his cock tight. His body went limp, legs dropping to either side of the table.

"You two are beautiful to watch," Derek murmured in Blue's ear. He thrust a final time and went rigid, uttering a short, deep groan with each labored breath.

Dusty slid off Blue's prick and sat up. Leaning forward, he found and captured Blue's mouth in a long, tender kiss. Blue trapped him in a close embrace, taking satisfaction in the feel of Derek's arms encircling them both.

"What now?" Blue asked.

Derek's lips curved behind his ear. "You two are taking a bath."

"And then?"

"You're polishing your friend's butt marks off the table."

Dusty shook with laughter.

"No fair," Blue said. "What's Dusty get to do?"

Derek pulled away, leaving Blue's ass cold. He stood and hitched up his trousers. "Dusty and I are ordering pizza."

Dusty's face brightened. "Pizza?"

Blue glared at Derek. "He gets pizza, and I get housework?"

"Dusty's our guest," Derek said.

"Fine," Blue muttered. "But you owe me," he told Dusty.

Dusty grinned. "I'll pay you in ass."

Blue decided that was fair enough.

Chapter Sixteen

Derek pushed his chair back from the computer hutch. He stretched his limbs and rolled his head from one shoulder to the other, relishing the crack of joints that eased the stress on his neck. At the tingle in his hand, he propped his right forearm on the chair to open and close his fist until the sensation disappeared. Having worked in the tech field for over a decade, Derek was well aware of the threat of carpal tunnel. He couldn't have his right arm acting up on him.

After all, Derek thought wryly, how would he whip Blue?

He turned his chair to catch a glimpse of his houseguest in the kitchen. Derek couldn't help but find it fascinating to watch Dusty cook. The boy had a variety of aids at his disposal, from the temporary glue dots that marked the dials on the stove, to the device clipped onto the pan that doubled as both timer and alert system should the ramen boil over.

While the ramen cooked, Dusty leaned on the counter. He spoke over a wireless headset with his supervisor and typed on his monitor-free laptop. As someone who relied on microtechnology to the point of dependency, Derek appreciated seeing it applied in ways that truly enhanced one's quality of life and enabled independence.

"Okay, sorry. I'll talk to you next week." Dusty pulled out the earpiece and set it by the laptop.

"Problems on the job?" Derek asked.

"The boss says I'm being too honest again. I'm supposed to impart positive, uplifting advice to the customer. Warnings about health, finances, or extramarital affairs should be vague at best."

"You sense that sort of thing over the phone?"

"Sometimes. It's erratic, like my abilities always are, but every now and then I'll tune into a customer and just *know* things."

"I suspect that has as much to do with the customer as it does you."

“Yeah, some people are more open and easier to read than others. You believe in this stuff?”

“I've experienced some unexplainable events in my life, particularly when it comes to Blue. I've been forced to rethink my views this past year.”

“Strange.” Dusty smiled. “Going on personality alone, I'd expect you to play the skeptic and Blue the believer, but you two seem to be reversed.”

“If Blue didn't believe you, he wouldn't have introduced you to his friend on the police force.”

“I don't know. I get the impression Blue's just indulging me. I think he's playing amateur shrink to help me with my nightmares.”

The beeper on the timer sounded. Dusty reached across the stove and turned off the burner. With an oven mitt, he gripped the handle he'd left turned to the right and removed the pan from the stove. He poured the ramen into an oversized bowl. As he did, he hung his left index and middle finger over the bowl's rim.

“Ouch,” he hissed, tipping the pan back. “Too much water. Your measuring cup's off from mine.” He sucked his burned fingers into his mouth as he set the pan on a cold burner.

Derek rose and went to the sink. He turned on the tap and took Dusty gently by the wrist.

“I don't need you to do that,” Dusty argued, though he complied as Derek held his fingers under the cold water.

“I'd do the same for Blue.”

“Yeah? Blue's a big baby.”

“Sometimes.” Derek turned off the tap and opened a drawer for a clean tea towel. He gently dabbed Dusty's fingers dry. As he did, their bodies came into contact. A flash of the previous night's activities played through Derek's mind, the blood surging to his prick.

He bit back a groan when Dusty ground back against him. At the feel of the hand palmed against his chest, Derek quickly sought control. Tossing the towel aside, Dusty's wrist still in his grip, Derek grabbed a fistful of hair with his other hand and leaned in. A puff of air tickled his lips as Dusty gasped and then breathed out, their mouths a hairbreadth apart. At the testing dart of the tongue between his lips, Derek pulled back.

"Don't break the rules, Dusty."

"I'm sorry," Dusty murmured, cheeks flaring red.

"I know why I've been holding back," Derek said. "Why have you?"

"Same reason as you. Out of respect for Blue."

"I think there's more to it."

Dusty squirmed against Derek's hold. "I need to eat."

"You had what was left of the pizza for lunch. You can safely skip snack time."

"I have to get back to work. I need to put in another hour."

"If I let you kiss me, you wouldn't be pleading the work defense."

Dusty stilled. "No," he confessed with a whisper.

Derek took a slow, steady breath. It would be so easy to give in to temptation, just like Blue would do, and enjoy one little kiss, maybe a handjob with a few well-placed flicks of the tongue.

Yet as far as Blue might take things, the brat could be trusted to check his libido before crossing the line of no return. Once Derek got started, he couldn't promise the same restraint. He'd take Dusty right there on the kitchen counter before all was said and done. The visual alone sent another unbidden rush of blood where Derek least needed it. He released his grip and stepped back. "I think you'd better start talking."

Frowning, Dusty rubbed his wrist but made no effort to move away. "No. It doesn't matter. Not anymore."

"This arrangement won't work if you've been dishonest in your intentions at any point."

Dusty's face screwed into a pained expression. "The one you trust cannot be trusted.' Remember that?"

Derek remembered—Blue's rune reading. "Now is not the time for cryptic messages, Dusty."

"I wanted you first!" Dusty blurted. "The day I met you, when you brought Chinese in. I heard your voice, and that's all it took. Are you satisfied? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Turning, Dusty stormed away. He cursed as he stumbled into the dinette chair that Blue had carelessly left pulled out from under the table.

Derek caught up with him in a few easy strides. He jerked Dusty back by the upper arm, the boy's hair whipping as he spun around. He cupped Dusty's chin with a firm hold, showing with actions what a stern expression would convey to others.

"Did you tell Blue this?" *Derek swore, if Blue had known and manipulated Dusty's feelings, there would be hell to pay...*

"No. Blue's my friend, and I like him, so I tried to ignore it. Then he and I messed around at the cosplay convention, just as a joke, but I felt something between us, and I realized the way to you was through him. It's why I tricked him into taking a bath with me."

"You tricked Blue." Derek was more amused than surprised.

"Yeah, but after we got in the water, we started goofing around. I realized Blue was the kind of friend I've always wanted, and I didn't want to fuck that up. I was surprised when I got turned on, and then next thing I know, Blue's kissing me! I didn't expect to enjoy it so much. I didn't realize how much I'd come to care for him until we took things to a physical level. Then he tells me you *both* want me! And for a moment, I had this horrible thought, one I'd had in the back of my mind all along. I've tried to make it up to Blue since."

"What was this 'horrible thought' of yours?"

"It doesn't matter now!"

"It completely matters. Answer the question."

Dusty's face clouded. "I wondered what would happen if I stole you from Blue. I regretted it immediately. I would never willingly come between you two! It's why I agreed to the rules and went along with your plan that I'd bottom to Blue. I thought with Blue between us, everything would be okay."

"But it's not okay."

"No, it isn't," Dusty said quietly, his expression conveying one of shame. "Blue and I grow closer each and every day, which just makes me feel more and more like shit for originally using him to get to you."

At the tears dewing in those silver-gray eyes, Derek released the boy and turned away. Palms braced on the countertop, he shut his own eyes. "You should have told Blue and me how you felt up front."

"I know. I'm sorry. I like being with you both, and I don't want to lose Blue as a friend. But I also know you two love each other, while I'm expendable."

Derek whirled back around, stunned. "Blue and I have never intended for you to feel that way."

"I understand that, and I appreciate it. Which just makes me feel all the worse. And then I think about why I'm even here. If it wasn't for the fire—" Dusty's voice cracked.

Derek went to him again. He put his hands on the boy's shoulder and made him sit in the chair. Taking Dusty's hands, he kneeled to the floor.

"You can't honestly think the fire was your fault."

Dusty dipped his head down. "What if it was? I don't just see things, Derek. Sometimes I make them happen."

"This is where my skeptical side kicks in. Blaming yourself for the fire is bullshit."

"I've tried to tell myself that, but I keep thinking how everything fell into place a little too perfectly, and I got exactly what and who I wanted."

"I still call bullshit." Derek was sensing a running theme beneath Dusty's comments—guilt.

A guilt that begged to be punished.

His darker instincts rising to the fore, the ones he'd suppressed since the first night Dusty had spent in his bed, Derek rose. "Your ramen's cold." He dumped the food into the sink and flipped on the garbage disposal. "I'll order takeout. Put in your last hour of work."

Dusty's sightless gaze remained fixed slightly askance from Derek's. "And then what?"

Derek pulled out his cell phone. "We wait for Blue to come home."

It was time to get both of his boys in line.

Chapter Seventeen

Blue locked the Mustang and started through the parking garage toward the elevator. His feet hurt, his lower back ached, and his nerves were on edge from the cryptic phone call he'd received earlier that afternoon.

"Don't bring anyone home with you today," Derek had instructed. *"No Jodi-chan."*

Blue wondered what was up. He might have anticipated some hot, mind-blowing three-way sex if not for the terse tone to Derek's voice.

Nearing the elevator, he froze at the figure propped beside it. The man gripped the strap of the messenger bag slung across his shoulder and stood straight. "Hello again, Blue."

"What do you want?"

The *Urban Weekly* reporter studied Blue. "Back when I interviewed you for the tattoo story, I was honestly joking about the DA being your father. Now I know why you shut up and your boyfriend looked like he wanted to kick my ass."

Blue crossed his arms. "Like I said, what do you want?"

"An exclusive," the reporter said.

"Why the hell would I give you one?"

"Think about it, Blue. I could interview all the assholes who claimed to know you back in high school, when in reality, they said two whole words to you. Or, I can go straight to the source and get the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"Your life as the flamboyant gay son of an uptight prick like Jimmy McGowan."

Flamboyant? "Get the fuck out of my building before I call security on your ass."

