



TALL, MEAN
AND
DARKLY

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Tall, Mean and Darkly

By

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Stephanie Hecht

Dedication

AJ: To Herve for always being my inspiration.

*Stephani: To Uncle Greg. I will always
remember you.*

Chapter One

I turned the corner on Cananea Avenue and stopped. When had trudging up the hill with a few groceries become such an ordeal? I bit my lip against the rolling mist and realized it was starting to rain again. I tried to think. I'd forgotten to buy something...what? Three days it had taken me to get out of bed, to coax myself from beyond the confines of the kitchen and bathroom and actually go to the store.

The doctor had given me Xanax and I'd abused it a bit. I had to admit. I didn't trust myself to drive. I'd taken advantage of the break in the weather and gone down to Burlingame Avenue for fresh supplies. For three days, I'd eaten every last bite of food in the house, even raiding the emergency rations from our earthquake kit. I snorted at the notion of how we thought we'd been prepared for an emergency, how we felt so secure believing we'd be able to handle any contingency.

Well, winter came into our lives and I was not coping well at all. If only, I thought, straightening and stretching my shoulders, the bus had taken me out, too.

My neighbor, Mrs. Farliss was squatting in her driveway in her pajamas, planting minuscule pots that wouldn't make it through the night, let alone the already chilly Fall. I stopped and stared at her. Her normally elegant, coiffed gray hair was wild. She looked drunk. She'd uprooted perfectly good, drought-resistant plants Chrissie and I had planted for her and they lay scattered on the driveway. Mrs. Farliss had been our neighbor for the two years Chrissie and I had lived next door in the house Mr. Farliss built. The house was too big for them, so they moved into the smaller one next door, selling their sprawling family home to us.

Chrissie and I had seen her mental condition deteriorate since her husband's passing. Now, I was heading in the same direction. I was slowly, painfully going mad from losing my own wife. I felt the way Mrs. Farliss looked. I put my shopping bags on the ground.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

She looked up, dirt smudging her face. "Oh, hello, Derek."

God, she thought I was her dead son.

"I'm planting, of course."

"But —"

"I drove to Home Depot."

"You – drove?" My God, her license had been revoked two years ago and she was considered legally blind.

"Where's the car?" I asked her, realizing the garage door was open and the massive Buick she owned was gone.

She peered at me suspiciously. "Don't you know?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't." I thought for a moment. She hadn't left it in the middle of the road. I would have seen it walking up the hill.

"Tony wants more plants. Cheerful plants." Her face clouded over and something shifted.

"Are you okay?" I asked gently.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Lordy, am I outside in my jimmy-jams?"

"Yes, you are. Come on with you now." I stretched out a hand and hoisted her to her feet. She could be sturdy as a rock one second, as frail as a crippled fledgling the next.

She gripped my arm as I bent and picked up my bags and helped her up the stairs.

"Tony?" she called out.

Of course, Tony was dead. Sometimes she remembered, sometimes she didn't. I stepped into the gloomy hallway. Mrs. Farliss's house was a nightmare of kitsch with flying ducks on the wall and a Department Fifty-Six winter village she put

up at Christmas and never took down. I knew all about Department Fifty-Six because my wife had been mad about it, too.

I switched on lights and Mrs. Farliss switched them off. I checked the thermostat. A warm and toasty forty-seven degrees. I inched it up to sixty, as far as I dared go and we went into the kitchen.

She threw herself into an avocado-colored plastic chair at the kitchen table and I called her son—the living one—and murmured her latest escapade into the phone.

"She did what?" he exploded. Her son Kyle was a cop in Millbrae, a few miles north. He was a juvenile division uniformed officer currently separated from his wife and he often told me his mom was more trouble than the city's teenagers ever were.

"She's okay, Kyle. Right now she's in the kitchen and I'll make her some soup, but I thought you might want to drop by."

"Of course," he said. "And thank you. Can you hide those car keys for me?"

"Actually, I didn't see the car in the driveway. She's already forgotten what she did with it."

"Christ," he said.

I hustled around the kitchen, keeping up a gay and carefree chatter that I truly didn't feel.

"You're Chrissie's husband," she said, pointing a crooked finger at me.

My heart gave a twinge. "Yes, I am."

"She's very nice. She makes the best caramels."

I didn't know how to respond. Chrissie had many wonderful attributes. Cooking was not one of them. It was the only thing we ever fought about. Caramels. Had she ever made caramels?

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked her.

"Mmm...yes."

She bought the cheapest supermarket brand and my heart broke. Chrissie and I used to buy Starbucks and put it in her fridge. Since Chrissie's death, I'd forgotten the old lady next door and the disgusting coffee she drank. I opened one of my shopping bags and tipping out the crap in the tin from her freezer, I poured half my own stash of ground French roast into the canister and shook some into her percolator.

Mrs. Farliss loved cutting things. Coupons for the things she would never buy, her hair, anything that could be halved, thereby economizing. She now wielded a pair scissors and cut the paper napkins in a holder on the table in half. She always did this. She was the most frugal woman I knew. Kyle once told me she used to darn his bicycle tires with thread when they went flat. I was surprised Kyle was such a nice, normal guy.

"You're the accountant," Mrs. Farliss said in a rare moment of clarity that stunned me.

"Yes, that's right."

"Some kind of fancy detecting accountant."

"I'm a forensic accountant, but I—"

"Do you know who stole the quarter off my kitchen counter?"

"Er...no."

"Hmph. Not much good at detecting are you?"

"No, but I'm not—"

"I want coffee!" she shrieked.

I got busy. I read the expiration date on her milk and almost gagged. It was two-years old. Mrs. Farliss froze her milk. She froze everything, even her eggs. Her food therefore was always inedible. Maybe to her, Chrissie had seemed a domestic kitchen goddess.

It was no good explaining that as a forensic accountant my bag was numbers, not homicide. I'd worked exactly one murder case, the rest of my business being mostly medical and legal cases. Since Chrissie's passing, I'd let my business slide. I had a small office, but also worked out of the house. I couldn't even think about working right now.

I made her coffee and toast, wondering what the hard lumpy stuff was in the plastic container. Of course. Frozen margarine.

"Can I have soup? I feel like soup," she said.

I opened a can of chicken noodle, heated it, made some more toast and left her in front of the TV with a crocheted blanket to watch her soaps.

"You know, you're awfully nice. What did you say your name was again?"

"Gavin. Gavin Jago."

"That's a strange name, are you from Japan?"

I looked at her. She was really dancing with the pixies now.

"No, Mrs. Farliss I live next door."

She didn't respond.

I heard her son's state-issued motorbike in the driveway and after a brief exchange of greetings, went back home. The rain had stopped, not that I cared.

"Kyle," I called and his head poked out from his front door.

"Your mom's car is in my driveway."

"Are the keys in it?"

I checked. "Yes."

He came down to me and I could see the anxiety on his face.

"Thank God. I'm thinking I should move in with the old girl...especially now..."

"Things aren't any better with Janet?"

He shook his head. His wife was an emergency room nurse and under a lot of stress. Kyle and their two kids, a boy and girl, suffered for it.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yeah." He blew out a breath and looked up at the house. "I never thought I'd be coming home again."

He palmed the car keys and reversed the monster Buick out of my driveway and I went up the stairs to my house. Tony Farliss had been a master architect who apparently apprenticed under John Lautner and followed his example of linear, sun-catching, modern design.

Chrissie and I had always gone for warm, neutral tones, Danish modern furniture and once we got used to our cozy, coastal living, she'd developed what I called a *village fetish* and started filling our house with angels, fairies, pictures of sunflowers with happy messages, embroidered cushions and Department Fifty-Six.

She had almost every piece of the Dickens Village and had coveted Five Gold Rings, the only part of the Twelve Days of Christmas she didn't have. Switching on lights, I looked straight into the living room and saw the huge expanse of white, rolled out fabric made to look like cottony snow lining the piano, the sideboards and the coffee table. She had gotten as far as assembling the street lamps, the railway station, some houses, an ice skating pond and a few trees when...the dreadful thing happened.

I hadn't the heart to touch anything in the living room.

For a month, it all sat there, the boxes, bags, the entire village, ready to roll. One lone carol-singing

boy stood on the ice-skating pond, his little face lifted in song.

I'll come back, she'd said, as she lay dying in my arms in the middle of Burlingame Avenue. *I'll never leave you. I'll find a way, baby. I'll come back.*

The tears came fast. It hurt to see all this stuff, yet I hadn't allowed my sisters to pack it away. A part of me needed the things Chrissie loved, the things she looked at, worked with and touched right up until the hour before...before...

I swatted at my eyes, took the groceries into the kitchen and felt a bit better for a few morsels of food in the fridge. What would I do this evening? I'd spent weeks watching our vacation, wedding and honeymoon videos. I thought...I thought if I believed, if I held on in a state of anticipation, she'd come back. I sometimes fancied I caught her out of the corner of my eye. If I did, it was no more than that, a whisper on the static air. She had left me no threads, nothing more to hold onto, except a Victorian village that was half-packed in boxes.

Netflix had made money off me renting every maudlin movie I could come up with. *Ghost*, *Topper*, *Truly Madly Deeply*...all were riddled with ghosts of dead spouses coming back to be with their true loves.

Where the hell was Chrissie?

Gazing out of the rain-tracked kitchen windows, I hoped for some sign of her in our

shadowy garden. She loved our garden and planted all kinds of things. Between the weeping willows at the end of the garden, I could see San Francisco Bay. We'd picked Burlingame as our home, about twenty minutes south of the city, because it was quaint and because Chrissie loved it.

And I loved her.

The garden, with its wrought-iron chairs and bird feeders, stood in mocking silence. She wasn't here. She wasn't coming back. That only happened in movies.

I opened the Xanax bottle. Three left. Not enough to kill myself. My doctor had prevaricated when I asked for a refill.

Telling him I wished I was dead had probably not been...helpful. He'd suggested exercise and an in-person appointment instead of a phone consultation. I'd assured him of both and had done neither.

I was debating what to cook for dinner when the doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anybody. Chrissie had been dead a month and after the initial flurry of casseroles and condolence calls, our friends had carefully gone on with their lives.

Nobody dropped by. Probably too afraid that I'd want to talk about my dead wife.

I glanced outside the narrow, glass window running the length of our front door. My front door.

"Yes?" I said as the tall, dark and I guess you could say, handsome man stood on my doorstep.

"Aren't you going to open up?" he asked.

"Who are you?" I was ready to call 911.

"Don't be ridiculous, darling. Open the door."

"Who the hell are you?" I asked. I'd had enough weirdness for one day.

"Don't you recognize me?"

He was leering.

I squinted at him. I was pretty certain I'd never seen this man before in my life.

"Um...no, I don't," I said. "I'm sure you have the wrong house."

"Darling, don't be ridiculous. It's me!"

I'd never met this man and he was starting to look pissed.

"You?"

"Gavin, darling. It's me. Chrissie!"

Chapter Two

The man kept leaning on the bell and knocking on the door. Terrified now, I backed away, bumping into the antique coat stand in the hallway.

Police. I needed the police. Wait! I had the police right next door! Disengaging myself from Chrissie's woolen hats and heavy pea coats, I ran to the phone in the living room and called next door. Kyle picked up on the second ring. I could hear the strains of *Days of our Lives* on the TV in the background.

"Help!" I shouted. "There's a crazy man at my door."

We didn't get too many crazy men in Burlingame. The Museum of Pez Memorabilia was about as crazy as we got. As soon as Kyle heard my frantic voice, he came running. By the time he arrived and scoured the entire property, the tall, dark, handsome man was gone.

Of course, once I told Kyle that a man had turned up at my door telling me he was my dead wife, I could see the funny look on his face. I could see the deep pity in his eyes. I didn't want his pity, I wanted him to tell me how this man could turn up at my door and then vanish.

He stepped inside and his gaze traversed the rooms surreptitiously. What was he looking for? Empty booze bottles? Drugs? A half-clad hooker chained to the sofa?

Kyle put one hand on my shoulder, hitched up his pants with the other and said, "You know, you're bound to become a little unglued with all the stress you've been under. Don't think about it. Try to relax."

Relax? Was he kidding? He stared at the winter village, a pathetic imitation of the one his mother had next door. His gaze strayed to my coffee table and the collection of DVDs and video tapes I'd been watching.

He arched a brow in my direction. "You know, you may wanna lay off the chick flicks for a while and take in a bit of wrestling."

Wrestling! Man, this guy didn't know me at all. He told me to lock up, advised *a brewski or two* and shuffled back next door. I sat on my sofa and wondered, had I really imagined the whole episode?

I picked the video on top of the pile waiting for me to watch. It was Henry Jaglom's *Déjà Vu*. It had been one of the many Chrissie and I promised each other we'd watch and never got around to. There were so many things we'd planned, Bucket Lists we kept revising. I felt the sob catch in my throat and I turned off the TV, pressed my face into the back of the sofa and screamed.

For long moments, I lay there. How long, I don't know, but the phone rang several times and I let it go to voicemail. Unfortunately, I was doing a sloppy job of retrieving messages and somebody kept calling back so I stumbled to my feet, scrubbed at my eyes with my fists and went in search of the phone. Here was another thing. I kept losing things since Chrissie died.

I did laundry once and found my cell phone tangled inside the sheets. I put the landline phone receiver in the fridge once. Okay, twice. I almost went for a walk one day until I realized I had no idea where my tennis shoes were. I was getting to be as bad as Mrs. Farliss next door. The phone rang again and I tried to remember what I'd done with it when I called Kyle next door. Ah! I remembered now. I tried to follow the sound, but the ringing stopped. I felt proud when I located the phone lying on a bed of fake snow. The little toy carol singer's mouth remained open in an

angelic O and I fought the urge to flick him across the room with my fingers.

The phone rang again. I answered it. A long, heavy sound of breathing.

Oh, God. "Hello?" I said again. The breathing continued and then the call ended. I frowned. The phone rang again and once more I answered it.

"Hello, Gavin?"

I grimaced. It was Caron Lewis, Chrissie's employee in her scrapbook store. I did feel guilty about *Scrappy Happy* because I hadn't the strength to open the doors since Chrissie's death. Dead. Chrissie dead at thirty-three. Didn't make any sense.

"Gavin?"

She kind of barked my name and I snapped to attention.

"Yes?"

"I can't believe you picked up. Look, I've kept a nice, respectful distance, but you must do something about the store. The holidays are coming and people have booked crop parties. Gavin, are you listening to me?"

Crop parties. God. Chrissie had scoured Northern California for the best scrapbook teachers to give classes, help her order the latest avant-garde accoutrements. It astonished me how much hardware women needed to create scrapbooks.

Caron on the other hand, was the most aggravating woman I'd ever met. She had been solid and reliable, but bossy and Chrissie kept her on because despite not having a creative bone in her body, Caron loved and lived the scrapbooking business and could run the store a few days a week, giving my wife a few days off.

Not being able to deal with Caron had been another reason to put off the inevitable. I'd taken the shop keys away from her at the funeral because she wanted to go open the store. My sisters had supported me on that one. I'd made a sign, which we put in the window. *Due to bereavement, the store will be closed. We'll be back before Halloween.*

I realized Caron was right.

"Yes," I said. She seemed angry now.

"Yes, what?" she asked.

"You're right. I will have to think about this. I'm not ready yet, Caron. Let me get back to you."

"But—"

I hung up on her and sighed. Staring at my shoes, I realized I was dressed, I could take a walk down Lorton Avenue and poke around the store a bit. My sisters, Sasha and Emily, had called all the vendors delivering product to the store and had it rerouted to our house. Most of it was sitting in boxes in the garage. I should go to the store, check on the mail, make sure the place was still

standing. I wished Sasha and Emily were here and not in New York. They'd been fantastic until they went back home the previous week.

They had assured me I didn't need to keep Caron on at the store, but she made me feel guilty, the way she made Chrissie feel guilty.

I work so hard for this store, was her constant refrain. You couldn't fire somebody just for being a pain in the ass. I slipped on a coat, went downstairs and threw a few boxes into my old Range Rover and reluctantly pointed it toward the store.

Lorton Avenue, the newest, trendiest, artfully rustic cluster of designer stores and cafés off the main drag of Burlingame Avenue had some of the coolest places in town. There was Quent Fine Arts, where we coveted half the artwork, Forever Cheese, where Chrissie and I would have lunch...Inie Café where we shared the grooviest cappuccinos...I swallowed hard. Everything reminded me of her. *It's been a month. Give it time.*

Outside the store, there was a parking space, which was a small miracle, but what shocked me was that the store was open and people were coming in and out with packages. My God, the store was being looted and people were stealing our stuff! I braked hard, reversed into the space, narrowly avoiding taking out a pigeon and the

fender of the Peugeot in front of me. Cell phone. Where the hell was my cell phone? I ransacked the glove compartment. When was the last time I'd used it? I never left the house anymore. Never mind, I'd use the shop phone.

I remembered to take the keys out of the ignition and, brushing past all the people milling around, zeroed in on the man behind the counter. God all mighty, it was him.

He grinned at me. "Hey, Chuckles!"

Chuckles? How did he know Chrissie's nickname for me? More importantly, how did he get in here?

Gaping like a fool, I watched him move swiftly across the floor space, removing a tube of glitter glue from a small girl's mouth.

"Violet, don't do that, honey," he said. "Here, have a cupcake. Much tastier."

A woman sitting at the crop station swept a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"Oh, thanks, Jackson. Say, what do you think of this overlay pattern?"

The tall, dark and handsome man glanced over her shoulder. "Great. I like the frayed edging."

"Me, too," she said, and bent back to her work as the man glanced at me.

"It's Mommy and Me Day. I can't believe how many people were waiting for me to open up!" He grinned as one of the elderly Kingsley twins

squeezed past me and handed him a die cutting tool.

"What do you think of this one?" she asked.

"Well, with your arthritis, I think this new cordless one here would be perfect. It's so easy to use. It has five blades and repositionable tacky adhesive. Here, why don't you try out mine and see if you like it?"

"Fabulous," the Kingsley twin said. "Although, I think I already want it."

I could never tell the sisters apart. Both had the same steel wool hair and school principal demeanor until they opened their mouths to laugh. A loud, honking bray ensued and I knew it was Dolly. Daisy giggled, Dolly honked.

I caught sight of the price tag. One hundred and fifty dollars, and I blanched for Dolly, but she was already rifling through the selection of Italian-themed scrapbook papers.

Each year, she and Daisy vacationed in Florence, at the same hotel, and came back with almost identical photos. The only things that changed were the embellishments on the meticulous pages of their scrapbooks.

"Gavin!" Dolly rushed forward and hugged me. "You look so pale. So good to see you out of the house. Isn't it wonderful you found such a great store manager in Jackson?"

Jackson?

I spluttered. “Store manager!” as more women crowded the front desk and the tall, dark man handled them all with grace, good humor and an effortless swipe of their credit cards. I watched, agog. Only Chrissie could have handled things so well. She used to pass the cards back with a certain flourish that this guy did, too.

Mentally shaking myself, I told my fanciful thoughts a thing or two. He was not Chrissie. He was...Jackson. Whoever the hell that was. I wanted to call for the police, medical intervention...something, but in the meantime, the stranger was racking up sales the way only Chrissie could.

Jackson stamped the scrapbook cards that entitled each owner to free goods once they’d racked up two hundred dollars in purchases and I could detect cream cheese frosting in the air.

I moved behind the counter to check the register and to have a quiet word with this...Jackson. He leaned in and kissed me hard on the lips and I jumped back, swiping at my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Ack! What the —”

Nobody seemed to notice. They were all now loading up on cupcakes and hot drinks from the gigantic thermoses.

I wanted to kick his ass.

"Bring in the boxes in from the car, will you?" he asked.

"How do you know I brought boxes?" I asked, feeling incredibly stupid.

Jackson's voice dropped. "Since I died, I know things. It's uncanny. I see things...ghosts, spirits, dead creatures...they're all around us. Did you know that? Little, strange life forms swimming all around us."

I glanced around in fear, then checked myself.

"Jesus Christ," I said, sweat trickling down my neck.

"Sometimes they see us, sometimes they don't." Jackson pointed a finger at me. "There's this kind of fish with feet that keeps hovering around you. He's a strange thing...operates on a different plane, but he swims around your head a lot."

"Cut that out!" I shrieked. The real Chrissie knew about my eel phobia.

"He's got razor sharp teeth," he went on and again his voice dropped. "Just like a moray eel. I know how you feel about them, darling, but he seems quite...harmless...sort of...playful."

"Ugh...er..." I was in full panic mode, thinking of a moray eel swimming around my head.

Jackson lifted his shoulders. "I'm sorry this was the only body I could find...but you know what? I like being a man. People treat you differently when you're a man. And look how hot I am! I am

goddamned sexy! I had two choices, a really ugly old lady or Jackson Avery."

"Jackson Avery?" I bleated.

"Yes, baby. And you know what? I have a huge knob. And I must say, I'm keen to use it."

He cracked his knuckles and I stared at him.

"Gavin, why are you staring at me? Be a darling, will you and bring in the boxes? I think the new Halloween card stock selection should be in one of them."

I glanced around, but nobody was watching us.

"Get out of my store," I said, as loudly and as menacingly as I dared.

"Don't be stupid, darling. Get the boxes."

At my sullen expression, he waved me away in the same manner Chrissie would have when she was very irritated with me.

"And stop calling me *darling*," I snapped.

"Hey, Jackson?" somebody asked and I turned to find a couple of housewives looking flush-faced and excited. "Where did you get these divine red velvet cupcakes?"

"Oh," the tall, handsome man grinned. "Butterfly Cakes, of course. To die for, aren't they?" He caught my gaze. "What, don't you love that store?"

The woman licked the cream cheese frosting and nodding, grabbed a second cupcake. I blinked a couple of times. Butterfly Cakes had been

Chrissie's favorite, but they also cost, as she always said, a pretty penny. There must have been five dozen cupcakes on long trays around the cropping tables.

"I know they cost a pretty penny," the tall, handsome man said, "but they're worth it." He handed me a harajuku, one of the store's specialty crooked cupcakes and the tears just dropped from my eyes. I was falling apart. This wasn't happening. Who the hell was this guy?

Standing in the middle of the noisy store, cupcake in hand, my senses reeling with each new revelation, I hadn't noticed that Jackson had brought in the boxes from my car.

He took them into the stock room and I followed him.

"You don't know what it's like to prowl the earth without a body, trying to find the right one. I mean this guy was perfectly normal. Fell down, had a heart attack. I was in the right place at the right time and jumped right in."

"Into...into his body?" I wanted to make sure I was getting my facts straight.

"Of course."

"Is he...er...are you a local?"

"Of course not. I found him in Europe. People think he disappeared, walked off in a fugue state. You often hear of it happening to men, you know. More men are alone in this world. He was a very

depressed, unhappy man, but was in an otherwise good condition."

She made it sound like he was a car.

"...and the gatekeeper gave me twenty seconds to come up with a name and I—"

"Gatekeeper?"

"Gavin, I just explained all that. I wasn't in heaven. I was halfway. They wanted me to ascend, but I said I wanted to come back. They said I didn't need to, but I told them I promised my husband."

His gaze on my face felt like sunburn.

"I never break my promises, as you know. Anyway, I thought Jackson Avery perfectly suited me. It suits a man with a big cock like mine."

"My God...you are not my wife," I spluttered.

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not. She would never use a word like that."

"I know." His smile was smug as he bounced on his toes. "Darling, I never have to think about tampons or high heels again. I've been liberated!"

No, no, this is not happening.

"Where did you get the keys to the store?" I barked.

He responded with a hard kiss on the lips.

"Stop that!" I rasped and jumped back, falling into a stack of boxes. He reached out a hand, steadied me and kissed me again.

In the doorway, a large, angry lion of a woman filled the frame. "Thinking about things, eh?"

Oh, God. It was Caron Lewis.

"Caron, I can explain."

"No, a picture tells a thousand stories," she said, her eyes, narrow, unseemly slits. "I understand *everything* and I am reporting you to the Better Business Bureau, the Labor Board..." she paused for breath. "And the police. I just *know* you pushed that poor woman under that bus!"

"Look, she's just an angry, strange woman. Nobody believes you pushed Chrissie under a bus. I mean, just because you used to joke about it all the time—"

"Emily!"

"Geez, you're really unglued, Gavin."

My sister sounded way too chirpy from her home in New Jersey. I cradled my cell phone against my ear and peered between the vertical slats of the living room blinds at Kyle next door. He was unloading his belongings from the bed of his Toyota pickup truck and hauling them into his mother's house. He glanced over at my house and I inhaled a sharp breath.

Had Caron Lewis called him?

"You there, Gav?" my sister asked.

"No," I responded. It was all right for her being married to a guy who had a job, two kids who had

no alarming personality defects. I felt resentful of her nice, normal life.

I was so unhinged, I'd dropped a perfectly good cupcake and run all the way home after Caron's accusations. I'd called both my sisters, calling Emily second because she always made me feel like I needed to get a better grip on reality. Now she was being very unsympathetic.

"It sounds like this Jackson guy's doing a terrific job. You can't stand Caron and he loves the store. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is—" I hesitated. Would she believe me if I told her that he claimed to be Chrissie? Would she believe Chrissie had died on Burlingame Avenue and just like one would shop for clothes or a book, she'd shopped for a new body? Would she believe that Jackson Avery had told me that she—he—had prowled continents and the tall, dark, handsome man's body was the best and closest one that was handy?

I remembered that last, awful afternoon Chrissie and I had gone shopping. She'd gone to get her haircut, ran across the road to meet me and the bus skipped a red light and plowed right into her. The image played in my mind over and over again. I had not been able to reach her until she had fallen under the wheels. The driver and some of the passengers cried and the paramedics

arrived within minutes. She died in my arms before they could even take her away.

Darling, I will come back...I promise you, she'd said.

"You miss her, it's understandable," Emily said now.

I watched Kyle's sad face as he took his snowboard indoors. I moved away from my hidden vantage point and forced myself to concentrate on her words.

"It's just that..." I was sick of the hot tears that were always close. "He...he says things."

"What things?" she sounded annoyed now.

"He says he's Chrissie...that she's come back and she's very happy about having a big dick."

"Gavin Jago, have you been drinking?" Emily demanded.

"Of course not."

"How much Xanax have you been taking?"

"Not enough to imagine he said those things."

Emily groaned. "Lord, don't tell me we're going to have to hospitalize you. I don't want to have to take you to the cracker factory, Gavin. Come on, chin up, best foot forward."

I stared at the long vertical blinds in the living room. I had never liked them. I'd wanted plantation shutters. In fact, there had been plantation shutters on them, but Chrissie insisted we remove them. We'd tried selling them, but

they'd been custom made for the house and if I remembered correctly, they were gathering dust in the garage.

"You think it's bad if I remove the blinds in the living room?" I asked my sister.

"Are you smoking crack?"

"Shut up! No. I just hate the blinds and we've got the shutters somewhere in the garage."

My sister was silent for a moment.

"I think it's a good idea for you to sober up before handling any type of heavy machinery, Gavin." Her voice sounded stiff. "Once you do, I think it's a superb idea. Physical work will knock the weepy socks out of you." She paused and her voice dropped. "Why don't you just rent porn and jack off like other men?"

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't believe she was being so insensitive. Her kids were grumbling in the background and I wasn't surprised when she said she had to go. It was fine by me. I had work to do.

Feeling faintly sacrilegious about removing the blinds, I told myself I'd never liked them. I stared at them for about ten minutes before grabbing a coat from the stand in the hallway. I ran out into the spitting rain, covering the short distance between the house and the garage in seconds.

A cat Chrissie and I fed scuttled under Chrissie's Saab, sitting in the garage. I liked the cat

and would have fed him in the house, but Chrissie hated fur and mess. I called out to the cat who stared at me from under the car and I shook some fresh food into his dish, wondering not for the first time, how he managed to squeeze in and out of the small space in the window. I prowled the garage until I found the old shutters.

They needed painting, but I could do that. I took them out to the covered back porch and examined them. Maybe a couple of coats of paint. I quickly lost enthusiasm for the job and then spotted the cat darting under the holly bush in the garden and streaking along the garage wall. He had a small, furry object in his mouth. A kitten!

I followed him, actually I realized it was a *her* into the garage and discovered she'd made a nest under the Saab. I heard a series of small meows, like little chicken peeps, and put my hand under the car. I felt four little heads and a gentle nip on the back of the hand from Mama Kitty.

I gathered them all up and ran into the house with them. The kittens meowed very loudly now and I'd been inside just a few minutes when Kyle came in through the back door.

"Hullo," he said, peering down at the old basket I'd fashioned into a bed for the little family.

He grinned at me. "Where did you find them?"

"In my garage."

"We have a spare litter box...maybe a little bit of litter. Hold on." He tore off.