The reporter held his hands up, palms out. "Hey, that's no way to be. I just stopped by to visit our mutual friend, Sadie. She's my co-worker, you know."

The reporter smiled almost amiably. He reached into an outer flap on his bag and extended his hand, a white business card slotted between his first two fingers. "Consider this, Blue. You're a hot topic of conversation right now, and the news business is a competitive one. It's only a matter of time before one of my peers coughs up a tell-all exposé. Let me write your story first, so you can be the one to tell it."

Blue snatched the card. He started to tear it, but the reporter's offer made some sort of sense. "I'll think about it," he mumbled, stuffing the card in his pocket.

He brushed past the reporter to the elevator and pushed the up button. He peered back over his shoulder. "If I decide to take you up on your offer, I'll call you. Don't stalk me and wait for me down here again."

"Yes, sir." The reporter gave a nod and a smirk. Readjusting his bag strap, he turned and walked toward the garage exit.

Once Blue reached the fifteenth floor, he was concerned less about the reporter and more about what awaited him in the loft. He swiped the keycard and punched in the lock code. Before he could turn the knob, the door opened partway. Derek peeked through the crack.

He ushered Blue inside and shut the door. Blue stood, stunned, comprehending the sight on the bed. Instantly going hard, he managed to find his voice. "You two playing without me?"

"No," Derek answered. Arms snaked around Blue's front, one hand sliding down to his crotch, the other up his shirt. Warm breath tickled Blue's ear. "He's ready for you."

Blue bit back a moan at the friction against his prick. "What do you want me to do?"

Derek unzipped Blue's pants and tugged them down partway. "I want you to fuck him as hard and long as you can without letting either of you come."

At the clasp of the cock ring around the base of his prick and balls, Blue muttered a feeble, "Yes, Sir." Wincing in discomfort, he toed off his shoes and slipped out of his clothes. As he advanced a step forward, Derek nudged him between the shoulders. Blue went down on all fours, palms and knees smarting where they slapped against the floor.

Blue scowled over his shoulder. "What was that for?"

Derek leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "Leaving the chair out where Dusty could trip over it."

“Oh. Sorry.” Shamed, Blue crawled across the floor, welcoming the plush comfort of the rug when he reached it. As he climbed onto the bed, he wondered what Dusty had done to provoke Derek's sadistic side.

Not that Blue could complain. His friend lay naked with arms stretched above his head, wrists bound to the headboard, knees drawn to either side of his head by an intricate pulley system of black nylon rope. The strands snaked down his thighs and met around his swollen cock.

Intrigued, forgetting his own discomfort for a moment, Blue perched between Dusty's raised feet. He pulled the loose end of rope that dangled down the cleft of Dusty's exposed ass alongside the silicon beads that protruded from the glistening hole in between.

Blue smirked as he watched, knowing what would happen next. The rope coiled around Dusty's cock went tight, causing the balls to flush a shade darker, sending a drop of precum trickling from the slit of the flared crown. Dusty cried out with a strangled plea for mercy.

“It feels good, doesn't it?” Blue asked, pulling just a little tighter. He offered a *thunk* against the end of the beads for good measure.

Dusty struggled to answer. “Yeah.”

Blue let the rope go slack. Amazed as always at his master's skill, intrigued to see it demonstrated on Dusty, Blue reached for the lube that had been left on the nightstand.

Palm slicked, he hissed as he worked his own aggrieved cock. He pulled the beads from Dusty's ass, one by one, and tossed them aside. Prepared to fuck as his master wished, Blue splayed his legs, bringing his ass flush with the mattress, and positioned his cock against Dusty's hole.

Derek stalked across the loft. “Tell him, Dusty.”

“Tell me what?” Blue gave the rope another playful tug.

Dusty could barely speak, his voice bordering on a sob. “I wanted Derek first.”

“What?” Blue froze, dumbstruck.

“I went through you to get him.”

“You did?” The confession sinking in, Blue yanked the rope hard. Dusty cried out, cock purpling.

“Blue,” Derek warned from behind. He settled in at the foot of the bed, the mattress shifting from his weight. “He has more to say.”

Blue eased up, but the shock of betrayal remained. “So you've been faking it with me all this time? Could've fooled me.”

“No!” Dusty's breath caught in his throat. He spoke again, barely above a whisper. “No. That first time in the tub, I realized I wanted you too. I wanted you and Derek both! I've felt like shit for not telling you.”

“You should have told me,” Blue said, anger fading but still stinging. “I'm your friend.”

Fueled by the sudden desire to fuck the shit out of Dusty to prove his point, Blue jerked the rope again, eliciting another strangled plea for release. Unfazed, he worked his cock past the puckered ring of Dusty's entrance, groaning at the tight snap of muscle around his swollen crown. Cupping his hands under Dusty's knees, he thrust forward.

Blue shoved his slicked shaft inside Dusty as deep as he could. Relishing their mutual pleasure as much as their pain, he held the end of the rope between his gritted teeth and started pumping.

Blue kept at it until he couldn't hold out any longer. With a cry of frustration he dropped the rope, allowing it to go slack. Dusty yelled, head thrown back in the pillows, hot cum splashing up his torso and splattering his chest. On cue, Derek slipped his hand under Blue's ass and unsnapped the cock ring. The blood rushed freely through Blue's prick, and with it the climax he'd been denied along with Dusty's.

“Oh God!” Collapsing, Blue burrowed his face against Dusty's throat and clung for dear life, the orgasm ripping through him, his limbs shuddering as violently as the body trapped beneath him. Dusty's tight passage clenched Blue's cock and milked it dry, the rhythm matching the rapid pulse that fluttered against Blue's lips.

Blue's head eventually stopped spinning. He listened as his friend's breath gradually returned to normal.

Dusty murmured in Blue's ear. “That was amazing.”

“You could say that.”

“You're not mad?”

Blue weighed his words carefully. "I'm mad at you for bringing unnecessary grief on yourself. We invited you into our bed, for God's sake. I would think that of all people, you could be honest with us."

Blue lifted up and pulled out of Dusty, his cock going cold in the air of the loft. He turned to see if he could do anything for his master, but saw Derek had already taken matters into his own hands.

"There's no need to jerk off when you've got two willing helpers," Blue scolded. He took Derek's hand and licked the cum clean one finger at a time.

After Dusty's bonds were freed, Blue curled around his friend. He rubbed the circulation back into Dusty's wrists and looked at Derek.

"Now that everything's out in the open, can we do things more like I originally wanted?"

"No," Dusty said before Derek could reply. "Derek should only fuck you, Blue."

"Dusty gets it," Derek said, rising from the bed to pull up his pants. "Why don't you?"

Determined, Blue angled for a different point of negotiation. "Why don't *you* get *this*? I'd like to see more interaction between you two. I would have loved to watch you tie him up."

"Point taken," Derek said.

"And you ought to let Dusty give you head some time. He's good at it."

Dusty gave a sly smile. "Only if you fuck me while I do it."

Blue tugged Dusty's hair with equal parts affection and lingering anger. "See? That's another thing. You've been letting me and Derek run the show. You're part of this too. Tell us what you'd like to do *before* we get in bed."

"I like to be surprised," Dusty said.

"So do I," Blue said. "But it's like Derek tells me. Drop some hints, and we'll 'surprise' you from there. Right, Derek?"

Derek smirked. He crossed the loft to slip on his shoes by the door. "I let you top a few times, and this is what I get in return. A pushy brat barking orders."

"Guess you'll have to spank me." Blue poked out his tongue.

Dusty's chest quaked against Blue's, a soft chuckle escaping his lips.

“What's so funny?” Blue asked.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all,” Dusty answered, playing innocent.

Derek shook his head, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “I'm going on a coffee run. What would you two like?”

“Want to split one of those oversized brownies?” Blue asked Dusty.

Dusty furrowed his brow. “Split?”

“Okay, make that two oversized brownies,” Blue said.

“You'll both have to earn them,” Derek said.

“Don't worry, we will,” Blue promised. Once the door was shut, he nuzzled Dusty behind the ear. “Won't we?”

Dusty sighed. “Whatever you want to do.”

Blue rolled back on top of Dusty and laced their hands together. “No, whatever *you* want to do. Any suggestions?”

“I might have a few.”

As they openly discussed possibilities, Blue grew aroused again. A slip of the hand between Dusty's legs confirmed he wasn't the only one.

The cell phone rang. “Damn it,” Blue groaned. An unfamiliar number scrolled across the caller ID. “Hello?”

“Shane? Sergeant James.”

“Hey, Sarge. Still haven't made detective, huh?”

“None of your business. Zackary Smith's been stabbed by another inmate. Doctors aren't sure if he's going to make it. He wants to talk to you.”

“Me?” Blue sat straight.

“I'll be escorting you. This could be important, Shane. If he tells you which murders he didn't commit, it could mean a big break with this copycat case.”

“What does Detective Thomas say?”

“He called in sick today. Feeling a little under the weather. Guess the old fart forgot to take his Geritol.”

“Ha ha,” Blue said dryly. “Don’t quit your day job, Sarge.” In spite of his irreverent tone, Blue’s insides churned with a nauseating twist. He could go the rest of his life without ever seeing Zack again.

“Bring your friend Dusty along. I want to see if he picks up any impressions.”

“You do?” Blue said, surprised. “I thought you didn’t believe in Dusty’s abilities.”

James gave a snort. “I hate to say it, but your friend seems to be on to something with this psychic shit. You could say I’m trying to be open-minded.”

“Don’t strain yourself.” Blue looked down at Dusty. It had become clear in the last few days that his friend was far from naive, yet in Blue’s eyes, Dusty still exuded a certain sense of purity and innocence. Blue didn’t wish to see his sensitive friend tainted by the evil that was Zackary Smith.

But he knew Dusty wanted to help the police. And Blue wanted the killer found before his friend woke up terrified from another nightmare. He gave Dusty’s hand a squeeze and relayed James’s request.

“I’ll go,” Dusty said.

“He’ll go,” Blue said into the phone. “Where should we meet?”

The arrangements made, Blue ended the call. Rising, he went to the dresser. He tossed a T-shirt and shorts onto the bed. “Hurry, before Derek gets back.”

Dusty tugged the shirt over his head. “Aren’t you going to call him?”

“After we leave,” Blue said, slipping into his own clothes. “I don’t want him to go with us.”

“You don’t want him around Zackary,” Dusty said.

“I don’t want you around him, either. Hell, I don’t want to be around Zack, but we have to do this.”