I fussed over the frisky kittens now climbing all over Mama Kitty. I brought in her food and water dishes and then Kyle returned with a litter box, patting it dry with one of Chrissie's decorative hand towels.

She would have gone barking mad if she were alive. I simply tossed them on the laundry pile.

"Our old cat died. My mom keeps everything," he said. He put the box down. There wasn't much litter, but there was enough until I made a supermarket run.

I put the basket under the kitchen table because it was very warm there. I positioned the litter box against the kitchen door.

"Want some Mike's Hard Lemonade?" I asked Kyle.

"Don't mind if I do. What's with the shutters on the porch?"

"Thought I might do some redecorating. Say, the Forty-Niners are playing the Cowboys. Wanna watch?"

He checked his watch. "Yeah. Hey, it's at Candlestick Park, right?"

Kyle helped himself to the remote and pushed aside my DVDs. I saw his shrewd glance shift from the cover of *Love, Actually* back to me.

I handed him a can and he ripped open the tab.

"My wife makes me tape everything," he griped. "I never watch a live game anymore."

Chrissie rarely let me watch anything I wanted now that I thought about it, but I sure missed the heck out of her. I sipped at the can in my hand and reflected on how often we had compromised on our TV viewing. Yes, I had usually been the one to cave into her cravings, but I hadn't minded, really. I wondered if Kyle would miss Janet now that he'd been officially kicked out of their crib.

"Great screen," Kyle commented of the new, giant, flat-screen, high definition TV Chrissie and I had installed a few weeks before...before...I shook my head. The words still hurt.

The game had just started and we drank in silence, talking only during the ads. That was the thing about another guy. You understood the power, the bliss of silence. We finished our drinks and at the next commercial break, I went to get us fresh cans and popped some kettle corn in the microwave. It was on our third pair that I realized the cans read Mike's *Harder* Lemonade. Underneath this, it said, *Hard and then some*. For some reason, this gave me an odd, sexual thrill. Man, I was drunk. Drink always made me horny and I realized for the first time since her passing that Chrissie and I hadn't had sex for about a week prior to her death. That made it five weeks since I'd gotten laid.

I stared into the future and felt a fresh wave of despair wash over me. Five weeks and counting. I was going to be celibate for a long, long time. I felt the stupid tears bubbling to the surface again and knowing Kyle was newly separated, felt it was okay to throw caution to the wind. We could have a third can each. We needed to forget, no matter how bad this hard lemonade might make us feel in the morning.

Back in the living room, Kyle looked glazed-eyed, his tongue running around his dry lips, was staring at the TV. I glanced at the screen. Two women were on the screen giving a huge, hung guy joint head.

"What the hell is that?" I asked, squinting at the screen.

He held up his hand for a can. "It's been that long since you got laid?"

"No, I mean, what happened to the football?"

"I have no idea. I was tooling around." He held up a small black gadget that looked like a slim, universal remote control.

"Ha!" he sat up straighter now. "It frickin' works! Jack Strewell two doors down has a full subscription to all the porn channels. I can access it from my place, now I can access it from yours."

This made me feel very uncomfortable. Jack Strewell was in his sixties and it was unpleasant to think of him having porn on tap. I watched as

Kyle flipped over to a raunchy scene with a white girl and two black men. She was sitting on the back of a sofa, one man kneeling in front of her outstretched legs, lapping away at her. The second guy sat beside her, his cock erect, stroking himself, watching the action.

Kyle let out a hiss. Oh, God, he was rubbing his crotch. I was embarrassed and hoped if Chrissie's ghost ever did come back, it wouldn't be right now. She'd never gone in for porn. I had to admit, watching one guy urge the other to pleasure the women he was going down on was kind of erotic, but I shook my head. What was I thinking? I couldn't be having horny thoughts. I was widowed for God's sake.

I was shocked when Kyle pulled his cock out of his pants and started stroking himself. He was so absorbed in his viewing, I guessed he forgot where he was for a moment. His cock was big and I was surprised to see, uncut.

"Come on man," he said, "play with yourself. Relax."

I can't, I wanted to say, but I didn't.

"Don't tell me you never jerked off with another guy before," he said.

"Um...I...er..."

"Come on, man, this scene is hot."

The man on the screen watching the action, now pressed his friend's head into the girl's

parted thighs. He stroked his friend's back and Kyle was really spanking his monkey now.

"Come on, Gavin. This is good. Get it out, boy."

He reached a hand over and before I could say anything, he was unbuttoning my fly. I brushed his hand away and his hand moved between his own legs. I watched him stroke and pull, tug on his balls and he shook and shuddered on the sofa as the black guy watching on screen put the girl on her back on the floor and prepared to enter her. He was inside her quickly, the two men holding back her legs. Kyle started to come, his juices frothing over his fingers. I was mortified, remembering a time when I was sixteen and how my cousin Elias and I had jerked off together watching one of his older brother's porn movies. It was a dusty VHS copy of some popular porn movie at the time. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten the simple, pleasurable intensity of the jack-off session.

The woman on screen started to fake-moan and Kyle came out of his trance.

"You came already?" he asked, zipping up his fly. He tossed back the contents of his can and switched channels again. His cell phone buzzed and he answered it.

"Gotta book," he said. "The old lady can't find her teeth."

I gaped at him. "Her teeth?"

"Yesterday, I found them in the dishwasher. In the cutlery basket."

He picked up his jacket, pocketing his little black remote.

"See ya."

"Yeah," I said, letting him out of the house. Rain started falling as he trotted down the stairs. I thought about what had just happened and returned to the living room. The free porn channel was still on, but I didn't feel like watching. I didn't even feel like living. I took a deep breath and sat back on the sofa. I'd read a Chinese proverb somewhere once that life is for a very, very long time. In the mad silence that ensued when I turned off the TV, I realized how true it was. How long it was for those who suffer violent loss...those who are left behind.

Chapter Three

I couldn't sleep, in spite of needing it badly. My head ached from the booze, my heart ached from longing. At five o'clock in the morning, I checked on my feline guests in the kitchen, giving them a little more shredded chicken and topping up their water. I'd have to buy them some actual cat food. I threw on thick sweaters and a coat and walked outside. I glanced around the neighborhood from the top of the stairs. Ice crackled under my frozen fingers as I gripped the handrail and marveled how it all looked like a winter wonderland. It was like something out of a deranged fairy tale. I felt lost. The city was still sleeping, but nothing was the same for me as it was for everybody else. I was a member of a club I did not want to belong to. The lost and lonely. I walked down the stairs, heading down to Lorton Avenue. I still felt wildly drunk and didn't trust myself to drive. My breathing came in harsh,

shallow bursts, stabbing my throat like little steak knives.

Slipping on the icy sidewalk several times, I spotted somebody across the road salting their walkway. People back east never believed we got inclement weather in California, but we did. I hurried down Lorton and when I arrived at Chrissie's store, I found it locked. I was pleased that Jackson Avery hadn't left it unlocked and had remembered to turn on the alarm. I turned it off and walked through the store.

It would have been easy to convince myself I'd imagined the whole Jackson incident except that the store was perfect. He'd left everything immaculate. He'd even made a deposit, leaving the receipt in the cash register the way Chrissie always did for me. I was surprised when I saw the amount. Two thousand, eight hundred dollars. People had missed us. Maybe we even had a bunch of sympathy sales.

Being an accountant, I handled all the finances, but since I'd run off and left Jackson here, he'd done what Chrissie often did. He'd deposited the funds himself. I read through the breakdown of figures. Mostly credit card sales and cash. Wow, we'd had a big day indeed.

I rifled through the booking sheets. He'd signed up a lot of people for classes and several of them for Chrissie's Halloween crop hop. We had

decided to rent a bus and take adults and children to several scrapbooking stores to crop and trick or treat. I scanned the numbers. Three more bookings and we'd have a full bus.

For a moment, I sat on her stool and stared into space. Chrissie was an innovator. I was the grunt. She came up with the ideas, and I grunted, then helped make them happen.

The store was her. It was all her. I couldn't bear for the moment being so close and yet so far from her. I felt tears brimming and swatted them away. I felt movement at the windows, but when I looked up, no one was there. I put everything away, turned on the alarm and was about to lock the door again, except the door wouldn't close. I had thirty seconds before the alarm went off. I tried again. The door wouldn't close, but nothing seemed to be in the way.

I felt a breath sweep across my face, detected a faint perfume and berated myself for my fanciful notions.

Within seconds, I was on the ground, a huge weight on top of me. I pushed and shoved and a hot mouth came down on mine. *Jackson!*

Christ! He's kissing me. Even worse, I can't breathe! I beat at him with my fists, but he would not get off me. His tongue was like an electric eel slithering in and out of my mouth. I kept thinking about the toothy moray supposedly swimming

around my head and freaked out, screaming for help. The shop alarm went off and my cock hardened as Jackson writhed against me.

God help me, I was getting turned on. No, no. I pushed him off me and struggled to my feet. Jackson pinned me against the wall, kissed me again and went inside and switched off the alarm. A patrol car passed by and I saw two officers staring at us. I held up my hand.

"Sorry," I called out. They nodded. They knew me. Everyone knew everybody in Burlingame.

"Come on, darling," Jackson said. "Let's have breakfast and we can go home and talk."

"No," I said.

"Come on, darling. Pancakes."

I eyed him, feeling suspicious. Chrissie would never allow me to eat pancakes.

Jackson sighed. "You know, I wasn't always the perfect wife."

The craziness of the statement almost made me laugh, except he was talking about Chrissie, my Chrissie.

"Don't say that," I whispered, my voice cracking.

He lunged at me again, kissing me.

I pushed him away. "Stop that!"

"You wanted me back," he shouted. "I promised you I'd come back. I kept my promise and now you're rejecting me!"

"You're a man," I shouted back. "And I'm not gay!"

His eyes narrowed, his demeanor now chilly. "I would love you whether you were a man, a woman or a giraffe. I love your essence. I love what is essentially you. Although right now, I don't like you very much."

Jackson turned his face and walked away from me. I blew out a breath and leaned against the faux-picket fencing façade of the store. I could have gone after him. I could have tried to talk. Chrissie always said I was a pretty good communicator for a guy, but I was fresh out of bon mots right now. What did you say to a guy who claimed to be your dead wife and kept trying to kiss and grope you?

I wondered where he was walking to and let him keep going. He unnerved me. He challenged me in ways nobody ever had.

What had he said? *I love your essence. I love what is essentially you.* How true was that of all of us? Chrissie had been a spectacular, blonde, all-American bombshell. She'd once been Miss Straw Festival, but that was the extent of her swimsuit ambitions.

Could I love her as a man?

The rain came down and with it, a blast of chilling reality. It was ridiculous. Jackson Avery was a lunatic. And he had the keys to my store.

I felt more lost than ever. Jackson Avery was the most confusing individual ever. I stood for a few minutes more and walked back home. I glanced down the street. Foster Cranham's vintage Chevy was not outside his house. I knew where he'd be. Luanna's Twenty-Four Hour Diner. I jumped into my car and drove toward San Francisco.

In the years we'd lived just south of the city, I'd tracked the suicide rate of America's most popular jumping-off place, The Golden Gate Bridge. I'd even watched a documentary about it called *The Bridge*. In the days following her passing, I wondered if I had the courage, enough despair to jump. I knew what kept me from dying was the knowledge that Chrissie said she would come back. I knew it was ridiculous. I knew it was desperation. I tried not to think about the strange look on Jackson's face when he walked away from me.

As I crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, I marveled at her beauty and her brilliance. I didn't see any forlorn individuals getting ready to jump and I squeezed the steering wheel with determined fingers and headed into downtown, misty, mystical San Francisco.

Luanna's had been around for decades and served up good old-fashioned comfort food. It never closed except for Christmas Day and Foster

Cranham's mom's birthday. Luanna had been his mother and he still closed it June fourteenth out of respect. Chrissie claimed it was in the old lady's will, but I preferred to think it was respect.

In my work, I met my fair share of gay men, but Foster was the only openly gay man I knew. I'd helped him out in a business matter and we'd become friends. I pushed open the door to the café and smelled pie.

"Hey, you," he said, gazing at me from the countertop he was cleaning within an inch of its life. Luanna's was the last of a dying breed. The good ol' American diner. Foster's life partner, Steve, had some firm, if odd beliefs such as gay men not being married or having or adopting children. He also had a thing for soy and has started slipping soy items on the menu. Luanna's had a long counter running the length of the place. Red leather stools surrounded it, a dozen red-leather booths hugging the wall opposite. The signs on the walls were authentic to the 1940s when Foster's parents opened the place. I stared at the *Coffee and Pie* sign wishing they still cost a dime.

He poured me coffee and watched me for a moment.

"You're out early."

I nodded. "Couldn't sleep."

Foster rubbed the Formica-topped counter a little more.

"You doin' okay?" he asked me.

"Yeah. You?"

Foster's mom had died in a nursing home after a fall. His older sister who lived in Los Angeles had sued him for half the estate. His mother had left him everything and his sister, who hadn't so much as called her mother in three years, sure came running when she sensed money in the wind. She accused Foster of pushing their mother down the stairs, she accused him of theft. I had been hired by his attorney and, after he paid out a chunk of change in his defense, his sister had gone back into the woodwork not a penny richer.

So, he knew from suffering.

"Yeah." He sighed. "Steve's gone to LA for some big meeting on Proposition Eight." He rubbed with something bordering on payback. "Funny how he refuses to marry *me*, but fights so hard for the *right* to get married."

Steve was a San Francisco personal injury attorney. An ambulance chaser and he was my least favorite of the aggressive breed, but since most of my bread and butter came from his kind, I opened my mouth into a smile.

"Thanks to people like Steve, we'll get the proposition back on the ballot for the next election," I said. *Did I just say we?*

He stared at me. "Chrissie told me she voted yes on eight." He blinked and said quickly, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't speak of her."

It had surprised me when Chrissie had voted against gay marriage. I'd voted for it, not that I had special feelings on the subject, but because I couldn't see the harm in it. I felt it only right that everyone should have the right to marry whomever they chose. Her feelings had been more obscure.

"No," I said, my voice cracking. "I don't mind you talking about her. She's still a big part of my life." The thought suddenly struck me. *Wow, it's weird she's back...as a gay man!*

He nodded. "You want pie?"

"Yes, please."

He sliced me a thick hunk of chocolate pecan pie. My fork was in it before he'd set the plate on the counter.

"You want whipped cream with that?" he asked at the same moment I opened my mouth and said, "Can I ask you something?"

He gestured for me to go first.

"Do you believe it's possible to love someone whether they are a man, a woman or a giraffe?"