“Why are you worried?” Dusty stood and slid into his shorts. “I assume he’ll be restrained.”

Blue went to the mat by the door to get his and Dusty's shoes. "You know how you say you pick up on things from people? Well, I feel something when I'm around Zack."

"And what is that?"

Blue shuddered. "Evil. Pure fucking evil."

Chapter Eighteen

The young brown-haired man lay in the prison hospital bed, an IV tube inserted into one of his restrained arms. A crimson stain seeped through the bandages wrapped tight around his ribs.

Zack's drug-glazed eyes swam before lighting on Blue. His lips barely moved, his speech slurred. "Hey...faggot."

"You should know." Blue took the seat placed several feet from the bed. He cast a nervous glance back over his shoulder at James.

The sergeant flashed the gun holstered beneath his jacket and gave a nod of encouragement. "I'm right here, Shane. He can't hurt you."

Blue looked back at Zack. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"You lied...why'd you lie?"

"About what?"

"The copy...cat..."

"You lied too."

"Your dad... heard somethin' 'bout your dad in here...some Russian guy told me."

"I'm not here to discuss my father."

"Girlfriend. Daddy's got...a girlfriend."

Blue felt his stomach knot. "How many of the murders did you commit, Zack?"

Zack let out a strained laugh. "All of 'em. None of 'em."

At the sound of footsteps scuffling across tile, Zack's eyes drifted. The plainclothes female officer who'd joined James for the day led Dusty into the room.

Blue had met the redheaded officer once before when he'd been unwittingly dragged into the Maple Street Murder investigation. She'd asked him to identify the key piece of evidence that

Zack had intended to frame Cameron with. Blue wondered why someone from the evidence team would accompany James for a routine questioning, but he'd reserve the questions for Zack.

Rising, Blue took Dusty's hand and guided him to the chair. As Dusty took a seat, he turned his head. His eyes landed eerily in Zack's direction, his body quaking with a visible shudder. His hand tightened on Blue's. Blue cupped him by the shoulder and squeezed back.

Zack blinked. His glazed expression lifted, something lewd and sick and evil flashing behind his eyes, his lips twisting in a humorless grin before his face went slack again. "Pretty boy. Woulda made you squeal."

"You don't talk to him," Blue said. "How many of the murders did you commit, Zack?"

Zack's mouth curved in a lopsided smile. "This lil' piggy...went to market..."

"How many?" Blue repeated.

"This lil' piggy...shoulda stayed home..."

"Five," Dusty said. "He's telling you there were five."

"You win," Zack said. "You win...the red ribbon..."

Blue's ears perked; Dusty sat straighter.

"What about a red ribbon?" Blue asked.

"Found one...he got to first...bastard ran off."

James stepped up to stand on Dusty's opposite side. "You saw the other killer?" James asked.

The opiate pump cycled with a series of clicks. Zack closed his eyes, expression gone dreamy. "Left me a present...pretty red ribbon...tied in a bow..."

James casually strode toward the bed. He pinched the tube connected to Zack's arm, interrupting the medicated flow. "Interesting. We've got an intravenous drip delivering analgesics straight to the brain, instead of an intrathecal catheter administered through the spine. Looks like the nurses want to calm your ass down as much as they want to numb your pain."

"Thought you was...cop. Not doctor."

"No, but I play one on TV. What did the other killer look like? Male? Female?"

"Don't know. Wearin' hat. Long coat."

"Tall?" James asked.

“Yeah. Tall.”

“Slender? Older?”

The female officer coughed. Blue peered over at her and saw her shaking her head at James in silent warning. Blue knew the sergeant should know better than to feed the witness details, particularly given Zack's drugged state. It sounded like James had a suspect in mind and was determined to fit the puzzle pieces into place, even if it required a little manipulation. That sort of thinking from others had botched the investigation in the first place.

James shifted his strategy. “Build? Age?”

“Dunno.” Zack hissed. “Hurts. Let go of the tube.”

James pinched the tube tighter. “This is important, Zack. You were duped. We all were. What else can you tell us about the person you saw leaving the murder scene?”

“It was dark. Only saw his backside.”

“His? The suspect was male?”

Zack hissed again, teeth bared, veins cording in his throat. He jerked at his restraints, the red stain on his bandages spreading, his voice lowering to a growl. “God, it hurts! Nurse!”

“You're dying, Zack. I can let you go in pain like your worthless ass deserves, or I can spare you the agony you inflicted on your victims. What else did you see? Tell me about the body.”

“The red ribbon! He choked that faggot with a filthy red ribbon!”

“Holy shit,” Blue muttered; Dusty gasped.

“What did you do?” James asked coolly.

Zack's eyes fluttered back in his head. “The body was still warm. Jerked off all over his pretty pink hair. Cut the ribbon, threw it away.”

Blue's shock over the detail regarding the red ribbon gave way to horror at the callous description. Zack's personal hatred and jealousy toward him had been taken out on young prostitutes who'd favored piercings and vibrant hair colors. In other words, they'd served as substitutes for the true source of Zack's hate, a fact which turned Blue's stomach.

James seemed unfazed. “So you marked the body as yours, like a dog pissing on his territory. Idiot. You framed yourself on that one.”

The heart monitor beeped furiously; the red stain spread from the bandages onto the white bed sheets. “That faggot was mine! Mine, not his! They should have all been mine! I’m the Maple Street Killer!”

Zack’s eyes rolled completely back into his head and went white. The heart monitor flatlined with a long, high beep. A team of medics materialized. “Get out of here!” one of them barked.

James stepped away from the bed. He gripped Dusty by one arm, Blue by the other. “Come on. Let these people at least pretend to do their job.”

James hurried Dusty and Blue down the hall. The female officer followed them, the crisp tempo of her heels echoing off the utilitarian gray walls. As they neared the barred exit, Dusty jerked away from James and froze.

“He’s gone,” Dusty murmured, face gone ashen. His eyes took on the same glazed look that they did when he experienced a night terror. He hugged his arms around himself. “I can feel him all around us. He’s cold. So cold. So much hate.”

A chill went through the hall, prickling the flesh on Blue’s arms. Dusty swayed on his feet.

Blue flung his arm out. “Shit! Dusty!”

Dusty fell before Blue could catch him. He collapsed to his knees and vomited on the floor.

A high-pitched buzzer sounded, and the grated door to the next hallway opened. James helped Dusty to his feet. “Get him outside for some fresh air,” he urged.

As they neared the visitor’s entrance, a familiar figure strode toward them. “I just got word from Central,” Detective Thomas said. “Why the hell didn’t you call me?”

“Thought you weren’t feeling well, boss,” James said glibly. Blue noted Thomas indeed looked tired and could probably stand a day or two off.

Judging by how red his face suddenly flushed, it looked like he could stand a dose of blood pressure meds too. “You son of a bitch! Don’t you dare try to pull this case out from under me! I’ll bust your chops back down to beat cop in a heartbeat!”

“Relax, old man. Smith’s dead. We got the information we needed.”

“What information was that?” Thomas cast a furious glance at Dusty, then Blue, his temple twitching where his hairline receded. Lacking his usual poise, the older cop looked like he was about to blow an artery while James proved to be the calm, cool, and collected one for a change.

The female officer stepped in. “Come on,” she said quietly, guiding Blue and Dusty toward the exit and leaving her peers to argue among themselves.

Blue held his trembling friend close. He looked back over his shoulder. He'd seen a more open side to James than usual today, but he understood Thomas's anger. The detective shouldn't have been left out of the loop. Blue wondered what James was playing at. At any rate, Blue didn't appreciate Dusty being dragged into the sergeant's scheme to usurp a higher-up.

“Asshole,” Blue muttered. He stepped out into the sunlit afternoon, thankful to get both Dusty and himself free of the smothering confines of the prison. It was then that it struck him—Zackary Smith was dead and gone.

But the nightmare was far from over.

Chapter Nineteen

For once, Dusty's appetite lacked. Blue quietly prepared a light meal, then made his friend eat.

"Better?" Blue asked in a hushed tone.

Dusty sipped the last of the instant broth. "A little. You were right about the miso settling my stomach."

"I learned that trick from Derek." Blue smiled at the fond memory of being fed for the first time by the man who would become his master.

Rising, he took Dusty's bowl and spoon. He cleaned the dishes and tidied the kitchen, taking care not to wake Derek while Dusty went to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Blue looked across the loft at the bed. He and Dusty had returned from the prison to find Derek asleep, on top of the covers and still dressed in his clothes. The older man reclined on one side, head nestled in the curve of one arm, knee crooked slightly, gorgeous auburn mane spread over the pillows. Enthralled, Blue padded softly across the rug and eased onto the mattress. Reaching out, he skimmed his fingertips through the silken hair shining in the late afternoon light. Even with the shadows under his closed eyes, the man's features were simply stunning.

He works too hard, Blue thought. *He does so much, for me and for my friends.* Blue wished he could offer more in return, and had tried lately, yet even with the luxury of Dusty in their bed, Derek put the pleasure of others first. Blue intended to remedy the imbalance, one way or the other.

Dusty stepped out of the bathroom. The color had returned to his face, but he still looked a tad on the queasy side. "Come lie down," Blue told him.

Dusty paused as his feet crossed from parquet to rug. "I still feel like I'm intruding sometimes."

"You can't intrude if you're invited, dork. Get over here."

“Okay.” Dusty padded across the rug and slid under the satin sheets. He curled against Blue, who in turn nestled his ass against Derek.

After the trauma of seeing Zack and watching him die, Blue found solace in his master's strong arms even as he clung to Dusty and offered his own comfort. It was nice. So nice, Blue wondered if maybe, just maybe, their trio could work in the long term.

He and Derek already shared a less-than-conventional relationship, while Dusty seemed to comfortably fit in with them. If anyone could make a *ménage à trois* work, Blue thought, it could be their “house of three.” Dusty had already agreed to stay a few more days before he decided on the new apartment with Jarod; depending on how things went as Dusty and Derek interacted more, maybe Blue would bring up the possibility of another living arrangement.

Two men living together could prove challenging enough, as Blue knew all too well. They'd need a bigger place, one that allowed each of them some privacy when they inevitably got on one another's nerves. Would Derek be willing to give up his loft and make more concessions than he already had the past year for Blue?

Blue considered other complications. His parents had come to terms with the fact that he was in a relationship with one man. Would he even attempt to explain to them that he was in a relationship with two, or fall back on the classic roommate defense?

Blue supposed a decision like that required more than a few days' test drive, but if he planned to suggest the idea, he knew he'd need to do it soon. Bearing that in mind, he whispered in Dusty's ear.

“If you or I wake first, let's make sure Derek wakes last. Deal?”

Dusty gave a sleepy, contented smile. “Deal.”

* * * *

Derek waited in the lobby, latte in one hand, a bulging bag of oversized brownies clutched in the other. He feared his boys would eat him out of house and home, though he couldn't complain about the activities that fueled their appetites. He wondered how he'd lucked out. Even in his promiscuous bachelor days, he'd never brought two boys to his bed at the same time. Now, he'd committed to a relationship with an adventurous partner who'd gladly brought in a third party who suited Derek's tastes to a tee.

The elevator doors hissed open. Sadie stood there, all grace, class, and style as usual. “Hey there, handsome.”

Derek smiled as he took the spot beside her. At the feel of the hand palming his crotch, he nearly dropped his coffee.

“Sadie!”

Minted breath teased at his lips. She rubbed her hand up and down his prick, the friction through his trousers slow and enticing, just the way he liked it. *Just the way he liked it...*

She opened the top few buttons of his shirt. Funny, he could have sworn he'd left the house wearing a tie.

“You've been with a woman before, haven't you? I can tell.”

“A long time ago,” he murmured, his cock swelling.

Lips traced down the column of his throat. “Something tells me if you gave me a tumble, it'd be worth both our times.”

Disinclined to disagree, Derek stood there, helpless to move unless he dropped his food and coffee. He closed his eyes at the feel of the warm, wet tongue deftly flicking his left nipple, and then his right...his left, and his right...

At the same time? Derek's eyes flew open. He found himself in bed, his shirt unbuttoned, the loft dark. As his sight adjusted and the fog of sleep cleared, he comprehended that he was being assaulted by two beautiful naked boys.

“You awake?” Blue's voice teased. “Or are you going to call out Sadie's name again?”

A soft chuckle sounded at Derek's opposite side, followed by a hot, wet swirl of tongue around his nipple. At the familiar feel of the piercing tapping against the other nipple, Derek hissed and arched his chest up. He moved to grasp each of the boys by the hair, only to tug his wrists against restraints, the chains clinking against the iron of the headboard.

Arousal, vulnerability, and anger flooded through Derek at once. “Get me out of these damned things. Now.”

“No,” Blue said curtly. “Not until Dusty and I are done with you.” He nipped Derek's nipple with his teeth and gave a light tug, sending a jolt of pleasure to Derek's prick where it swelled against his trousers beneath a firmly pressed hand. Whose hand, he didn't know.

“Goddammit, Blue,” Derek growled. He jerked at the chains again, his efforts at escape in vain. “You’re in trouble. Both of you are.”

“Good. I like to get in trouble. I don’t think Dusty minds, either. Do you, Dusty?”

Dusty answered with a harsh suck against Derek’s nipple. The hand pressed harder against Derek’s cock and gave another rub, the fingers curling beneath his testes and prodding his taint spot.

Derek groaned, wondering which one of the brats had him, literally, by the balls. As his body involuntarily responded, his hips rocking forward of their own accord, Derek found he didn’t care.

Dimly, he registered the guilty party as Blue transferred one hand to Derek’s belt buckle. With his other hand, he threaded his fingers through Dusty’s hair, guiding his partner in crime southward. Dusty’s eager mouth trailed down Derek’s torso with a soft brush of lips and breath.

Derek took the only course of action left to take. He groaned in surrender and let the boys have their way. He lifted his hips, complying as Blue tugged his pants down to his knees.

Blue gripped the base of Derek’s cock, angling it toward the ceiling. Dusty reached his goal. As he trailed his tongue up the shaft, Blue gave a squeeze.

Dusty latched on, starting with a teasing suck against the crown before plunging down. Derek thrust upward, sliding in until Blue’s knuckles brushed Dusty’s lips. After a few experimental sucks, they fell into delicious tandem, Blue squeezing as Dusty dragged his tongue upward, Derek thrusting when Dusty’s mouth slid back down.

Blue released his hold and pulled Derek’s pants down the rest of the way. Wholly at the mercy of not one but two brats, Derek stifled a groan and continued thrusting. Dusty indeed gave great head and proved the point with vigor.

Just when Derek thought things couldn’t get more intense, he felt a pair of hands pry between his thighs. “Spread your legs a little,” Blue said.

Not normally one to take orders, but not exactly in the position to argue, Derek obliged. Angling his head forward, he watched the rebellious duo through hooded gaze as he prepared to come in Dusty’s mouth.

At the tongue ring tapping against his taint spot, Derek was done for. He arched his head back into the pillows, eyes shut tight, and cried out. He tugged at the restraints, relishing the cut

of leather into his flesh even as he fought it. Light exploded behind his eyes, filling his mind, flooding his senses. He pumped his load into Dusty's mouth, the blond sucking and gulping with each burst of cum while Blue's tongue massaged Derek's balls.

"Save some for me," Derek heard Blue say.

Coasting down from the apex, Derek opened his eyes to see the boys kissing, their kneeling forms silhouetted by the dim light through the balcony window. Blue sucked at Dusty's lower lip with a moan of approval before breaking the kiss.

"What do you want to do now?" Blue murmured.

Dusty spoke, voice wavering, his words hesitant. "I want Derek to suck me off while you fuck me."

"Okay," Blue said, "but only if Derek ties you up. I'm still pissed I didn't get to watch last time."

"All right," Dusty whispered.

The blond sat by as Blue climbed up the bed and straddled Derek's ribs. Hunching over, Blue circled his fingers around Derek's cuffed wrists. His hair tumbled in his face, framing eyes that flashed playfully in the dark. "You gonna play nice when I let you out of these?"

"You get a free pass," Derek said. "This time."

"Good." Blue leaned down and plied Derek's lips with a kiss. Derek sought some semblance of control as he sucked Blue's tongue into his mouth, tasting his own cum where it had transferred from Dusty's mouth.

Yes, he'd let Blue off the hook tonight, but tonight only.

* * * *

Dusty moaned into the pillow, his buttocks flexing, his cock twitching where it dangled toward the mattress. Derek sat by, one leg crooked on the bed, the other extended to the floor, fully nude now that his shirt had been tossed aside. He admired his handiwork in the dim light of the single candle that burned on the nightstand.

Blue kneeled behind Dusty. He had watched, fascinated, as Derek had looped the black nylon rope around Dusty's torso and arms, bringing his wrists to cross at his tailbone. The rope twined down each of Dusty's legs to the spreader bar between his ankles.

His head down and his rump in the air, Dusty's position left nothing to the imagination. Blue stared, getting his first true look at his friend's ass—or at any man's ass exposed in such a way, for that matter, outside of porn. He took in the sight, his cock responding to the view of Dusty's buttocks spread wide where the rope dug into the flesh, exposing the pink, puckered center.

On impulse, Blue leaned in and flicked his tongue. Dusty cried out and humped back against Blue's face. The mattress shifted. Peering over the curve of Dusty's ass, Blue watched Derek slide onto the pillows, knees splayed, and guide Dusty's face to his prick.

Blue couldn't help but smirk, reveling in the slack expression that overtook Derek's features, and the way his master clutched the strands of silver as Dusty's head bobbed up and down between his legs. Now that Dusty had gone down on him once, it seemed the master wanted more.

Blue couldn't blame him. He resumed pleasuring Dusty with his tongue. He traced the outer rim of Dusty's hole, daring to tease the opening here and there, growing more aroused than expected at treating another man to such an intimate gesture. The fact that Derek watched while simultaneously being pleased only intensified the experience.

With a groan, Derek jerked Dusty's head up. “Stop.”

Chest heaving with shallow pants, he reached over to the nightstand for the bottle of lube, which he then passed to Blue. In turn, Blue squirted a generous dose into his palm, then drizzled some down the crack of Dusty's ass. He passed the bottle back to Derek. “Beat off while you go down on Dusty,” he instructed.

Derek arched an eyebrow. “Such an attitude tonight.”

Working the handful of lube around his own cock, Blue slipped his slicked fingers in and out of Dusty's ass for good measure, eliciting more moans from the bound and hapless blond.

Gripping Dusty by both hips, Blue positioned his knees between Dusty's ankles against the spreader bar. He worked his cock in, biting his lip at the resistant snap around his glans, then crying out in triumph with a slap of flesh against flesh as the muscles opened and received him to the hilt.

Trying not to shoot his wad right then and there, Blue stretched one arm to grip Dusty by the hair. With his other hand, he clutched the anchor knot at Dusty's wrists. Easing back on his

haunches, Blue pulled his friend into an upright position, proud that he managed to do so in one smooth, fluid movement worthy of Derek's tutelage. He still preferred to bottom, but he'd settle for Dusty riding him. He leaned back, draping his arms across the rails between the foot posts for support.

Derek gripped his own prick, lube dripping between his fingers, then kneeled down and braced himself on one elbow. He opened his mouth to receive Dusty's cock.

Dusty gave a yelp of surprise. "Jesus! You didn't tell me... he could deep throat. Fuck."

Blue chuckled. "Now you know why I put up with him."

Recovering from his shock, giving in to the pleasure, Dusty started working, his ass sliding up and down Blue's shaft with short, sharp thrusts.

"Slow down," Blue urged through gritted teeth, knowing from his own experiences in the middle that the longer the moment lasted, the more fulfilling it would prove for his friend. Yet taking his own pleasure into account, Blue couldn't decide what turned him on most—Dusty's cock shoved down Derek's throat, the slick sound of Derek's hand pumping in self-pleasure, the rising chorus of moans that echoed through the loft, or the hot grip of muscles rippling up and down his prick.

Blue closed his eyes and lost himself in the moment, his senses spiraling until his gut coiled and thighs trembled. He willed himself to hold off from coming, waiting until Dusty slammed down one final time and gave a long, low moan. At the rhythmic clutch of muscles around his prick, Blue surrendered to the welcome rush of heat and blood, yelling out as the tide surged and his cum flooded deep inside Dusty's ass.

Dusty fell back against him for support and gasped for air. Catching his own breath, Blue peered down Dusty's torso and watched Derek reach peak last. His master made for a sensual sight, hair strewn in his face as he released Dusty's cock, mouth swollen and rounded in guttural surrender as the hand between his legs stilled and his body quaked.

Panting, Derek peered up and met Blue's gaze. "You two... are going to be the death of me."

Blue smiled back down at him. "I guess there are worse ways to go. What do you think, Dusty?"