"A giraffe?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"This is amazing," I said. "The chocolate is still warm."

He smiled, but his eyes looked wary now. "Thanks. Now what do you mean by a giraffe? You haven't gone and developed a zoo fetish, have you?"

"No. I'm wondering...could you love somebody no matter whether they were a man or a woman?"

"No, I couldn't. Have some coffee. While it's still hot."

"So, you don't think it's possible?"

"Is what possible?"

"Would you love Steve whether he was a man or a woman?"

"No. Why are you asking me that?"

"So you're saying it's chemical. He'd have to be a man in order for you to be attracted...for you to love him?"

He frowned. "You thinking of experimenting with...a *guy*?"

"Well, not exactly..."

"Look, I understand grief. I've experienced a little of it myself, but you are not gay. Whoever this poor fool is, you'll break his heart."

"No, no, you don't understand —"

"I understand plenty," he said. "You're completely fucked up. I get it. Your wife is dead."

You can't look at another woman. Just rent porn like every other normal guy."

The pie sat in my belly, making me feel nauseous. He completely misunderstood me. I couldn't explain my own thoughts, my feelings. If I didn't understand, how could I make him understand?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out some cash. He didn't say a word, but I could tell he was angry.

"Foster, I'm sorry."

He rubbed the counter again. "Just because we're gay men doesn't mean we don't have feelings. Some of us might whore around like jackrabbits, but I've been with the same man for twenty years." He pointed a finger at me. "If I hear word of you breaking some poor guy's heart, believe me, you'll be hearing about it."

"I—"

Foster turned his back on me and I walked out of the diner feeling like I'd not only lost a friend, but the best pie place in town.

I fed the kitties newly purchased cat food and topped up their water. Mama Kitty seemed to enjoy my visits, but let me know when she'd had enough socializing by closing her eyes and huddling her brood closer. The kittens were adorable and seemed to like me. At least

somebody did...I attacked the painting job on the shutters. I chose the color Swiss coffee, a very soft white and, as the rain drizzled against the porch roof, I listened to the radio. I had loved the radio since I was a kid. I used to hide a small blue transistor in my pencil case and held it to my ear in class. It was confiscated more than once. Now I listened to the French singer, Garou, interviewed on the public station and his gruff, gravely sexy voice on the song *Je n'attendais que vous*. He talked about how much he loved the song and its message that you could spend your life waiting for that special someone, loving them even though you didn't know who they were.

For a moment, I wished I could have the balls to call him and ask if he could ever love a giraffe and I shook the thought from my mind. There were moments when life was livable...endurable. Then there were moments when pain ensnared me again. I'd never been away from Chrissie for more than a night. Each new day brought the painful realization, *this is the longest I've been away from her*.

"I miss you!" I shouted to the universe as the ten o'clock news started. Was it too early for some hard lemonade?

Leaving the shutters to dry, I went inside, soaked the brush and paint pan in water and went to lie on the sofa. I passed a hand across my eyes.

The phone rang and I surprised myself by getting my ass up and answering it.

"Your store is closed," a voice said. I groaned inwardly. Caron Lewis. "Your new store manager's not on the job, I see."

"Caron—"

She hung up on me. I sighed. Everybody hated me lately. I picked up my keys, hoofed it down to Lorton Avenue, but when I arrived, the store was open and I smelled cinnamon buns. I stopped in my tracks. These had been Chrissie's favorite things to bake, when she did actually bake.

Jackson Avery was sitting at the crop table with two young women I recognized as obsessive croppers. He held a small pair of scissors in his big hands, trimming around a decoupage flower in a dainty, expert way. I watched as he placed the flower, a pristine red rose, on a cropping mat and finishing the awkward edges with an Exacto knife.

"See, this will finish off your page nicely," he said, placing it beside a photo embellished with buttons and bows. I gulped. Jackson had the same eye for detail and color as Chrissie had. Could it be? Was it at all possible?

"Wow, thanks, Jackson. It looks exactly like the roses in my wedding bouquet!"

He looked smug. "I photoshopped one of the flowers from your bouquet. I found it on your Facebook page!"

The woman looked astonished. "Oh my God! Wow! You are awesome." Her gaze dropped to her scrapbook again. "Wait until my friends see this!"

Jackson noticed me then. "Hey, Chuckles!"

I stood feeling, and most assuredly, looking stupid.

"There's some boxes in the storeroom I need help with." He inclined his head in that direction. I nodded. More than anything, I wanted to kiss my wife. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to know that she was okay. *What am I saying? She's dead! How can she be okay?*

"Be right back girls," he trilled. "Help yourself to coffee and rolls."

I followed him into the storeroom and he pushed me against the wall the second we were out of plain sight. I was taken aback, though not upset when he kissed me. I was astonished to find myself kissing him back. Then my senses got the better of me and I pushed him away.

"You wanted to kiss me," he said, his tone reproachful.

"Can you read my mind?"

He shrugged. "I know your thoughts...about everything. You should have told me you hated the living room blinds so much."

"I tried," I said, working hard to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "Sometimes you just...didn't listen."

Jackson's eyes widened in surprise and I swear I saw Chrissie's soul in them.

"Oh, Chuckles..." He spread his hands apart. "Well, I'm dead now. I have all the time in the world. What's on your mind?"

You don't hear a line like that every day and terror flicked at me like a hungry whip. Once again, I ran from the store all the way home. I stumbled up the stairs and into my house. I closed the door and leaned against it, gasping for breath. The pie in my stomach threatened to come up all over the place.

There was a knock at the door. A woman's voice sang out to me.

"Yoo hoo, Gavin, I know you're in there."

I opened it up, knowing I knew the voice, but not being able to place it for a moment. I was surprised to find Kyle's estranged wife, Janet, standing there in an overcoat. She smiled at me. I took in the bare legs and the high red heels at the same moment she opened the coat and revealed a completely naked body.

"Fuck me, Gavin," she said. "I'm horny and I know you've always wanted me."

Chapter Four

As I stood there like an idiot, staring at the very naked, extremely beautiful woman in front of me, a thousand thoughts quick fired through my mind, like gunshots.

She's hot and she wants me.

No, you can't, she's Kyle's wife.

But they're splitting up, so it wouldn't be that wrong.

Yes, but he still loves her and would be devastated if you screwed her.

If I did it and liked it though, it would prove once and for all that I'm not gay. It might even make me forget about this stupid attraction I have for Jackson.

We both know that's a cop out.

No, I don't. It might really work.

There is no way you can do this and you want to know why?

Why?

She is not Chrissie.

I started, shocked to note that I'd just had an argument...with myself. I'm pretty sure I lost, too. Which proved that maybe I was going crazy. Wasn't talking to yourself one of the first signs that you were losing it?

"Hello!" Janet called sarcastically, breaking up my inner debate. Her hands were still clutching the edges of her coat and she shook them in a look-at-this kind of way. It made her boobs bounce a bit, not too much though since around twenty pounds of silicone prevented too much movement. It reminded me of why I'd always liked natural breasts so much better.

When I still didn't answer, Janet clucked her tongue in annoyance and anger flashed over her highly made up face. The rage thinned out her lips, made her dark eyes almost beady, and her mug took on a pinched, mean look that reminded me a lot of Caron. In a span of a second, she went from being a beautiful, naked women, to a haggard, desperate crone.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, making sure to keep my gaze directed up. Since I couldn't meet her bitter eyes, I zoned in on the black roots showing through her brittle, blonde hair.

"Why shouldn't I?" she countered, raising a too-thin eyebrow. "You're alone. I'm alone. Let's be alone together."

"So you just hunted for the first guy who looked lonely and needy, then jumped at the chance?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew they had been the wrong ones. Whipping the ends of the coat together so tight they overlapped, she gave me a glare that would have turned a lesser man to stone.

"I should have known better," she seethed. "Everybody is talking about how you've become half a man. That you won't even leave the house. Look at what you've become." She waved a hand at my wrinkled shirt and worn jeans. "You probably can't get it up anymore."

Hey! I thought, defensively. There is no reason to bring mini-Gavin into this. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't stand up at attention over a low-end boob job and cheap shoes. I fought to keep the anger off my face, knowing it would only give her more ammo.

"Look, Janet," I said in my best pal voice, "I think we've both said things we didn't mean. Why don't you just go home and we can forget this ever happened?"

Unfortunately, she wasn't ready to make peace. "Kyle was right about you."

"Good, for Kyle." I started to close the door, but her hand shot out and held it open.

"Don't you want to know what he said?"

"Not really," I replied, my tone as bored as I felt. As far as I was concerned, this whole situation had become dull as soon as she had opened that damn coat.

"He calls you the weenus. That ever since your precious wife died, you've been so lost you can't even tie your own damn shoes. "

"Are you done?" Despite my best efforts, my voice came out hard, brittle because the second she had brought Chrissie into it, the whole thing had got personal on a whole new level.

"Not even close. He said that before she died, your wife had you so whipped that you had to ask for permission before you could even take a piss."

The betrayal of Kyle talking about Chrissie hit me hard. Then I reminded myself this was all coming from a guy who was currently living with his mommy and I felt a little better about myself. Glaring at her, I replied, "You're drunk and trying to use me to piss off Kyle. I was raised to be nice to women, but you're really pushing me. I'm about two seconds from slamming this door in your hateful face."

"Gavin, I'm so sorry I'm late," a deep, masculine voice called from the end of the drive.

My stomach did a flip when I saw Jackson coming up to the door. I didn't know whether to be relieved or if I should run in and lock *both* of

them out. In the end, I opted to stand there with what I'm sure was a dumb look on my face.

"Hey," I squeaked. That was what I did, too, squeaked like some cornered mouse.

Brushing past Janet, Jackson came up and planted a hard kiss on my mouth. In my shock, my lips had been parted slightly and he used that advantage to briefly slide his tongue inside. He tasted sweet, like the cinnamon rolls he'd baked.

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear Janet's shocked gasp, but it was a distant second to the sound of Jackson's moan of pleasure. Desire rocked through my body so hard my toes curled as my cock grew hard. Jackson must have noticed because he chuckled against my lips as he briefly rubbed his hips against me.

"What is going on?" Janet demanded in a high-pitched tone. It grated on my spine like someone had scratched a chalkboard with their fingernails.

Jackson pulled back and gave her a jaded look. "It's called kissing, darling. Surely it hasn't been that long for you." Giving a pointed look at Janet's near state of undress, he added under his breath, "Or maybe it has."

Janet's mouth opened and closed in outrage so many times she reminded me of a baby chick looking for its next meal. Finally she managed to sputter, "But you're a man."

"Yes, I am," Jackson replied with a great deal of pride. His lips spread out in a sexy smile that sent my heart racing.

I gave an internal shake of my head. How was it that when Janet had thrown herself at me, I had felt nada, zip, nothing, yet with Jackson, one kiss had me almost falling to my knees in lust? What was happening to me?

"You can't be gay," Janet screeched at me.

"Why can't he be?" Jackson asked with a shrug.

"Because..." Janet trailed off as she seemed to be struggling to pull the right argument from her alcohol-addled mind. Her eyes brightened, excited as she came up with, "Because he was married to a woman."

"And now he's with me," Jackson answered in a silky sensual voice as he gazed down at me. His eyes were stormy with desire and I felt a shiver of excitement and fear slide down my spine.

"Is this true?" Janet's indignation echoed through the foray.

"Yes," I replied quickly. Not that I thought for one second it was, but because I was willing to take any out given to me. Anything, just as long as she left.

"Perfect." She snapped as she spun on her heels and stormed away. She paused long enough to shout over her shoulder, "You've probably been

like this all along and pushed poor Chrissie under that bus to get rid of her!"

Poor Chrissie? A second ago, Janet had been trashing her and now she was acting like they had been bosom buddies. The whole situation was so ridiculous I couldn't hold back the small bark of hysterical laughter.

"I don't think that's the last we're going to see of her. I've known her for years and she holds a grudge with the best of them." Jackson shook his head. "Janet's on the board of the Chamber of Commerce and she could make things very hard for us."

"Do you want me to call her back and apologize?" I asked with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"Hell no, let the bitch stew." Jackson grinned wickedly. It made him look that much sexier. Even though the words were exactly something Chrissie would say, I still had trouble accepting that she really was in Jackson's body.

Down south from my brain, however, mini-Gavin was still standing up and waving like it didn't seem to have issues with the situation at all. That little bastard was always the first to cave. I shifted to the side, hoping to relive some of the pressure in my pants, and felt a heat come to my eyes when Jackson caught me.

"Problems?" He cocked a dark brow as the corners of his lips twitched.

"Plenty, but not what you think," I snapped back, even though my cock was so hard at this point I could have used it to break up concrete.

"I always knew when you were lying to me." Jackson sadly shook his head as he walked past me and into the house. Along the way, his hand *accidentally* brushed against my erection and I had to bite back a moan.

"Where do you think you're going?" I growled, more frustrated than angry.

"I think it's time you and I sat down and talked like adults. Every other time I've tried, you've run from me." This time Jackson didn't even try to hide he was laughing at me. "Real nasty habit you've developed there. I may just have to tie you to the bed."

"I would love to see you try." Despite my fighting words, I closed the front door, thus cutting off one of my escape routes. I still had the window in the living room and kitchen within eyesight in case I decided to bolt.

"Don't tempt me. You know that is one fantasy I've always wanted to fulfill."

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "Yeah, except it was always me you wanted tied up. Not you."

Jackson tossed his head in fury. "Is that why we never did it? You should have told me. I would —"

The words died on his lips. Once more, he was reminded that as my loving wife he didn't always listen.

"I wasn't much fun, was I Chuckles?"

"You were wonderful," I said, hoping beyond hope he really was Chrissie and I really did have a second chance at love.

He pursed his full sensual lips together in what might have been called a pout in a less dominating man.

"In that case," he said, obviously helping himself to my thoughts uninvited, "Let's get busy. Let's do the fandango, shake your booty." He swayed his hips.

Oh my God, Chrissie and her bad taste in music.

"You think I have bad taste in music?" He looked crestfallen.

"Maybe it was better when you couldn't read my mind and I didn't tell you what I thought."

"We can't do that, you know. It's against the rules."

"What rules?"

He put his head to one side. "The rules of returning. I was given a chance to go on to heaven or come back and heal my karma with you. I chose you."

Jackson had succeeded in stumping me for a response yet again.

"What was it like? You know, heaven?"

"Not what it's cracked up to be. It was all...lute music." He looked pained. "No disco beat."

I laughed at that and Jackson shook his head.

"We have to get on with this, you know. And prove to them upstairs that we want this, that we're making every effort to be a happy couple. You're not trying very hard, Gavin."

"I don't know what you want from me. You're expecting a lot from me and I refuse to believe you're my wife," I snapped back, with more conviction than I felt. Despite what I was saying, a suspicion that there was some truth to what he claimed plagued me. Oh, God, this was it, I had finally taken a swan dive off the edge of insanity. Time to get the straightjacket and padded cell. At least I would get some good drugs in the loony bin.

"Now, come on." He smiled. "I don't think they will be using the jacket on you and throwing you in a padded cell quite yet."

"Stop reading my mind!" I shouted as I jumped so hard in fright I took a stumbling step back.

My feet got tangled in a throw rug and I almost fell on my ass, only Jackson reaching out to grab my arm saved me. As he steadied me, I could not help but feel the warmth of his touch through the thin material of my T-shirt. His hand was large, tan, the fingers long. Sensual images of what those hands could do to my body flashed through my

head and I wondered if maybe just reading minds was his only talent. Maybe he was forcing those thoughts into my conscious.

“No, I can’t make you want something, those desires are all yours.” Still keeping his hand on me, he stepped closer so we were mere inches apart.

I really should have stepped back, pulled away, demanded he leave and never come back. I did none of those things. Instead, I found my feet moving forward so those inches of separation became centimeters. Jackson was taller than me so I had to tilt my head slightly to look up into his eyes. It was new position for me to be in, but it was far from unpleasant. A sigh whispered past his lips, his breath smelling like he’d tasted – sweet, warm and decadent.

“If I kiss you, will you run away again?” he quizzed, his voice full of the same need I was experiencing.

“I should,” I whispered as my body swayed even more into him.

“You really don’t want to.” His rigid cock was pressing against me, only the thin barriers of our clothes separating us.

“I still could,” I argued even as the urge to rub against his hard dick was almost irresistible.

“You won’t though.” Somehow he’d managed to slide his arms around my waist without me

noticing. It felt so good, since it had been so damn long since I'd been held.

"Why not?"

"Because you want this as much as I do." He reached down and cupped me through my pants. "Cocks don't lie."

A gasp slipped past my parted lips, but it soon turned into a groan and he gave my shaft a gentle squeeze. "No, I don't think I'll be running away this time," I panted right before he kissed me.

As sappy as it sounds, I felt like I had come home. His embrace, his touch, everything about Jackson seemed so right. Finally giving in, I plunged my hands through his dark hair and started to return the passion in earnest. Taking gentle nips of my lips, he teased me before sliding inside my mouth. I thrust my tongue out to meet his as he continued to rub my cock.

"I've missed this so much," he moaned as he popped open the top button on my pants.

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could get anything out, he'd captured my lips into another demanding kiss. I really should have stopped him, but I just didn't want to have to face another day alone. Whereas the thought of being with Janet left me cold, the thrill of being with Jackson made me feel alive for the first time since that dark day.

The only sounds filling the air was our heavy breathing, moans and the rasping noise as Jackson struggled with the buttons of my jeans. Reaching inside, he pulled my cock out and started to slowly stroke it. *Was I going to run away?* Hell no, instead I was thrusting my hips forward, urging him on.

Again his tongue swept in, this time I captured it and sucked hard. He let out a growl as he fisted my dick, pumping his hand slowly up and down. Pleasure ripped through my body as my balls grew tight.

"I'm not going to last long if you keep that up," I confessed between kisses.

Jackson gave a sensual chuckle as he increased his speed. His fist worked up and down my shaft, before he stopped to toy with the overly sensitive head. I choked in a sob of pleasure as I fought to hold on just a bit longer.

"Do you like this?" Jackson crooned. "Ever since I got my own, I've been practicing."

The thought of the tall, handsome man spread out, naked on his bed as he jacked off, was the last push that threw me over the edge. Throwing my head back, I moaned as I shot off into his waiting hand. Tremors wracked through my body as waves of pleasure washed over me.

As soon as I got down from my orgasm induced high, I came back to earth—hard. The

sudden realization that I just got a hand job from another guy hit me like a punch to the gut. Pulling away, I quickly got myself back together and zipped up. Looking anywhere but at him, I mumbled, "Be right back. Bathroom."

Bolting like the coward, before he could say anything, I darted into the nearby half-bathroom and locked the door behind me. With a groan of embarrassment, I sat on the closed lid of the toilet and buried my face in my hands.

I couldn't believe that I had lost control that easily with Jackson. The only other person who had ever made me that wild was Chrissie. I shook my head. No, there was no way that what Jackson claimed could be true.

Or could it?

Chrissie had been so soft and good. Whereas Jackson had a dark, wicked side that almost scared me. How could they possibly be the same soul? Yet there was no denying he knew things that only she had. There was also no denying my reaction to him.

Standing up, I bit back a growl of frustration as I looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes were wild, my lips swollen from kissing and my cheeks flushed with left over passion. It was a whole different picture then what I had been looking like. Gone were the haggard lines, the haunted gaze and the pasty complexion.

Darling, I will come back...I promise you. Her dying words echoed in my head. Had she really made good of her vow?

Did I dare give this a chance? What if he was just playing some sick game with me and everything he claimed was a lie? Or worse, what if we were both crazy and delusional? A case of mass hysteria gone terribly wrong.

I did know one thing though. I wasn't going to find the answers while standing in my half-bathroom. Hiding hadn't got me anywhere. I did it for all those weeks after Chrissie died and all it had got me nowhere but deeper into depression.

No, it was time to face life and everything that came with it. Even if it did mean owning up to the fact that I was more than a little attracted to another man. Gripping the edges of the sink, I took a deep breath to steady my nerves before I turned around and opened the door.

Chapter Five

When I stepped out, Jackson was nowhere to be found. The hallway was empty as was the living room.

"Hello!" I called, feeling a bit foolish. For all I knew he'd left and I was talking to myself again.

"In the kitchen," Jackson's smooth, deep tone called back.

As I walked through the house, I cringed as I noticed how much I had let the place go in the past month. Piles of clothes and dirty dishes were all over the place. The furniture was smudged and dusty. Plus the floors were nappy and covered with dirt since I had never bothered to vacuum.

She must be so disappointed in me. This was her dream house and I just let it go to crap.

The smells of cooking food reached me, making my mouth water in anticipation. My nose picked up tomatoes, oregano and basil. Now I was almost running to the kitchen in my haste to get to the food.

Jackson was at the stove, stirring a pot, and the counters were full of grocery sacks and fresh produce. The kittens were on the floor crowded around a bowl of something white.

"Cat milk," he said. "Fancy feeding those bitty babies canned food. They're not even weaned yet and Mama Kitty is struggling to take care of them all."

"I had no idea. I...tried," I bleated. The radio was on to the oldies station and he started humming to a *Three Dog Night* song as he worked.

"Where did all this come from?" I breathed.

"I heard that you've been a little hermit and haven't even gone out to the store, so I picked up a few things on my way here." He brought the spoon to his mouth and sampled the sauce. Giving a dissatisfied shake of his head, he added more basil.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked, not too surprised. In our neighborhood, nobody kept a secret for long.

"Mrs. Richards came into the store today and let me know all about your dark, sordid past."

"What sordid past?" I snorted.

"Oh, she imagines quite a bit. All of which she was more than happy to pass on to me." He waggled his eyebrows playfully and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"She is a piece of work," I agreed.

"Remember that one time she was convinced we were part of some wild swingers group?" he asked as he poured a glass of red wine and then handed it to me.

Yes, I recalled it like it was yesterday.

"I was so mad at her for making up stories, but not you. You just laughed it off," I whispered as I took the wine.

"And you wanted to tell her off, but I wouldn't let you. I said for you to let her at least have some fantasies to spice up her life, even if they were about other people."

Shock made me cold from the inside out. Nobody, but Chrissie and I knew that story. Shaking so hard some of the wine sloshed onto my hand, I stammered, "Holy shit, it's really you, isn't it?"

"Yes." He rolled his eyes in exactly the same way Chrissie always had when she was annoyed with me. "Isn't that what I've been telling you?"

Setting the glass down on the counter, I slowly walked up to him and raised my trembling hands to touch his face. The strong jaw and hard lines were all man, but as I searched those dark eyes, I could see Chrissie's bright soul in there. "Boy, when you promised you were coming back to me you really meant it," I said in awe.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Well, yes," I replied, bluntly. "Don't you remember that time you maxed out the credit card for that new computer system for the store?"

"That was just a tiny fib and it was for the good of the business. The one we had was so old and outdated I couldn't do anything on it," he argued with a sheepish look.

"You still tried to hide it from me so that makes it a lie by omission." I laughed for the first real time in weeks and damned if it didn't feel good.

"I didn't have any choice." He chuckled, too. "It was taking me hours just to do payroll and balance to the books."

"Bull, you got it so you could make better patterns and templates."

"Well, maybe that may have been part of it," he conceded. Stirring the pot again, he then held the spoon level in front of my mouth. "Here, taste this."

I was brought back to the many times Chrissie had done the same thing before she died. We used to joke that I was her *royal food tester*. Locking gazes with Jackson, I opened my mouth and let him slide the spoon in.

An explosion of good cooking filled my mouth and I nearly groaned in pleasure. It was the spaghetti sauce that Chrissie had always made. Her own special secret recipe that she'd never shared with anyone, not even me. It had been so

long since I'd had something that didn't come in a can or a box with a cartoon character on it, I nearly wept in relief.

"Good?" He raised a brow, questioningly.

"God, yes. How did you manage to do this just in the time I was in the bathroom?"

"News flash, you were in there for quite a while. Long enough for me to go out to the car, carry the groceries in and then start cooking. Ten more minutes and I was going to send in the National Guard after you." Despite the teasing words, there was a bit of worry in his expression.

"I was doing a lot of thinking."

"About the fact that your wife is now residing of the body of a hunky guy?"

"Well, yes." I nervously took a sip of wine.

"So now what?" He turned to me, crossing his arms over his large chest.

"It's going to take me a while to get used to this. Until today, I've never even kissed a guy and now..." I struggled to find the right words.

"Now you're finding yourself attracted to this." He pointed to himself.

"Yes, so much so that I can't even see straight sometimes." A strange feeling of relief went through me now that I'd finally admitted how he appealed to me in a very sexual way.

"If it makes you feel better, I've never been more turned on by you. It's just not the old me

who wants you, but Jackson does, too." He flicked a heated gaze over my body. While it should have made me squirm in discomfort, instead I found myself taking in a sharp breath as passion spiked through me.

"I thought you said he died and you just took over." I licked my lips as I remembered how good his kiss had tasted.

"Yes, but I think there's still a little part of him—an essence maybe and it likes you a whole lot."

"Really?" I swallowed hard, my stomach clenching in excitement.

"Yes." He nodded slowly as he crossed the two paces separating us. It wasn't lost on me that once again he was the stalker and I was the prey. Running the back of his knuckles against my cheek, he sighed, "I want to fuck you, bad. I've missed you so much and I need to hold you again."

"I missed you, too, I just need time." I turned my face so I could nuzzle his fingers.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, I don't want you to go ever again," I surprised myself by saying. It was true though. The thought of Jackson walking out that door and me never seeing him again terrified me.

"You're just not ready for hot monkey sex yet?" The corners of his lips turned up into a smile.

"Hey now, I haven't used that term since we were first dating," I chided playfully.

"You want to know a secret?" he asked in a loud stage whisper. When I nodded, he continued, "I used to love it when you called it that."

This time it was me who leaned forward and initiated the kiss. His soft, full lips parting in acceptance so I could slide my tongue in to taste what I'd been craving. This time instead of cinnamon, I detected traces of spices and something else—erotic, male.

A growl of approval rumbled in his chest as his arm hooked around my waist and hauled me closer. Still nibbling on his lips, I breathed in deeply—he smelled clean, like soap and...burning food?

Jerking away from me, he cursed, "The bread. I forgot!"

Still muttering swear words, he grabbed the hot pads and pulled a loaf of French bread out of the stove. When he lifted it and saw the bottom was black, he let out a groan of disappointment.

"It's okay," I reassured. "We can just cut off that part. It was my fault for distracting you."

"You can distract me that way anytime." Tossing a wicked grin, he handed me a large bowl. "Why don't you make it up to me by fixing the salad?"

I went to the other counter and we worked in a comfortable silence for several minutes. Then the Beach Boys came on the radio and Jackson started to sing along with them. He had a really good voice, smooth and warm like a nice scotch.

Once we had all the food ready, we sat down at the table and ate. Since the food was so good, I didn't make much conversation, but Jackson didn't seem to mind. Instead, he filled the silence by updating me on everything that had been going on at the store. It was pleasant until he dropped a bombshell.

"I think we may have to let Caron go."

I paused, fork halfway to my mouth as I gaped at him. Recovering, I hedged, "Do you think that's such a good idea?"

"Yes, I don't like the way she's been treating you. Not only that, but I think there's something else we're not seeing. She is way too interested in getting her fat hands back into our business. If I didn't know better, I would think she was trying to hide something from us."

"Maybe she's just acting that way because she's a witch," I suggested as I mopped up some sauce with my bread.

"Are you afraid to fire her?" Jackson narrowed his eyes at me.

"Hell yes, Caron is scary when she's mad."

"Stop being so melodramatic."

"I'm serious." I took another bite. "Even Steven Seagal would be afraid to take her on when she's on the warpath."

"Tough, it needs to be done and you're going to have to be the one who does it. As far as anyone else knows, you are the only one who should be running things at the business."

"Okay, I promote you to half-owner again. Now call Caron and can her," I shot back only half-joking.

"Chuckles," Jackson scolded, although there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Fine, I'll call her in tomorrow and do it. I hope you know that means we're going to have to search around for someone to replace her," I grumbled as I looked around for dessert. Surly he had thought to make that, too.

"I already have the perfect person."

"Of course you do," I said, still looking around for the elusive dessert. At that point, I wasn't even going to be picky about what it was, as long as it was sweet and fattening. Jackson rolled his eyes and got up.

"You remember Jordan?" he asked as he opened the freezer and pulled out an ice cream cake.

Jackpot!

Forcing myself to focus on something other than the fudge, cake crumbles, ice cream and icing

tempting me, I answered, "Of course I know Jordan. She used to come to the store all the time."

"Yes, and she doesn't anymore because she lost her job when her company made cutbacks. She's a single mother and in desperate need of money." Cutting the cake in thick slices, he put them on plates and brought them to the table.

"I think she would be perfect." I warmed to his caring spirit and business savvy. We could get rid of Caron and help out someone more deserving at the same time.