"I'm starving," Dusty mumbled. "Is it time for breakfast yet?"

Derek hung his head and sighed. Blue laughed and gave his friend a kiss on the cheek. At the rush of affection that came with it, Blue wondered again what might come of a permanent arrangement between the three of them.

Chapter Twenty

April dipped her head back. Arm extended, she snapped a self-portrait with her cell phone.

"Your life is an ongoing phone cam documentary," Blue teased.

"My blog visitors ask to see these things." April sat straight in the salon chair. "I have no idea why. It's not like I'm the most interesting person out there, but I guess Pandora is."

"I think you're interesting just the way you are," Blue said, still intrigued by his quiet friend's alter ego. He resumed twisting the tinfoil wraps into April's hair.

"Trust me, Pandora gets more e-mail than I do," April said. "Mostly about my hair. People ask what shade I use so they can try it. I tell them I have 'people' who blend my own custom tint."

Blue laughed. "Translation: my crazy friends experimented on me in the bathroom once, and we couldn't wash out the results."

Jodi waved her scissors in the air from where she stood the next chair over. "Tell them it's called Pandora Pink." She went back to cutting Dusty's hair. She'd talked him into a much-needed trim with the promise she'd barely snip the ends. "I want to bottle your hair color, Dusty-tan."

"What will you call that one?" Dusty asked.

She paused, finger denting her chin. "Silverdust?"

"Good one," April said.

"No, too generic." Jodi's eyes lit. "Wait, I've got it. Chasing Starlight."

"Ooh, fancy," Blue quipped.

Dusty smiled. "I think it's poetic."

“Yeah, Dusty-tan thinks it's poetic.” Jodi poked out her tongue. She quieted as the instructor walked by to check the students' progress. When the instructor walked off, the quartet resumed their idle chatter. A cell phone chimed.

“That's me,” Dusty said. He reached under the smock and pulled out his phone. As Dusty listened, his face went blank. “Okay,” he muttered softly. “Talk to Blue.” He held out the phone. “It's Detective Thomas. He's found a lead.”

“On the murders?” Blue asked under his breath, taking the phone.

“No,” Dusty said. “My mother.”

* * * *

Derek studied the black-and-white 8x10s fanned in his hands. “These are beautiful,” he murmured, as awed by the photographer's talent as he was her subject matter.

Sadie glanced over from where she hunched beside him on the sofa. “Thanks. I had great models to work with, not to mention my keen-eyed assistant.”

Derek smiled. He selected a breathtaking shot of Blue and Dusty's bared torsos curled together yin-yang fashion, the image cropped on both sides just below the necks while Sadie had airbrushed Blue's tattoo from the image. He placed the photo on the coffee table alongside three individual portraits taken of Blue for Derek's own purposes.

Two of the portraits had been posed and captured Blue at his sultriest. In one, he stood with half-buttoned shirt hanging off his tattooed shoulder, arms crossed and a defiant gleam in his eyes as he bit into his lower lip. In the other, he sat naked with his knees drawn to his chest, his cock and ass strategically covered by his crossed feet, the pout on his face both innocent and seductive at once.

Derek's favorite, however, was the candid shot Sadie had snapped after the shoot. A dressed Blue perched on a stool, one leg drawn up as he tied his sneaker, his hair draped to one side where it framed the profile of his softly lit face. God, Blue was gorgeous. Derek's heart swelled with love, and his ego with just a little pride in the knowledge that he'd landed such an attractive young man as his partner.

Taking Sadie's skills into account, Derek came to a decision regarding an idea he'd been tossing around. “I need to run something by you. You're a fan of my father's work.”

Sadie peered up from the photo she was assessing, her eyes sparking with interest. “That I am. What’s up?”

“I’m about to come into possession of Austin’s collection.”

“Oh.” Sadie touched her fingers to her lips. “Did he...”

“Not yet,” Derek said. “But soon.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Her tone rang of genuine sympathy, but Derek shrugged it off. “I’ve been discussing strategy with my mother via e-mail. She’ll be approaching direct buyers first, then either auctioning off or donating the rest. She understands what the average patron or gallery collector wants, but we could use some expertise from an experienced photographer as far as which images are more technically sound. It would aid my mother’s decision in who to approach with which images and at what starting price. In exchange for your time, you can have your pick of photos.”

“I’d be honored to help, though just seeing and touching an Austin Graves original is payment enough.” Sadie’s eyes lit. “Wait, does this mean I get to meet *the* Sandra Yee?”

“The one and only,” Derek muttered, holding another image of exposed flesh up to the light. He forgot, sometimes, that his mother’s name carried as much cult status as his father’s among those educated in New York glam, punk, and post-punk.

A knock sounded at the door. Setting the photo aside, Derek rose and went to peer through the peephole. He opened the door part way, his body acting as barricade should the stranger pull anything funny.

“Derek Graves?” the man asked.

“Who wants to know?”

If a reporter had made it past building security, Derek would have this guy’s ass and a few others in slings. At the flash of the FBI badge, he froze. The only hacking he’d committed in recent years had been to view a felon’s hospital records, and he’d made sure to cover his tracks.

“Agent Mike Fitz. I’m looking for Shane McGowan.”

Shit. What the hell had Blue gotten himself into now? Derek opened the door wider. “He’s not here. What’s this about?”

"Do you know where Shane is?"

"He's with a friend."

"Dusty Sterling?" Fitz said sharply.

Derek's gut knotted. What did this agent know, and why? "Yeah. They're meeting a police officer."

The agent's eyes flashed with alarm. "Detective Thomas?"

"Yes."

"Shane's life may be in danger. Did he say where he was meeting Thomas?"

"Downtown. That was as specific as he got." Launching into emergency mode, Derek slipped into his shoes as he whipped out his cell phone.

"I've already tried his and Dusty's cell numbers," Fitz said. "I can't reach either of them."

The agent had Blue and Dusty's cell numbers? "I'll try one of their friends." Derek felt his jaw tighten by the second as he waited for an answer on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Derek-sama," Jodi cooed.

"Tell me where Blue is. Now." If anyone knew specifics, Derek knew it would be her.

She noticeably paused before answering. "He's with Dusty. They went downtown to meet that detective guy."

"I know that. What part of downtown?"

Another pause. "I'm not supposed to tell you."

Shit. "Jodi, this is important. They may both be in danger."

"That's what I'm worried about!" she blurted. "They're at the old bus station in the Park Row district."

The blood drained from Derek's face. "What?"

"Blue said they'd be okay since they're meeting a cop there."

"And he told you not to tell me."

"Yeah. It seemed kind of private. I figured he and Dusty can't discuss the case, so I didn't ask for details."

Derek thanked Jodi. Ending the call, he relayed the information to Fitz.

Fitz reached inside his jacket and whipped out his phone. "I understand you're a good driver. You know the way over there?"

Wondering how in the hell the Fed knew anything about his driving habits, Derek went to the kitchen counter for his keys. He glanced at Sadie, who'd risen from the couch, her mouth open in shock.

"Sorry," Derek said. "Lock up on your way out?"

"Of course," Sadie said, who'd been left in the lurch during a previous Blue-centered crisis. "Go get our boys."

"I am." Derek bolted out the door after Fitz. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I'll explain in the car. We may not have much time." The agent spoke into the phone. "Fitz here. We've got Thomas. Abandoned bus station in the Park Row district. Two targeted victims. Let's not catch him in the actual act."

"Act of what?" Derek asked. He barged past Thomas, forgoing the resident elevator for the service one.

Fitz shoved his phone back into his jacket. "Serial murder."

Derek stared, finger depressed into the elevator button. "Jesus. How do you know?"

"A retired coroner came to the FBI a few years ago with some nagging suspicions. He'd gone back on his own time and found a link between what he believed to be copycat murders over the course of multiple serial investigations spanning the past three decades."

A violent image flashed through Derek's mind, of Blue and Dusty, bodies twisted in a frozen embrace where they lay together in a pool of blood. Shuddering, he shook it off. "What was the link?"

"Red silk fibers. I looked through the case files and found my own link—the primary investigating officer."

"Thomas." If the elevator didn't reach the floor soon, Derek was taking the damned stairs.

Fitz nodded grimly. "I've been working undercover as his partner for the past year. Your boyfriend knows me as a homophobic twat by the name of Sergeant James."

Under other circumstances, Derek might have laughed. He slipped into the elevator the moment the doors hissed open. "I've heard a lot about you. None of it good."

“Perfect. Means my cover's not blown.”

The elevator descended, Derek's stomach plummeting with it. He wondered how in God's name he was going to get Blue out of this one.

Or Dusty, who might have done well to pick friends with less exciting lives.

Chapter Twenty-one

Blue activated the Mustang's car alarm with a *beep*. He led Dusty around the rusted dumpster and across the littered parking lot. He heard something crunch under his heel and looked down to see a broken hypodermic plunger. Cringing, he swept a cautious gaze around the backs of the dilapidated buildings, the bricks spray painted with various gang tags. Detective Thomas was nowhere in sight.

Park Row had a rough reputation. Once the thriving heart of the city, just a mile from the annual state fairgrounds, even the cathedral-styled church down the block had long been abandoned and left to decay. Some of Blue's junior high goth friends had tried to sneak into the church once to steal a few panes of the stained glass that still bedecked the windows. They'd been held up by gunpoint and robbed of their money, jewelry, and boots.

"Where's Thomas?" Dusty asked.

"I don't know. We should wait for him." Blue pulled out his cell to give Thomas a call. "Crap, let me see your phone."

Dusty's phone told the same story—Park Row was a cellular dead zone. Blue guessed no one wanted to brave installing a tower in the area.

Dusty sucked his lower lip a moment. "I don't sense any immediate danger. Let's go in."

"We really should wait."

"Honestly? I don't want Thomas in there with us. It's too personal."

"Okay." Blue tried the service entrance to the bus station. The door opened easily. Blue hoped his friend's instincts proved right and they weren't stepping into a crack house. He may have spent three days in a mobster hideout once, but Blue didn't think he could hold his own against a drug-crazed fiend or trigger-happy dealer.

Afternoon light filtered dimly into the former lobby. Plastic waiting chairs sat empty, covered with a layer of dust. The schedule behind the ticket desk still announced arrival and

departure times, plastic white letters missing or dangling here and there from the black letter board.

“Do you feel anything?” Blue asked.

“No. Let's find the bathroom.”