"Good, because she's already scheduled to start tomorrow," he quipped.

"So you have enough power to hire people, just not fire them?" I looked up from the cake to pin him with a knowing look. What was worse, was he didn't even have the good grace to look guilty.

"I'll think of a great way to make it up to you," he promised in a husky voice. His tongue darted out to caress the curves of his lips as the desire in his eyes told me just how he would be making it up to me.

"Oh really, and just how are you going to do that?" My cock was hard again, pushing at my jeans like it was demanding to come out and play.

"I'll let you pick out the movie for tonight." He smiled and for a second, the dark dangerous look on him was replaced with a playful boyishness.

After we had finished with dessert, we did the dishes together and then went into the living room. I purposely picked an action flick to see if he would object, but he just sat on the sofa and didn't say a word.

I hesitated, my glance going from the chair that would put me at a safe distance to the sofa that would put me next to one very sexy male. Mini-Gavin was still throbbing in my pants, like it wanted to speak up and give its vote. Jackson raised one brow like he knew the inner debate going on inside my head.

Shoot, since he was a mind reader, he probably did. Smiling, he crooked one finger at me in the classic come-hither motion. Like a damn puppet, I obeyed, stumbling forward to sit on the sofa.

At first, I sat stiff and unmoving, but as the movie progressed, I got more comfortable. I'm sure the wine we started sipping halfway through the flick didn't hurt either. Whatever the reason, when I started to get tired, it didn't seem so odd that I lie down on my side and put my head in his lap.

"Where have you been living?" I mumbled, sleepily.

"In a small apartment across town." He started to brush his fingers through my hair and it felt so good I almost purred in pleasure.

"You should move back here." I was a bit shocked at my impulsive suggestion, but I also knew that after tonight I couldn't be apart from him.

"Are you sure? The neighbors are going to go into a feeding frenzy over you taking up with someone so soon after your wife died. It will be even worse because I'm a man."

"I don't care." I didn't either. "I won't lose another moment of time with you. We already have so much to make up. I'm not about to let my worry about what others think stop us from being together."

"Wow, then I guess you aren't going to be running from me again." He bent over and placed a tender kiss on my cheek.

There were a few moments of silence, as he continued to play with my hair. I was just drifting off to sleep when I could have sworn I heard him say, "Gavin, I love you so much."

Chapter Six

I woke up to the smell of cooking bacon and pancakes. Cracking my lids, open I saw the early morning sun peeking through the shutters and that Jackson was nowhere to be found. He had taken the time somewhere during the night to cover me with a blanket and I smiled, touched by his thoughtfulness.

I shuffled to the bathroom to shower and brush my teeth before I got dressed in some clean clothes. I was happy that I had at least thought to do some laundry the other day. He was just finishing up breakfast as I came into the kitchen.

Mama Kitty was having a feast of freshly shredded chicken, her kittens lapping up the cat milk. I studied the can.

"Where do you buy this?"

"The pet store. Our little friends are putting on weight. Even the runt weighs one pound this morning."

I stared at Jackson. He was a kind of wonder man. I really hoped I wasn't dreaming all this.

"When did you become such an early riser?" I yawned. Chrissie had always hit the snooze button at least three times before she could drag herself out of bed. Not only was Jackson up, but he was damn chipper. The radio was on again, this time *The Bee Gees* were playing.

"Ever since I've taken over this body, I don't need much sleep. Here try this." He crammed a piece of bacon into my mouth.

I had no choice but to chew it or choke. It was cooked perfectly, crispy yet not burned. After I swallowed, I asked, "Since when do you make pancakes and bacon? You always called this stuff a heart attack on a plate."

"I already apologized for not letting you eat like this." He popped a piece of bacon in his mouth, his eyes rolling back in bliss. "I realize now how wrong I was, this shit is good."

I had been taking a drink of coffee and choked, spraying it everywhere when I heard his last words. He laughed and patted me on the back until I regained my breath.

"Sorry, didn't mean to shock you there."

"It's okay." I coughed, my eyes watering a bit. "I just never thought I'd hear you say something like that."

"One thing dying does for you is to teach you not to hold back in life anymore." His gaze grew intense and dark. "I'm one of the few lucky ones to get a second chance and I plan on never having regrets again."

He shifted closer, bracing his hands on the counter, trapping me in his embrace. I realized, not for the first time, how much more built he was than me. Not that I was a hundred pound weakling, but if it came down to a fight, there was no question Jackson would come out on top. The thought should have alarmed me. It sure as hell shouldn't have made me rock hard. There was no denying the desire pulsating through my body though.

"I'm sorry I zonked out on you last night," I stammered just to have something to say.

"That's okay." He leaned in so close that every time he breathed I felt it fan my cheek. "I enjoyed watching you sleep. You looked so at peace and sexy."

"You're kidding, right?" I snorted. "I probably snored and drooled all over your lap."

"No, you were perfect." He pressed his lips against mine, just barely brushing a kiss on me. It made me so hungry for more, it was all I could do not to grab him by the front of the shirt and demand another.

"I really should go and open the store," he murmured in a low seductive way as he cupped the side of my face.

"Yes, you should," I agreed, yet neither one of us moved.

Jackson shifted his hand slightly so he could run the pad of his thumb over my lips. When I darted my tongue out to taste his warm flesh, his eyes flared with passion. So I did again, this time adding a slight nip of my teeth at the end.

"Damn, you're driving me crazy," Jackson moaned. "I know I said I wouldn't push things, but I want to taste your cock so bad it's all I can think about. I even dreamed about it last night. Please say yes. I don't know if I'll be able to stand it if I can't."

Before I even realized it, I nodded. "Okay."

A primal thrill went through Jackson's gaze before he kissed me again, his hand reaching down to caress my cock. I hissed in pleasure as I thrust my hips forward. My heart pounded in anticipation and nerves hit me so bad my hands shook as I grabbed onto the counter behind me for support.

Jackson left my mouth, his lips trailing a heated path along my jaw, down my throat before he dropped to his knees in front of me. Looking up at me from under his dark lashes, his gaze seemed to sear me, causing my breath to catch in my throat.

"I love you," he said before he undid my jeans and pulled my cock out.

As soon as his fingers touched me, a wave of pleasure hit me so hard, I almost came before the fun even began. It was only when I bit my bottom lip so hard I drew blood that I was able to hold back.

"I love your cock," he crooned as his tongue darted out to lick away a bit of come leaking from the tip. "So big. So beautiful."

"Quit talking and suck it already," I pleaded. My knees felt ready to give out so I gripped the counter tighter as I arched forward, offering myself up to him.

Jackson had mercy on me, his lips parting as he took my cock into his wet, hot mouth. At the same time, he used one hand to massage my heavy sac. I let out a cry of pleasure so loud the whole neighborhood probably heard it, but at this point, I didn't give a damn. All that mattered was Jackson and how what he was doing felt so damn good I never wanted it to end.

I had to hand it to him. He knew how to suck a cock. His mouth seemed to be all over me at once, rubbing against my shaft, working the sensitive tip and sucking in my balls. At first, he was real gentle about it, but as we got into it and my groans grew louder, he started to get more aggressive, sucking my cock so hard that his

cheeks hollowed out. Just as I was about to come, he pulled back and gave me a wicked grin. I whimpered in protest.

“Why are you teasing me?” I demanded in a breathless voice.

“Because I don’t want the fun to end yet. I’m enjoying this too much.” He ran his tongue over his lips like he was savoring my essence.

“What you’re enjoying is torturing.” I cupped the back of his head and urged him forward. “Now get back to work.”

We both knew that the only reason he started back up again was because he wanted to. Despite my demanding words, he was the one in charge. Keeping my lids half-open, I watched as he gave me the blow job of my life, my glistening cock sliding in and out of his wet mouth. A lock of his raven hair had fallen across his forehead, making him look even more rakish than usual. His eyes were closed, the dark lashes so long they almost fanned his highly arched cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful,” I observed in awe. Never had I thought I could be this physically attracted to another man.

He groaned around my cock, the noise vibrating against it and sending shockwaves of pleasure all the way up the shaft. That was enough to push me over the edge. Still holding

onto his head, I started to thrust my hips back and forth.

"That's it, babe," I cried in a broken voice. "Suck me just like that."

Again he moaned, this time as he took me in, the tip the tip of my cock bumped into the back of his throat. I could feel my balls grow tight to my body as every nerve ending inside me tingled. The most intense orgasm of my life ripped through me, robbing me of the ability to breathe.

I threw my head back as I gasped in pleasure. Jackson's lips moved against me as he swallowed my semen. It wasn't until the last tremors had left my body that he stood and licked his lips.

"That was..." I took in several heaving breaths.

"Wonderful," he finished for me. I realized he'd been doing that a lot, filling in the blanks.

"Yes, that," I replied with a sigh. His swollen lips beckoned me and I went in for a kiss, tasting myself on him.

"I do need to get going," he said with regret as he rested his brow against my forehead. "Jordan is going to be there any minute and I promised to be there to meet her."

"Okay, I guess it wouldn't be good to stand her up on her first day there." I hated the thought of this moment ending, however.

"You coming?"

"I'll be there in a bit. I was thinking maybe I would clean the house up a little." I gave him another kiss, not being able to stop touching him. Now that I had a taste of the passion he'd offered, I couldn't get my fill.

"I guess I can let it slide if you promise to bring some lunch." He grinned and my heart thumped in my chest. I realized then that I loved him more than ever. Man, woman, giraffe—hell he could have been a ten-foot purple gorilla and I would feel the same way.

He pulled away and I tucked myself back in my pants and zipped up. I was numb with my revelation and almost missed my opportunity. It wasn't until his hand was on the door that I blurted, "I love you."

He stopped, fingers still wrapped around the handle. Giving me a sideways glance, his features grew soft. "I know you do and that's why I never hesitated to take this chance to come back to you, Chuckles."

It took me a few hours to clean up the house since I had pretty much let things stagnate after Chrissie died. Deciding I would pick up take out on my way to the store, I grabbed my keys and wallet, then headed out the door.

It was bright and sunny outside and I inhaled deeply, savoring the fresh air. Everything was

perfect until I heard someone shouting my name. Kyle was crossing the yard and he looked far from happy. His hands were balled into fists, his lips pressed into an angry line and his whole body language screamed, *You better run because I'm going to kick your ass.*

I stood my ground and waited, not because I thought I could actually take him on, but because I'd seen him run and I knew that no matter how hard I hoofed it, he would be able to catch me.

There was no doubt in my mind what this was about, Janet. When I rejected her last night, she'd no doubt trotted right over to Kyle and twisted the whole story around so I was the villain. He probably believed that I was the one who came onto her. Knowing ol' Janet, I was probably just one step above the dirty old man who sits on the park bench and flashes people.

When Kyle yelled, "You son of a bitch!" my worst fears were confirmed. I took a step back and held my hands up in a peaceful gesture.

"It's not what you think," I said, trying real hard to hide the fact I was close to panicking.

"Really? So you're going to try and tell me that you did not reject my wife last night?" His face was red and distorted in rage, reminding me a bit of rabid pit bull.

"No, she came—" I stopped, shocked as his accusation hit home. "Wait, you're mad at me for not sleeping with your wife?"

I felt like I had stepped into a dream. One of those ones you have where everyone and everything is crazy but you. Never had I imagined that a husband would want to beat me up for refusing to cuckold him.

"You think you're too good for her or something?" He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me.

"No...yes...I don't know." I threw my hands up, at a loss. "Just tell me what you want me to say and I'll do it. I honestly don't know where you're coming from with this."

"You really hurt her feelings," Kyle raged on. "She cried for half the night."

"I'm sorry," I hedged. "It wasn't her. It's just too soon for me to pick up with any other woman."

"Oh, but not with some strange guy. Janet told me how that man was all over with you and I know he stayed the night."

"Were you spying on me?" I sputtered, getting good and pissed myself.

"More like taking a professional interest in you." He cast a shrewd glance at me. "It just seems odd that you would already be with

someone a month after the wife you supposedly loved so much died."

"You were just yelling at me for not sleeping with Janet and yet you say I'm wrong to be with Jackson?"

"Exactly how much insurance did you have on Chrissie?"

"How is that any of your business?" I seethed.

"There has been talk." Kyle almost looked smug and that set off alarm bells in my head.

"What kind of talk?" My mouth was suddenly dry as I clutched my keys so hard the grooves dug into my hand.

"That maybe Chrissie had some help finding her way under that bus."

A cold anger took over me and for a second, I almost forgot he was a cop and took a swing at him. Only the fact that I knew that was exactly what he wanted held me back. Judging by the cruel smile on his face, he would love to have an excuse to arrest me.

"As exciting as this conversation is, I really need to get to work." I opened the car door. Kyle's hand shot out and blocked me from getting in.

"Go ahead and leave. Just know I'm on to you and I'm not going to rest until you pay for what you did."

I didn't even bother to deny that I did anything, knowing it would be a lost cause. Kyle had dug

his heels in on his twisted theory and there would be no convincing him otherwise. If the whole accusation hadn't been so preposterous, I might have been concerned.

He moved his hand and stood back. As I got in the car and pulled out, he continued to glare at me. I drove down the street and could still feel his gaze burning into the back of my head. Somehow I had a feeling I hadn't heard the last from him.

Chapter Seven

As soon as I walked into the store, Jordan attacked me. She let out a squeal of delight as she threw her arms around me and squeezed so tight it was hard to breathe. She was blabbing about something, but I didn't get a word of it since her face was buried in my chest, so I just awkwardly patted her on the back and waited for her to finish.

Jackson was behind the counter and he seemed to think the whole situation was amusing. Just the sight of his smile lightened my own mood and I grinned back at him, my dark temper lifting.

Jordan pulled back and I was stunned to see her big blue eyes were wet with tears. She was actually young to be a mother. Still in that bubbly stage of life. Her long blonde hair was twisted up in a clip and she was wearing a pair of black dress slacks and a tight pink sweater. It was obvious she had dressed to impress since before today I'd always seen her in blue jeans and T-shirts.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," she chanted as she grabbed my hand and pumped it up and down.

"What?" I acted confused, even though I knew what she was so grateful for. Holding the bag of food up, I said, "It's just some sandwiches, I didn't even get soup."

"You know what I'm talking about, silly," she chided as she pursed her glossed lips together. "I needed this job so bad and you were willing to take a chance I me."

"It's no big deal." I felt my cheeks grow warm, not being used to such gushing gratitude.