Blue led the way, waiting any moment for a pockmarked addict with no teeth to come charging through the lobby with knife or gun in hand. He tried the door to the ladies' room, assuming it to be the logical choice for the mother that had left her baby bundled in the sink with a teddy bear and note and never looked back. The door opened with an ominous *creak*.

The room was dimly lit; dust motes danced in the soft ray of light that beamed from a single, narrow window set high in the wall. Dusty released Blue's hand and stepped forward a few paces. Reaching out, he found the row of porcelain sinks. He paused at one and gently cupped his palms to either side of the basin.

“I wonder if this was the one,” Dusty murmured. Trembling, he jerked his hands away. He stepped back and pivoted, flailing his way to the center of the bathroom before dropping to his knees.

“Damn it!” Dusty punched a fist against the floor, his cry reverberating from the dingy tiles. “Why can't I see her? I see things I've never asked to see, horrible things that wake me up in the middle of the night crying. Why can't I see her?”

Blue rushed to Dusty and kneeled down. He placed a hand on Dusty's shoulder. “Maybe you're not supposed to see.”

“Why?” Dusty's voice cracked, tears streaming down his face. “I need to know. Did she leave me because she truly thought it was for the best? Or did she leave me because she didn't want me? Because I was blind, because I wasn't perfect?”

“She cared enough to wrap you in a blanket,” Blue said. “She cared enough to write that note and leave you somewhere that she knew you'd be found.”

“No. There's more to it. She left me because of...a secret.” Dusty's face lit. “That's it, Blue. A secret. *I* was the secret. She was...scared. And young. Too young. And scared someone would know. Know about me. She didn't want them to know about me.”

“Maybe she was protecting you,” Blue suggested. “Maybe she was a pregnant runaway, and her parents were abusive assholes.”

Dusty suddenly went rigid. He clutched at his throat and gasped for air. "Can't breathe. Dying."

Blue gripped Dusty's wrists. "Stop it!"

"Hot. Ribbon. Dying. Dying."

Blue gave such a hard shake, Dusty's teeth rattled. "Stop it, goddammit! You're wide awake!"

Dusty's eyes rolled back in his head, and he went limp in Blue's arms.

"Dusty?" Blue mumbled. Had he shaken Dusty too hard? Was he having a seizure?

Dusty's lips barely moved. "Can't...breathe."

That was it. Blue jerked Dusty's head up by the hair with one hand and reared back with his other. The slap cracked and echoed through the bathroom. The other man's head whipped to the side.

Dusty sat straight, mouth hanging open. He placed the palm of his hand against his reddening cheek. Blue felt sickened as he watched the shock register in Dusty's face, but he'd done what had to be done.

"You slapped me," Dusty mumbled. "Wow. I didn't see that coming."

Blue choked back an exasperated laugh. "Want to hit me back?"

"Someone's here." Dusty jerked his head toward the door. "I hear footsteps." He stiffened, a visible tremor running through his staid limbs. His voice dropped to a whisper. "The one you trust cannot be trusted."

Chills coursed down Blue's spine. "What?"

At the creak of the door, Blue flinched. Making out the tall figure that loomed into view, Blue breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's just Detective Thomas," Blue told Dusty.

Dusty's brow knitted, and he let out a slow breath. "Why are you here?" he asked. "Why are you really here?"

"You wanted the truth," Thomas said. "I'm here to give it to you."

He passed a yellowed computer printout to Blue. Squinting in the dim light, Blue read the dot matrix text, his stomach turning as he skimmed through the first few lines of the 9-1-1 call

log. He looked at Thomas and shook his head. *No. Don't tell him this. Please don't tell Dusty this.*

"What's wrong?" Dusty asked. "Blue, talk to me."

"Tell him," Thomas said.

Blue refused to budge. "You can't prove this was Dusty. This could have been another baby."

Thomas shook his head. "I'm afraid it is, son. I met up with the officer who answered the call that night. He made a rather interesting confession to me, then directed me to the janitor who found our miracle baby. Old boy's laid up in a nursing home after he received a stroke for his retirement gift. He and I had a talk, after he'd sworn me to secrecy. His story matches up with the officer's. People tell me things. They trust me."

Blue stood quietly, stunned by this colder, by-the-book side of the detective.

"What did the janitor tell you?" Dusty asked.

Thomas seemed eager to answer. "The officer, the two paramedics, the gal who was working the ticket desk that night, they all conspired with our janitor friend before you took a little midnight ambulance ride to the hospital. They all backed each other up when the caseworker interviewed them while the original 9-1-1 log was conveniently lost in the shuffle, courtesy of our officer."

Blue stared down at the paper in his hands. He looked back up at Thomas. "No," he mouthed mutely, shaking his head again.

"I found scans of some old bus logs. All handwritten, seeing as folks weren't exactly up-to-par with technology at this location. The handwriting on the note matches the ticket clerk's handwriting, son. She wrapped Dusty here in a blanket from the lost and found, same place the teddy bear came from. Do you want him to hear the rest of it from me, Shane, or from a friend?"

Blue swallowed. He spoke, voice quivering. "Dusty...oh God."

"Tell me," Dusty said. "I need to know."

Blue blinked, tears stinging his eyes. Dusty could go the rest of his life without knowing the damned truth as far as Blue was concerned. "You weren't just left here, Dusty."

"Go on," Thomas urged.

"Fuck you," Blue hissed, knowing he shouldn't hate the messenger but loathing Thomas nonetheless. He shut his eyes. "You were born here."

"What really happened?" Dusty asked quietly.

Blue took a deep breath and blurted it out. "The janitor found you in the sink with the umbilical cord wrapped around your neck. The desk clerk called 9-1-1 and helped guide the janitor through CPR. They got you breathing before the medics arrived."

Dusty's face went slack. He lifted his hands to his throat. "The nightmares," he muttered. "Choking, not being able to breathe. I picked up on people dying the same way I did."

"Dusty, I'm sorry," Blue said, the sentiment sounding stupid and useless as it tumbled from his mouth.

Dusty remained unsettlingly passive. "One of the neurologists asked if I'd suffered trauma at birth. She said the damage to the visual cortex was consistent with oxygen deprivation." He gave a wry laugh. "My mother didn't abandon me because I was blind. It's her fault. It's her fault I can't see. At least now I know." He angled his head toward Thomas, and his tone went cold. "But now I think it's time you revealed a truth of your own."

Thomas returned ice with ice. "You're the psychic, son. You tell me."

Blue flicked his gaze back and forth between Thomas and Dusty. What the hell was going on?

"Like you told us, people trust you," Dusty said. "It's how you get away with it. It's how you've tricked Blue. It's why I couldn't see until now. You've dropped your guard. How long have you been doing it? Copying the murders you investigate to cover your own crimes?"

"Years, son. Years."

"No." Blue shook his head, trying to make sense of what Thomas had just said. "You once told me that you've never gotten used to the violence you see on the job. You said the day you grew immune was the day you should retire."

"I spoke the truth," Thomas said. "I've never gotten used to it. I never want to get used to it. I like it too much."

"Why?" Blue asked. "How?"

"I'm not the egotistical type. I cover my trademark. I know it's there, so that's all that matters." Thomas reached into his pocket. Blue gripped Dusty's arm, expecting a gun.

Thomas stretched a strip of shiny red fabric between his hands. "I usually copy strangulation cases. Simple as cutting the ribbon away when I'm done, snip, snip. But sometimes, it gets better. Sometimes, I slit their throats to cut the ribbon away. The knife covers the more obvious signs of asphyxiation. The occasional coroner bothers to look deeper and makes a note of it, and that's that."

Thomas's face spread with a humorless, mechanical smile. "Sadly, most cases in this town don't involve that particular M.O., which leaves me little to work with. Then I got called in on a random mugging a few weeks back, victim killed with a knife to the throat, right down the street from here. I've been watching and waiting since, same as I do with every case. Chances are the perp's got a taste for slitting throats now and will be back for more. Once I find him—and I will because I'm the best on the force—I'll have a long string of murders to pin on him. Someone lower down the food chain than me, looking to rise up in the ranks, will talk him into a plea bargain with full confession. Case closed."

"And if the other killer doesn't get caught?" Blue said.

Thomas shrugged. "There's always a fall guy, son. If I can't find one, I'll create one."

He advanced toward Blue. Blue stepped back, pulling Dusty with him. "You can't hurt us. Someone will figure it out. Derek knows we're meeting you." As soon as he said it, Blue's stomach clenched with regret. He'd just given Thomas ammunition.

The detective's sinister smile deepened. "The calmest of men can be the most capable of violence, particularly the lover provoked by jealousy. Your father may have kept it off-the-record, but my friends in SWAT have seen firsthand the violence your boyfriend is capable of. He damned near killed that rapist who brought you two together. Something tells me we'd find all sorts of incriminating evidence back at your cushy little loft. Derek likes to give it to you rough, doesn't he? Ties you up, smacks that ass of yours around while you cry and beg for more?"

Blue looked around the bathroom, trying to find a way to get Dusty and himself out, but the window was too high. There was only the door with Thomas standing between them and escape. Thomas was going to kill them both, and then he was going to link Derek to the crime.

"I figured you the first time I saw you, Shane. Dusty too. Boys like you, you're all alike. You like your men a little on the dark and dangerous side, until one comes along and shows you the true meaning of darkness."

Blue reached into his pocket for his cell phone. Thomas reached into his own pocket, trading the ribbon for a different weapon.

Instinctively, Blue stepped in front of Dusty. "He has a gun," Blue warned.

He weighed his options. If it were just him in the bathroom with Thomas, he'd take his chances at risk of getting shot. But there'd be no escape for Dusty.

He swallowed. Time to negotiate until a window of escape presented itself.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked Thomas.

The detective gestured toward the door. "We're going for a drive in that sweet little ride of yours."

"What about the car you came in?" Dusty asked. "You'll be traced here."

"Police impound," Thomas said, "signed out under that idiot James's badge number. Trust me, I've covered my ass for years. You could say I'm an expert at this sort of thing."

Blue led Dusty past Thomas and out the door, aware of the gun trained on him with his every step. "I liked you," Blue muttered. "I thought you were one of the good guys."

"They all think that, son. They all do."

Chapter Twenty-two

Derek shifted gears and slid the Porsche smoothly between lanes. He spied the Mustang several car lengths ahead.

“This is the way to Jim McGowan's house,” Derek muttered.

Fitz repeated this information into his cell phone, keeping his partner—his real partner—advised of the situation. He turned to Derek. “She just merged onto the freeway a few exits behind. So we've got back up.”