"It's a huge deal." Her eyes grew so wide they almost dwarfed her face. "You're not going to be sorry either because I won't let you down, I promise. I will be the best employee ever. "

She was so earnest I had to work hard to keep the grin off my face, not wanting her to think I was making fun of her. She was so nice, so sweet, so not Caron. Why hadn't we done this ages ago?

"I know you're going to be perfect for the job, which is why when Jackson recommended you I was totally on board."

She looked over her shoulder at him, her teeth nibbling shyly on her bottom lip. It was obvious she liked him for more than his scrapbooking abilities. "He's very nice."

"Yes, he is." And he's mine so get that come-hither look off your face.

She looked back at me. "It's so nice seeing you here and the store open. A lot of us missed you."

"I missed you guys, too." Handing her the bag, I said, "Here, I brought enough for everyone. Why don't you go take your lunch break?"

"Are you sure? I could go last if Jackson is hungry."

"I'm fine," Jackson called across the store. "You heard the man, go eat. With as hard as you've been pushing yourself, you have got to be starved."

"Okay, thanks." She waved as she headed for the small break room in the back of the store.

Once she left, we were alone as there were no customers in the store. The silence was heavy and a bit of shyness came over me as I felt Jackson's heated gaze on me. As I thought about what we'd done that morning, I looked up at him from under my lashes. My cock jerked when I saw him run his tongue over his lips like he was reliving the moment, too.

"I forgot to ask you if that eel is still stalking me," I said, surprised at how husky I sounded.

"If I say yes, are you going to freak again?" He crooked his finger at me and I found myself obeying like some lovesick puppy.

"No, I'll try to man up and not be a nancy about it."

"Yes, it's still there, but Mittens likes you so you don't need to worry."

"You gave it a name?" I was up to the counter now and leaned across it so I could drink in his scent.

"Of course, I just couldn't call it *Hey you*, could I?" He rested his elbows on the countertop so we were even closer.

"But it just seems cruel to call it Mittens of all things since eels don't have hands," I replied playfully. "It's like you're making it a point to draw attention to the poor thing's shortcomings."

"I see your point. What would you suggest we call it?" He chuckled. The sound so warm and pure it made my heart skip a beat.

"Oh, I don't know." I pretended to contemplate. "Maybe something vicious and baddass, like Fangster or Beastie."

"Won't that make you more afraid of him?" he cocked a brow as he moved even closer to me. Anyone coming into the store would have no doubt they were interrupting an intimate moment, but damned if I cared. I didn't give a rat's behind what people thought of me before Chrissie died, so why change it up now?

"Now that I know that he comes with you, he doesn't scare me anymore." I reached over and ran my fingers over his knuckles.

"Well, he isn't exactly with me. I'm just able to see stuff like Fangster where others can't."

"So we decided on that name, huh?" I continued to run my finger on his hand, loving the feel of his warm skin. It wasn't soft and smooth by any means. Rather it was rough and calloused. A man's flesh, and I had never touched better.

"Like you said," he edged even more forward, our lips now so close they were a mere whisper apart, "we can't give the eel a complex. I could never live with the guilt."

"Jackson," I whispered.

"Yeah."

"I want you to kiss me. Right. Now."

His big hands came up to cup the sides of my face and my lungs hitched as I waited for him to make his move. At first, he didn't do anything besides softly fan my cheeks with the pad of his thumbs. Gazes locked, our breaths mingled.

He slowly brought his lips to mine, his eyes closing just as we touched. I cursed the counter separating the rest of our bodies as his tongue swept into my waiting mouth. I let out a low groan as I tilted my head to the side and really got into it.

The chiming of the bell on the door was our only warning before I heard a voice declare, "I knew you were crazy, but I had no idea you were this far gone!"

Fuck! Caron! I would have recognized that evil cackle anywhere. It was the kind of voice that would be perfect for the witch in one of those cartoon princess movies.

Jackson and I jumped apart. Although there was little chance of her not realizing what she'd just walked in on. Caron stood there like she had been slapped on the ass by a horse whip. Her mouth opened and closed so many times she resembled an air-starved fish as angry spots of color appeared on her cheeks.

Her outraged expression looked so comical that, before I could stop it, a snort of laughter popped out of my mouth. Her head whipped to the side as she directed her rage fully on me. Trying to look contrite, I clamped my lips together and bit the inside of my cheek.

That lasted until I heard a sputter that told me Jackson was fighting the same battle I was. I made the mistake of looking at him and that was the end for both of us. We burst into gut wrenching laughter. Between gasps, I could hear Caron voicing her outrage, but I really couldn't make out a word she was saying because Jackson and I were so loud.

Jordan came out to see what all the fuss was about and when she saw the state we were in, her lips curled up into a smile before she started to giggle, too. It was one of those moments where laughter was contagious, unless you were born with a witches broom firmly planted up your ass, like Caron obviously had been.

"What is she doing here?" Caron pointed an accusing finger at Jordan.

"She's working, what does it look like?" Jackson drawled. Caron gave him the hand and started to walk closer to me. I knew she meant the move to be intimidating, but given her height and the way she waddled in her Crocs, she kind of reminded me of an irate penguin.

"Am I or am I not the manager here?" She narrowed her eyes at me.

"That's easy to answer," I returned in clipped tones, my early humor gone. "You're not."

"Excuse me?" she nearly shrieked.

"You're fired." I held my hand out, palm up. "Give me the extra set of keys I know you had made. I'll make sure to mail you a final check."

"Now I know you're crazy," she crowed, crossing her arms over her chest. I noticed she was wearing a sweater that had calico kitties doing cartwheels across the front of it. Wow, not only was she evil incarnate, but she had crappy fashion sense, too.

"Actually, I think I'm finally coming to my senses," I responded in a cool voice. "You're mean to the customers, rude to me and you always take the last donut from the box in the morning."

"I'm the best thing that ever happened to this store and you'll realize that as soon as you try to run things with this tart." She jabbed a finger at Jordan. "And your new boy toy. It takes more than a great ass and cocky attitude like he has to manage a business." Next it was Jackson who got the finger.

"You can say whatever you want about me," I snarled, "however, you will not insult Jordan or Jackson. I'd demand that you apologize to them, but that would mean we'd have to suffer longer in your presence." I held out my hand again. "Now give me the goddamn keys."

"How dare you speak to me that way," she gasped. Fishing the keys out of her huge purse, she slammed them so hard into my palm it was a wonder I didn't howl in pain.

"I knew I was right to go to the police about you," she hissed.

"About what?" Jackson demanded with a cold, hard glare. A smart woman would have been shaking in her knee-highs. But then nobody had ever accused Caron of being brainy. She flicked a look of disdain at him.

"There has been talk." She smiled so smugly, I already had a sneaky suspicion I knew where she was headed. "Talk that you pushed Chrissie under that bus."

"That is ridiculous," Jackson nearly shouted. "He was on the other side of the street from m...her."

Jackson and I both sucked in a breath as we realized what he'd almost said.

"I don't think it's ridiculous at all," Caron chirped. "I think you did it, Gavin, and the guilt has been eating at you so much your mind couldn't take it anymore and snapped."

"Go!" I gestured to the door.

"Cuckoo," Caron mocked as she made the *crazy* gesture with a finger at her temple. "You're a loony bird. Next time I see you, you're going to be wearing paper pajamas and being fitted for a straightjacket."

"Woman, either leave now or I'll carry out on my shoulder," Jackson threatened with a snarl.

"You touch me and I'll press charges against you," Caron spat.

"How about this," Jordan butted in, her tiny hands balled into fists. "Leave now and I won't let the ladies at your church know you like to sneak whiskey into you coffee mug when you go to choir practice."

"You wouldn't dare." Caron grew several shades of red as she let out a strange strangling sound.

Busted!

"You know I will."

"Fine." Caron tucked her purse under her arms, her movements angry and jerky. "Don't think you got off that easy though, Gavin. When I talked to the police, they let me know I wasn't the only one who's come to them with concerns." Giving us all one last haughty look, she turned on heel and flounced out, nose in the air. Making as dramatic an exit as a women in a kitty shirt and Croc shoes could.

"Gosh, she is so mean," Jordan declared, once the door had closed.

"Yes, she is." Jackson agreed as he came out from behind the counter and gave her a one-arm hug. "Thanks for sticking up for us."

"You know this means she will be gunning for you now," I felt compelled to warn Jordan.

"Let her," Jordan snorted. "Ever since her precious nephew knocked me up and left, I've been on her radar. She thinks it's all my fault he's such a deadbeat. I loved having the chance to give her some crap back."

"Thanks, I owe you." I walked over and gave her a hug, too.

"By the way I'm okay with it," she said once I pulled away.

"Okay with what?

"You two being together." She waved her hand between the Jackson and me. "Personally, I think you guys make a really hot couple."

The bell over the door rang again and I turned, fully expecting it to be Caron coming in for another round. Instead, I was surprised to see a man in a wrinkled, brown suit and a tie that was so loose it hung around his neck like a scarf. His brown hair was thinning and he'd brushed it to the side in a feeble attempt to hide it. As I exchanged worried glances with Jackson, I walked forward to greet the man, although something told me he wasn't here because he harbored some secret addiction to scrapbooking.

"Hello, is there something I can help you with, today?" I offered.

"Yes, there is." He pulled out his wallet and flashed a detective's badge. "I need you to come to the station with me and answer a few questions."

I stared at him for a moment. I knew every cop in town. Millbrae was the closest police department we had and it contained a mighty force of six men. This guy was not one of them. I detected the odor of fish on his person and my memory pounced on me like a rabid dog.

"Hank?"

The man's gaze shifted in ten different directions, but he didn't respond.

"You're Hank, right? Hank Finnegan?"

He stared at me. "Oh...oh. Chuckles?"

"Yeah," I said.

Jackson snapped his fingers. "Oh my God..." He stopped talking and looked taken aback.

I was pleased to see Hank, the former school quarterback superstar who'd beaten me to Chrissie's virginity. She had left him for me and often liked to mention his superior prowess in certain things, just to torture me. I was pleased to see how badly he'd let himself go. Here he was, wanting to arrest me and I wanted to scream and shout, *he looks like an old, fat, broken down bum!*

"Sorry about this," Hank said, actually looking like he really *was* sorry. "God...it's been what, fifteen years? So...that was Christianna who was killed last month?" Before I could respond, he went on in an inconsiderate, unfeeling way. "I never realized she took on your last name. I guess I forgot a lot of things..."

"She was my wife. Whose name should she have taken?"

He snapped back to attention.

"Why's he staring at me?" He gestured to a frowning Jackson.

"Chrissie's death hit me pretty hard, Hank. She died in my arms."

He nodded. "I heard. I'm sorry, Chuckles. Still gotta take you to the station."

"Right after I call my attorney." I picked up my cell phone, rifling through my mental rolodex of which scumbag attorneys I knew who owed me favors. I zeroed in on Con Papadopoulos. He wasn't a scumbag, but close to being one. He owed me money for two separate court trials and he could help me out now that I was in a jam.

I called him from my cell phone. I heard the ring tone and cut my eyes to Hank.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"Retraining. I'm coming off desk duty. I had a heart attack and needed work. They sent me here for two weeks."

I held up a finger as Con answered my call and agreed to meet me at the station. Hank and I walked out of the store and I glanced over my shoulder at Jackson whose forlorn stare made my heart skip a beat or ten.

"You will stay and look after things?" I asked, looking around, taking it all in as if I might not see it again. Man...could I really be heading to the poky for something I didn't even do?

Outside, Hank opened the passenger door of a cruddy, brown Toyota for me. The blast of fish hit me and I couldn't believe it.

"You're still observing lent," I said.

He nodded and rummaged through greasy takeout bags until he hit on a scrap of a filet-of-fish sandwich.

"Somebody told me the fish is synthetic in these things and Mickey D's may be takin' 'em off the menu. I'm whomping 'em down as fast as I can, just in case." He crammed it into his mouth.

"Didn't you say you just had a heart attack? Do you know the fat content of those things?" Geez, I was starting to sound like my wife. I couldn't believe that the smell of fish on the guy reminded me of all those Friday nights in college when he ate fish instead of burgers and abstained from beer until Saturday night.

"That's not very nice," he said, stomping on the gas pedal and narrowly missing a passing PT Cruiser. The driver gave Hank the finger, not knowing he was a detective.

Hank rummaged under his seat, found a dusty French fry, flicked a few bits of grime off it and threw it into his mouth. I felt sick to my stomach.

As he wedged the car into the next lane between two fast-moving SUVs, I wondered if I would make it to the poky in one piece. Other drivers honked and he continued to drive in a haphazard way that freaked me out.

I stared at him. He'd gained a ton of weight, but lost his marbles in the years since I'd seen him.

"You haven't aged much." His glance was accusatory as he swerved back into the other lane, oblivious to the squeal of brakes and skidding tires behind us. I squeezed my eyes shut and hoped the ride from hell would end soon. He slowed down a fraction and I opened my eyes, my mouth opening in a silent scream as we bore down on a bus. I put my foot on an imaginary brake and he hurtled us back into the other lane again.

"Well, I'm making up for lost time now. What's with this crazy driving?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, but I saw his white-knuckled fingers gripping the steering wheel.

"If I haven't aged much, how come you didn't recognize me?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I recognized you once I saw you. It was your name I didn't recognize."

"You didn't know my name?"

"I always thought of you as scumbag."

"What the —"

My head snapped forward as we arrived at a red light and he pounded on the brakes, making the Toyota jackrabbit forward. The smell of burning rubber was strong. He poked through a couple of discarded paper bags for food and he accelerated on the green light, missing a passing truck in the intersection by a whisker.

"You thought of *me* as a scumbag?" I asked, incredulous. "I'm not the one who cheated on her."

"Look, that was an accident."

"An *accident*? What, your dick accidentally fell inside Jane Carter?"

"A mistake then...all right?" he bellowed. "I made a mistake."

We drove in silence for a moment.

"I loved her," I said.

"So did I." We came to another red light.

"I guess I can't keep calling you scumbag," he said.

"No, I guess not."

A woman came running up to us, pounding on the driver's side window and shouting.

"Officer, officer, I want to report a robbery in progress."

Hank wound down the window.

"How do you know I'm a cop?"

"My son is Steve Kelly. He works the front desk up in Millbrae."

Hank nodded in a way that told me he had no idea who Steve Kelly was as the woman pointed to a house across the street. A car was parked in the driveway and a man was sitting inside it. The front door was open and the woman looked grim.

"There's one guy in there and he keeps coming out with things."

"How do you know he's robbing the joint?" he asked.

"The owners are out of town. I've been feeding their cat for three days."

Hank ran his hand over his face.

A car honked at us and he thrust his arm out, indicating for the driver to go around him.