“Good. You'll need help keeping me off that bastard.” From the corner of his eye, Derek caught Fitz glancing at the speedometer.

“You're good at this tracking shit,” Fitz said. “Sure you're not undercover too?”

Derek smiled tightly. Whether through sheer dumb luck or the strange connection he shared with Blue, he'd thankfully caught sight of the Mustang a block from the bus station. From what he could see, the Porsche had gone undetected as he'd tailed behind.

“Got a cigarette on you?” he asked. He'd smelled the smoke on Fitz the minute they'd met. Funny, he'd never noticed the smell on others before he'd given up smoking himself.

Fitz passed him a cigarette. Derek pursed the filter between his lips.

A minute passed. “You gonna light that?” Fitz asked.

“No. I'll get my ass chewed out.” Providing Blue made it out of this mess alive, that was.

The Mustang crested a rise in the road, then dropped out of sight. Derek ignored the flash of panic that seared through him, maintaining both his composure and speed. He breathed a sigh of relief as he coasted over the rise several agonizing seconds later.

“They're signaling right at exit two seventy-three,” Fitz announced.

“I know where they're going,” Derek mumbled around the cigarette. He swung into the right lane, hoping Blue's knowledge of the back roads would provide leverage against Thomas.

Derek just prayed Blue didn't try anything stupid.

* * * *

Blue's palms sweated where they gripped the steering wheel, the tendon in his neck aching where the gun barrel dug into his flesh. He exited as instructed, whipping the Mustang smoothly around the three-sixty degree curve.

"This is close to where my father lives," Blue said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I most certainly do, son. Thought while I was cleaning house, I'd send a little message to your daddy. Lots of folks in this town sick of his way of doing business. About time he learned he's not the only one with some push and pull. Daddy's due for a long, hard fall, Shane. It's only a matter of time before that happens. You might want to thank me now for sparing you the fallout."

"Yeah, sure," Blue said wryly. "Leave Dusty out of this, though. Let me pull over and let him go."

"No can do, son. Spooky boy here knows too much. As vague as he's been on some details, he's been dead on about others. Can't afford to keep him around." The detective's tone turned to one of evil glee, chilling Blue to the bone. "That, and I can't wait to take you two together. As long as I've done this, you two will be my first set of doubles. I'll take Dusty first, Shane, so you can watch him die. Or better, I'll make you do the deed."

Keeping his head turned straight ahead, Blue flicked his gaze over to Dusty. The blond had sat silently the entire car ride, his manner one of grim resignation. Blue supposed that between fear of death, the realization that the killer had been right under their noses the whole time, and the horrible revelation regarding Dusty's birth, the guy felt like he had nothing to lose.

Which meant that maybe, just maybe, he was on the same wavelength as Blue.

As Blue neared the local dead man's curve, every horror story his father had ever told him about reckless driving played through his mind. He quickly assessed the situation. He and Dusty both wore seatbelts; Thomas did not.

Blue sped up, just a little. "Dusty," he said, keeping his voice level. "If you had your choice, who would you rather be killed by? Me? Or this asshole psycho in the backseat?"

The gun dented harder into Blue's neck. "Shut up, boy. I decide how it's done."

“You,” Dusty answered.

Blue picked up speed and started around the curve. The familiar cluster of white crosses came into sight, a fresh bouquet of pink roses placed at their base. Confirming no cars approached in the opposite lane, Blue took a deep breath.

“Cover your face!” he yelled. He floored the accelerator.

“Shit!” Thomas pitched forward and then fell back, dropping the gun.

Tires left pavement, and Blue's hands left the wheel. Crossing his forearms over his face, Blue shut his eyes and sent out a silent message.

I love you, Derek. Sorry about the car.

* * * *

Derek wheeled around the curve just in time to see the Mustang fly off the road, a black trail of rubber and smoke in its wake. Time slowed. Derek watched the car sail through the air. It rotated counterclockwise as the passenger-side fender hit a small tree. The tree splintered like a toothpick. The car landed driver-side down and plowed several feet through grass and dirt.

In a daze, Derek took all this in even as he navigated the curve and came to a screeching halt without spinning out.

He was out of the car and running across the road, barely paying heed to the black sedan that pulled in behind the Porsche. “Blue!” he called. “Dusty!”

“Graves, wait!” Fitz called after him. “Thomas may not be down!”

Ignoring Fitz's warning, Derek waded through the haze of smoke coming from the car. Squinting, he made out a flash of silver hair.

“Dusty!”

“Derek?” Dusty whipped his head around. He struggled to climb through the window.

“I'm right here.” Derek reached out and gripped the boy under the arms. Dusty's face and arms were scratched and bruised, but otherwise he appeared unharmed.

“Blue's not talking.” Dusty's voice cracked. “I think I'm stepping on him.”

“I'll get Blue in a minute. We've got to get you out first.”

Derek gritted his teeth and hefted. He nearly had Dusty free of the car when the boy's body gave resistance. Dusty gave a sharp cry.

A bloody hand gripped Dusty by the ankle, pulling him back down. "Little bastard...get back here," a strained voice demanded.

Dusty kicked and Derek pulled. Fitz came up behind the car, gun pointed at the rear window.

"Let him go, Thomas," Fitz said. "The game's up."

Thomas's hold slipped, and Derek fell back, bringing Dusty to the ground with him. A shot rang out, and with it, the sound of shattering glass. Fitz yelled and stumbled back.

Two more deafening shots fired. Derek rolled over, pinning Dusty beneath him in the event a bullet strayed. Greeted with silence, Derek peered back over his shoulder to see the female agent standing with cool, high-heeled poise, smoking gun aimed at the rear window. Fitz huddled on the ground beside her, face gone pale and clammy, a shiny, wet patch widening under his hand where he clutched his shoulder.

His partner kneeled beside him, gun in one hand, cell phone pressed to her ear with the other. "Agent down! Two injured hostages! Thomas is dead! I repeat, Thomas is dead! Need medics, stat!"

Derek instructed Dusty to wait and stumbled toward the car. Christ, he hoped the agent had hit her mark and not the innocent boy still belted to the driver's seat.

Derek heard a familiar moan, one he preferred to elicit under much different circumstances. He hung his upper torso down into the car. A brief glance confirmed Thomas lay in the backseat dead. Very dead.

Grunting, Derek stretched and freed the seat belt. He moved to heft Blue's limp form up. Eyes fluttering, Blue looked at Derek with a dazed expression, blood dripping down the left side of his face.

"Don't look in the back," Derek said.

"Why?" Blue asked, speech slurred.

"It's a bit messy."

"S'okay. Everything's kinda blurry."

"Can you stand?"

“Tryin' to.” Blue's legs proved wobbly, but he held himself up enough for Derek to get him through the window. Limping, Blue leaned against Derek for support. “Sorry 'bout the car, Sir. Did it on purpose. Only way to stop him.”

Sir. Leave it to a rebel like Blue to remember the rules in a state of half-consciousness. “It's all right, Blue. We'll get another one.”

“Cam'll fix it up.”

“It's totaled, Blue. Frame's bent.”

Blue looked back over his shoulder at the wreckage. “Fucker,” he muttered. “Showed his ass.”

Derek choked on his words. “Brat. I love you.”

“Love you too.” Blue winced. “Head hurts.”

“I'm sure it does. Keep talking.”

“Gotta stop gettin' hit in the head an' shit. Can't be good.”

“Probably not,” Derek agreed.

“Dusty...where...”

“He's fine. He's right here.” Derek collapsed in the grass next to Dusty, cradling Blue in his arms.

“Blue?” Dusty felt around, hands seeking.

“Don't touch his head. Here.” Derek guided Dusty's hands and placed them atop Blue's where they crossed on his chest.

Blue tried to smile but settled for a pained grimace. “Hey, Dusty. Bet you didn't see that coming.”

Dusty laughed and sobbed at once. He squeezed Blue's hands. “I thought I was the crazy one.”

Sirens sounded in the distance, the fading glow in the western sky signaling the end of another day gone by.

Chapter Twenty-three

"We're almost there," Dusty said.

"Just passed a sign that said Bethel Ridge, one mile," Blue confirmed. "How'd you know?"

"I can feel the people."

Blue believed him. "Not a lot of people here to feel. This place is total Hicksville."

Dusty grinned, his face lighting up around the sunglasses Derek had given him. "I thought that's why you brought me here, so I could take a break from the city."

"True. How're you feeling?"

"Better."

"Good." It was nice to see Dusty smile again, refreshing to see the radiant glow that had waned in the past month since that fucked-up day at the bus station, leaving Blue to worry he'd never see his friend happy again.

"I'll call Cam and let him know we're close." One hand on the wheel, Blue flipped his cell phone open and hit speed dial.

Cameron picked up on the second ring. "Hey, Shane."

"Hey. Almost into town. You said take the first left past McDonald's on Wildflower Drive?"

"Yeah. I'm in the little white house on the right. Fourth one past the row of mailboxes."

Blue repeated Cameron's directions for his own benefit.

"That's right," Cameron said. His voice softened. "It'll be nice to see you, Shane, even if you're not staying long."

Blue smiled into the phone. "It'll be nice to see you too."

Blue ended the call. He slowed at the speed limit sign. Thirty miles per hour? he thought, incredulous. After booking it at seventy on the open highway, he felt like he'd just slowed the rental car to a snail's pace.

The town looked interesting though, even if it appeared to be on the small side. Cameron had told him that the entire downtown district had been preserved by the historical society after a band of realtors had threatened to raze it in the early 1960s. The buildings dated mostly to the Victorian era, with a little Art Deco and a soda shop straight out of the Fifties, creating a timeless Main Street pastiche.

Blue came over the rise and slowed to cross a row of railroad tracks before speeding back up. As he cleared the rise and rounded a curve, the newer part of town loomed into view. The superstore and surrounding fast-food joints served as stark contrast to the preserved quaintness of downtown.

"There's the McDonald's." Dusty nodded toward the windshield.

Blue's stomach dipped as he drove downhill. "Okay, how the fuck did you know that?"

"I can smell the burgers. Can't you?"

"Not from two blocks back, no. And how do you know it's not some other place, like Burger King or some local grease pit?"

"Mickey D's has a unique aroma." Dusty grinned and rubbed his stomach. "*Mmm. McSmell.*"

Blue laughed. He passed the source of the "McSmell" and started looking for his turn. Spying the street sign for Wildflower Drive, he signaled and veered to the left.

When he pulled into the driveway, he honked the horn. The screen door to the modest house opened, and Cameron came out onto the porch.

Blue stepped out of the car and smiled. It was a pleasure to see his friend without the baggage of conflicting emotions of love and hate. As Dusty emerged from the car, Cameron's gaze shifted and flickered with a curious expression.

Dusty whipped out his cane. Blue took him by the elbow and guided him toward the house. Dusty counted his steps, acorns crunching beneath his shoes.

"There's a set of four stairs," Blue told Dusty, halting at the bottom step.

Dusty tapped the tip of the cane in a left-to-right motion, gauging each step. He released Blue's hand and tapped his way up, the porch creaking from his weight.

"Hello," he said, extending his hand directly toward Cameron. "I'm Dusty."

"How'd you know—" Cameron paused.

"I can smell your soap." Dusty smiled, a warm, open smile. Cameron reached out and took the extended hand. Dusty's brow puckered, and then his cheeks flushed pink. Blue noted this reaction with interest.

Even more interesting was Cameron's briefly startled expression. He resumed the introduction. "I'm Cameron, but everyone just calls me Cam."

"That's what Blue told me," Dusty said, his tone suddenly going shy. "Thanks for letting me stay with you,"

"It's no problem. A friend of Shane's is a friend of mine." Cameron's hand and gaze lingered on Dusty.

Well, fuck me, Blue thought. Were his two friends feeling the chemistry that he was witnessing between them, the energy so strong it was damned near tangible?

Blue stepped up beside Dusty. He reached out and knocked Cameron against the shoulder. He smiled, a sly knowing smile. "I'm here too, you know."

Cameron's face went ruddy. Clearing his throat, Cameron dropped Dusty's hand and opened the door. "Come in, I'll show you around."

He paused as soon as he said it, an embarrassed flush mantling his cheeks. He looked at Blue, his eyes seeming to ask, *Is it okay to use words like "show"?*

Blue remembered worrying about the same thing when he'd first met Dusty. He knew Dusty would soon put Cameron at ease regarding any such worries. Sure enough Dusty laughed, breaking the awkward silence.

"Thanks, Cam. I can't wait to see the place."

* * * *

It seemed Dusty had taken up with a stray cat on the screened back porch. "I've been trying for months to get that cat to come to me," Cameron mumbled. "But he only comes in here to eat and then runs."

"Dusty's got skills," Blue said. He lowered his voice. "I need a moment alone."

"Sure." Cameron cast another curious glance toward the young man sitting cross-legged on the sunlit patch of porch and went inside.

Blue sat on his haunches beside Dusty. "You don't have to wear these in the house, you know." He pulled the sunglasses up, combing back the strands of silver to reveal equally silver eyes.

With his other hand, Blue stroked the calico cat under the chin. The cat nestled deeper into Dusty's lap and purred.

"Making friends already," Blue said.

"Yeah." Dusty laughed, chasing away the hint of sadness that had crept back into his features. He definitely looked like he was feeling better, but Blue knew the truth revealed in the bus station bathroom had left Dusty permanently scarred.

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Be careful driving back in the rain," Dusty said.

"There's not a cloud in the sky," Blue said, puzzled.

"I can smell it in the air."

"Okay. I'll be careful." Blue cupped Dusty's chin. "Mine and Derek's offer still stands."

Dusty smiled. "So does Jarod's and his girlfriend's. Nice to know I've got so many places to stay."

"Our offer's a little different," Blue reminded him.

"I know," Dusty said quietly. "But it would never work."

"How do you know if we don't try?"

"I don't care how much you two try to include me, Blue. There's something special between you and Derek that no one can touch. I'd always feel like I'm standing on the outside, and I'd always be second best behind you on Derek's list. Call me selfish, but I'd rather be somebody's one and only."

"I understand. But if you reconsider—"

"You'll be the first to know."

“Okay.” Leaning in, Blue plied Dusty's mouth with a kiss. Their tongues briefly met, warming Blue to the core, the feeling less passionate than it was affectionate, but Dusty would always hold a special place in Blue's heart as more than a friend.

A wet nose nudged Blue under the chin. Laughing, he pulled away. He scratched the cat behind the ears. “Someone's jealous.”

Leaving his friend, Blue took advantage of Dusty's distraction to get the things from the car.

Cameron set the suitcase on the living room floor. “Shane, who have you left with me in there?”

Blue placed Dusty's one box of belongings on the coffee table. “Someone special.” He rose up on tiptoe and left a chaste kiss on Cameron's cheek. “I trust I'm leaving him in good hands.”

Blue started to pull away. Cameron grabbed him and pulled him into a close embrace. “I guess I'll see you when you come back for Dusty in a few weeks?”

Blue looked up at Cameron. Something told him Dusty wasn't leaving Bethel Ridge. The thought made him both sad and happy at once. “Yeah, I'll see you then.”

He offered another kiss, a quick one on the lips before untangling from the embrace. A familiar wistful look passed behind Cameron's eyes.

You only think you love me, Blue wanted to say, but he suspected his friend's feelings would soon change. “Good-bye, Cam,” he said instead.

Cameron simply nodded, his amber eyes dimming in resignation.

As Blue pulled out of the driveway, Cameron watched from the porch, then turned and went back into the house.

“Good luck, you two,” Blue said, the little white house growing smaller through the cloud of dust in the rearview mirror.

If anyone understood the healing process and could help Dusty, it was Cameron. Blue hoped it worked out for them. If one of them ever hurt the other, Blue would be hard-pressed to decide which one of their asses to kick first.

Turning onto the highway, he noted the small band of clouds that had gathered on the horizon. He smiled even as his eyes teared up.

Thanks for the weather report, Dusty. Blue was going to miss him.

* * * *

The rain started halfway through Blue's return trip. It was a gentle rain, bringing with it a crisp, cool breeze that offered welcome relief from the heat that had oppressed the city the entire summer.

Blue opened the door to find the lights dimmed and the loft empty, yet he felt Derek's presence and knew his master to be home. He toed off his shoes and tossed the car keys on the dining table that no one ever ate at. He stopped at the sight of the postcard. A temple spire shone gold in the sun atop a white dome, a pair of eyes painted at its base. "Bodhnath Stupa" the card said in small print in the lower left corner.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Blue flipped it over. He squinted at the small, cramped handwriting, the sender having made the most of the allowed space.

By the time you get this, I'll have lost the battle to cancer and left this realm behind. I have few regrets, but those few have pained me all these years and weighed heavily on my heart. When we met for lunch, I said you'd been better off without me, but that's too easy. The truth is, it broke my heart the day your mother left and took you away. I should have never let her go. I should have fought to keep my son. But I didn't, and I lost you, in more ways than one. Please tell Sandy I never stopped loving her. Please know that I love you too. You're the man I never could be, and I'm damned proud of you. See you in the next life, Derek. Maybe I'll get it right the second time around.

"Shit," Blue muttered. This was what Derek had been keeping to himself the past several weeks. He dropped the postcard and crossed the loft to the balcony doors.

His instincts confirmed, Blue quietly closed the door behind him and leaned against it. The patter of rain filled the air; water dripped from the eaves that sheltered the balcony. Thunder pealed softly in the distance.

"Hey," Blue said.

"Hey." Derek sat facing away, his chair turned toward the balustrade. The drink in his hand had barely been touched, while the vodka bottle on the table sat nearly full.

"I read the postcard. I'm sorry about your dad."

Derek swirled his drink, ice clinking against glass, but didn't take a sip. "It happens. I assume you deposited Dusty safely at Cameron's."

"Yeah."

"I still think it's a shitty idea."

"I know. But Dusty will be okay." *They'll both be okay*, he thought, remembering the intense current he'd felt surge between his friends the moment their fingers had touched.

Blue crossed the balcony. He took the drink from Derek with no argument and set it on the table. He pried between his lover's knees. "You okay?"

Derek looked up at him. His expression remained stalwart, but the wet streaks on his face briefly shone in the soft flash of lightning. "I didn't expect it to hurt this much."

Blue smoothed his fingers through Derek's hair. "He may have been an asshole, but he was still your dad."

He moved to straddle Derek's lap. In turn, the other man's legs shifted to accommodate him. As Blue wrapped around Derek, he felt the body in his arms melt against him, a rare show of vulnerability on his master's part. They sat that way in the dark for a while, Derek's head against Blue's chest, Blue's face in Derek's hair. Neither man spoke, the only sound that of falling rain. If Derek cried, it didn't show, but Blue could feel the pain emanating from him in slow, steady waves.

"I love you," Derek murmured, breaking the silence. "I'm glad you're here."

Blue smiled against Derek's scalp. "Me too."

Derek pulled back a little and peered up at Blue. "I called my mother earlier. She's visiting in a few months."

"Really? I can't wait to meet her."

"Sandy can't wait to meet you, either."

"You told her about me?"

"A little."

"Sounds downright conversational of you."

Derek grunted in reply. He stood, hefting Blue up with him.

They stepped inside. Derek paused and looked at the bed. "I enjoyed our time with Dusty," he said. "But it'll be nice to have you alone in our bed tonight."

"I don't know," Blue teased. He hugged his master from behind, his head pressed between Derek's shoulder blades. "I bet having two boys at your beck and call spoiled you. Think I'll still be enough to satisfy you?"

Derek turned in Blue's arms and peered down with his piercing emerald gaze. "You're more than enough, Blue. You've always been." Breaking away, he went to the nightstand and opened the drawer. "As it happens, I'm between contracts again."

"How long?"

"I don't know." Turning, Derek dangled a leather collar from one finger. "Get undressed."

"Yes, Sir." Blue smiled and tugged his T-shirt over his head.

Both of them naked, save for the collar around Blue's neck, they slipped under the sheets, their limbs entwining easily as they fell into a comfortable fit. From there, they indulged in a luxury they hadn't shared with one another for months.

They curled up together, and enjoyed a full night's sleep.

 THE END 

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Katrina Strauss

Katrina Strauss discovered her love of romance novels with sneak peeks at her grandmother's dog-eared, spine-worn paperbacks. Inspired to pen her own twist on the timeless genre of romance, Katrina explores the darker side of love. Though her stories qualify as “happily ever after”—or at least “happy for now”—her characters take a deliciously twisted path getting there.

A Texan by birthright with the accent to prove it, Katrina currently lives with her family near St. Louis, Missouri. To learn more about Katrina and her special brand of dark romance, please visit her author site at <http://www.katrinastrauss.com/>