"I'll call 911," he said.

"I already did that. You need to go inside. He's been at it for about twenty minutes. He'll take everything."

She reached in and was about to pull him out, but Hank pushed her aside and closed the door, racing into the driveway and parking right behind the burglar's car.

"Can I trust you not to run?" he asked, getting out of the car.

"Of course you can trust me," I said. "I haven't done anything wrong. I didn't hurt my wife."

"Yeah...you seemed real squeamish when I wove in and out of the lanes...but still, I ought to caution you not to make a run for it."

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing," I lied.

As soon as his back was turned and he was running into the house, I took my chance. Too late, I saw the burglar running out of the house and past the passenger side of his car, slamming right into mine as I opened the passenger door.

"Oof!" He hit hard, taking the door off its hinges and Hank, huffing and puffing, ran over to us.

The burglar was out cold on his back, the busted door on top of him. Hank suddenly turned red and clutched his chest.

"Breathe," I shouted. "Breathe!"

He pointed to his right and I saw the guy in the driver's seat of the burglar's car running away, but I leapt across the seat of the Toyota and threw open the driver's door. He slammed into it, grabbing his balls and doing the squashed dangly bit dance as I raced back out to take care of Hank. He was on his knees now, in mortal agony it seemed.

I put him on his back, giving him mouth to mouth as the police arrived.

"We need an ambulance," I shouted. "I think Hank's having a heart attack."

I'm not sure who hated my swiftly ensuing *hero* publicity more, me or Hank. The police chief gave me the key to the city in an embarrassing press conference three hours later. I was disappointed to learn it didn't actually open anything significant. Being an accountant, a free numbered Swiss bank accountant ranks as my all-time favorite sex dream.

With all the crap I'd been dealing with, I would have settled for the key opening somebody's liquor cabinet.

I smiled for the cameras as the police chief droned on.

"Mr. Jago not only saved Detective Finnegan's life by administering CPR, he knocked out one burglar, Harry Stone, but also maimed his accomplice."

The chief cleared his throat. "Stone's accomplice is a notorious felon, Walter Anderson, released this morning from the county jail in San Bruno. Harry Stone, who is his cousin, picked him up from jail and decided he couldn't resist a little heist on their way home."

Cameras clicked, questions volleyed over the chief's booming words.

"Anderson wanted nothing to do with the crime," the chief intoned, "but under the terms of his release, he should have reported the robbery instead of sitting there waiting for Stone. By the way, we can attach thirty-five other cases in our community to Harry Stone. We found a lot of items of interest in his vehicle."

He turned to me and shook my hand.

"The city of Millbrae can rest easy that citizens such as Mr. Gavin Jago are willing to step in and help and not turn a blind eye to villainry."

Villainry. Was there such a word? I smiled for the cameras. This was not the time to think about my initial attempt at escape. I accepted the police chief's public apology and glanced askance at him when I realized he was wearing makeup for his big moment.

"So sorry for your loss," he said as the press conference wound down. I saw over his shoulder that my attorney Con Papadopoulos was flirting with my new store manager Jordan *and* a female cop. Jackson roamed the room, handing out ten-dollar coupons for our store. The accountant in me had a mini-meltdown.

The chief gripped my hand and shook it. "We are of course no longer pursuing our inquiries into your wife's death. Once again, I am sorry for your loss."

He suddenly snatched me into a hard, unwelcome embrace. I realized somebody was taking our photo. Geez, Louise. What some people won't do to get their mug in the media.

I learned Walter Anderson would be back in jail before the day's end. It proved my theory that there is guilt by association. It also proved that you can't choose your family, more's the pity.

I watched Jackson schmoozing with the cops and the media and was anxious to go home. Something told me it would be nice of me to go

visit my high school love nemesis, Hank, see how he was doing over there in Peninsular Hospital.

Scumbag. He thought I was a scumbag? Scrap that. I'm going home.

Chapter Eight

Something stopped me from grabbing Jackson and going right home. I wasn't wrestling with the idea of visiting Hank so much as reassuring myself I didn't need to. I wanted Chrissie. I missed her. I needed her. I stepped out of the station, inhaled some welcome, frosty air and a uniformed officer I recognized as Steve Kelly gave me a kind smile.

"Can I drop you some place, Mr. Jago?"

"Gavin, please."

He smiled again. "Gavin."

I couldn't remember where my car was. I couldn't remember what day it was.

"Yes. Do you mind taking me to St. John's cemetery?"

The words slipped out without my even thinking about it. I saw the pity and understanding flash across his eyes. I knew in that moment he, too, had loved and lost somebody.

"Come on, I'll take you. I have my motorbike. I hope that's okay."

It was fine with me. I could hear Jackson laughing at somebody's joke. I heard him making a crack about scrapbooking...I had to get away.

Steve gave me a spare helmet that came down low over my eyes. It reminded me of the time my cousin Jerry gave me a haircut back home in New York. He was seven, I'd been five and he put a saucepan on my head and cut the hair around it. There's still photographic evidence of his mutilation. I have never forgiven him.

We hurtled down the 101 Freeway that headed south away from the Bay area and the chilly wind whipped my cheeks in a pleasant way. I looked across at the Adobe mud house high on the hill to my left. It always reminded me of the Flintstone house. Chrissie and I always said we'd buy it one day. Five miles south of the Burlingame city limits, we came to San Mateo and Steve dropped me at the gates of the old and atmospheric cemetery.

"How will you get home?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I'll call somebody to come get me."

He didn't seem happy about leaving me, but I wanted to be alone. I wanted to be with my wife. I walked through the gates and over to the memorial bench I'd paid to have constructed over her cremated remains. I wanted to have a place to

sit when I visited her overlooking the cemetery's ancient, crumbling mausoleums and impressive, gothic angels.

Sitting down, I was aware of my own restless spirit and of those laid here to rest. I took my time and for the first moment since I'd lost her and come here before grief gripped me and I'd been unable to leave the house, I couldn't feel her here. I couldn't feel her at all.

Was she really Jackson Avery? Was love really stronger than death? A strange feeling enveloped me that was hard to describe, but I felt as though my heart opened up in that moment. *Yes*. In that sad, yet commemorative place, I realized I'd been given a gift, a priceless treasure of timeless, death-defying love. I took a deep breath. Cemetery smell has its own scent. Death, despair, human pain. And hope. I think that hope is carried on the breeze of flowers brought by loved ones. I hadn't been here for a few weeks, but Chrissie's rose bushes were thriving. I wish I'd brought her something fresh and sweet smelling. Something pretty. And then I thought about Jackson Avery.

If what he told me was true and he was my wife except that he was now a man, who would bring whom flowers home? Who would lead in dancing? Who would order in restaurants? I bit my lip. Did he still like roses and violets above all other flowers?

Go. I heard her voice then.

"You took me with you!" I shouted. For in truth I'd lost a lot of me that day. She wasn't the only one who went under the bus. I knew she'd come back not for her, but for me. I guessed I was duty-bound to lead in dancing, I was the one who would buy flowers...a breeze kicked up and I smelled violets. I walked out of the graveyard, tears on my face, a smile in my heart.

True love lives forever. I began the long, long walk home.

The city was in darkness as the Metro truck driver dropped me outside the store where I remembered finally that I'd left my car. He waved off my offer of cash. He'd gone way off his two-mile loop on the freeway where he was paid by the city to rescue idiots like me.

He'd seen the news reports and wanted a full recitation of the robbery, my takedown of the bad guys and I...I just wanted to go home.

"Thank you," I said for the millionth time.

"No money, a photo is fine." He snapped away with his pocket digital camera. It had a violent flash that blinded me.

"I'm putting this on Facebook!" he yelled as he fired up his truck again.

In a few short minutes, I was home. The house was dark when I arrived.

"Jackson?"

The house was still. A soft rain began to fall as I slipped inside. I smelled violets and shook my head against this fanciful notion, but the smell grew stronger. I found Jackson in the bedroom and he was flinging things around.

"What's the matter?" I asked. I recognized this frenzy of activity from my marriage to Chrissy. She could become unhinged over a small thing and took it out on inanimate objects.

"You went to the cemetery. You prefer the dead me to the living me?"

"Now wait a minute —"

"You don't believe me. It makes me crazy."

"Chrissie...Jackson...I do believe you, but five weeks ago you were a small, cute woman...and now you're...something else."

"Don't you find me attractive?"

I felt dizzy.

"What's the matter?" His face looked frightened as he came toward me.

"Nothing," I said, and fell on the floor.

Jackson leaned over me, his face full of concern as the smell of violets subsided and I recovered my senses. I'd never fainted in my life.

"I'll get you a drink."

He seemed to be gone forever and I crawled onto the bed, pulling down the duvet. I hadn't slept in the bed for a long time. I'd taken to

napping all night and all day on the sofa. Jackson returned with a hot drink in a mug. I took it, sniffed it and although I loved cocoa, I had something else in mind.

I put it on the nightstand and drew him to me.

"What are you doing?"

I glanced up at him as my fingers fumbled with his button fly. "Learning to love a giraffe."

He laughed as I pushed him onto the bed.

His eyes glowed. "You are so naughty. I think you need to be fucked, baby."

Hell, no. I wasn't letting Chrissie take control again. I was the man in this relationship. As I undressed him, I remembered, we were both the men in this relationship.

"I love how you're taking control," he murmured, his voice husky.

"That's right." For some reason this notion turned me on.

He gasped, his hands on my cock.

"Gavin, I've been yearning for your big knob."

I laughed. Chrissie never used this kind of language. I loved it. I sat up on the bed, drew down his pants, his boxer shorts and when he was naked at last, I felt his very soft skin, running my hands all over his body. I did not touch his hardening cock. Instead, I rolled him over, putting him across my lap and fondling his ass.

"Thank God you still have a wonderful ass," I croaked. "I always loved your ass."

He moaned as my fingers slipped between the cheeks. No sound could be heard, save for a faint wind outside and our own, shallow breathing.

I squeezed his sweet cheeks, dipping my fingers between them, along the crack.

"Oh..." he ground out. "I am your slut. Do whatever you want to me."

I let my fingers delve deeper and he squirmed underneath me as my fingers slid deeper along the crack, rubbing against his sweet ass hole. I could feel his cock leaking on my thighs. I spit on his ass hole, making him jump. I let my fingers strum against it, gently, waking up those membranes, putting a little more pressure on it.

"Oh...you make me so hot...so hot."

I bent and licked him just a little, flipping him over onto the bed. His hard cock, which had been very patient, yet most insistent, greeted me with a bit of a gift. He was leaking profusely and of course, I needed to lick it all up. I discovered I loved the taste of come. I used my mouth and a couple of fingers to apply pressure to the base of the cock. He groaned as I moved my mouth up, clubbing the head against my lips and then I sucked it down again.

"Aarrggh!"

Jackson's body trembled as I fondled his balls, my fingers straying to that hot ass.

"Jackson, I want you to come in my mouth, my fingers inside you, please."

I moved two fingers into him slowly. It felt like his ass was sucking them in. He was warm and ready I sucked him until he came, rubbing his balls with my thumb in circular motions as he flooded my throat.

Refusing to release him until he'd stopped pulsing, I let go with a satisfied pop.

"I never..." he gasped, choking on his own breath, "ever had an orgasm like that as a woman."

"Really?"

"No wonder men go gay. Having a cock is like having a picnic with nothing but pastries and candies."

I snorted. "If you say so. You're new at this. Wait until you have to start using urinals and have to observe protocol—"

"Protocol?"

"Yes, the protocol of peeing."

Jackson scrunched his nose. "There is one?"

"Yes. You look straight ahead. You study dirty tiles...anything."

"You mean, I can't check out other guys' dicks?"

"No, baby, you can't."

"Crud on a bagel. That doesn't seem fair."

"And let's not forget erections at inopportune times. The relentless thoughts of fucking—"

"Oh, I had all those thoughts when I was a woman. You know what? I can't wait for you to fuck me. Abuse my prostate, baby. I want to see how good it really is to come that way."

I didn't quite know how to respond. Chrissie and I had anal sex a couple of times when we were dating and once we got married, the door closed on that tempting avenue of entertainment. Chrissie said it was *gross*.

The phone rang beside the bed and I didn't ignore it for once. Frankly, I was thrilled to have something else to do with my mouth than have strange conversations with my manly wife.

"Hello?" I was surprised to find it was Hank Finnegan.

Jackson slumped against the bed, looking disheveled and content.

"Is that Hank?" he croaked.

"....so anyway, I was hoping you'd come by and visit me," Hank said.

"Sure. Am I allowed to bring you food?" I asked.

"French fries."

Yeah, right.

When I ended the call, Jackson's gaze was on me. "He still loves me. He still holds a torch for

Chrissie." His satisfied sneer made me want to gag.

"Oh, please. He's a jerk."

Jackson sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed.

"Well, I didn't say he wasn't. But he obviously never got over me. I was the one that got away. Look how crappy he looks. He never got over me. He should have appreciated me when he had the chance."

I seethed with jealousy that Jackson enjoyed the notion. I realized Mama Kitty was in our room swatting at some imaginary foe in the air.

"What is she doing?"

Jackson smiled. "Playing with Fangster."

Oh, Lord. Now our cat had a relationship with the airborne eel.

I returned to the subject at hand. "You still have feelings for Hank," I said, surprised.

"No, I don't. I like knowing that he screwed up and suffered for it. For *years*. Come on, babe, shake a leg. Let's go see him and grab some fondue."

I threw on a fresh sweater. "That's funny, Chrissie and I always—" I stopped cold on his stare. "I mean, you and I always said we'd go to that fondue place in Half Moon Bay."

He nodded. "We're not putting off a single thing anymore. We're doing it all. I'm dead proof that it's a short life."

I couldn't argue with that.

"You're going to come with me to the hospital?" I asked.

"Of course."

"How am I supposed to explain you?"

He shrugged. "You could try the truth."

"I don't even think *I* know what that is."

"Tell him we're best friends...that I dropped in from out of town." He grinned and threw his arms up into the air. "Way out of town."

"You're batty."

Jackson wrinkled his nose. "I want to hear what he has to say. I bet he makes you cry with his remembrances of me."

"Do you miss being a woman?" I asked. "I mean you know, really?"

"No. I am so pleased to be me."

Peninsular Hospital was as advanced as they come, set in beautiful surroundings. Hank lay, wearing his best cranky face expression.

"Who's this?" he asked, eyeing Jackson warily.

"A friend who —"

Jackson put his arm around me and wiggled his eyebrows. "Very close friend."

Hank's mouth dropped into a surprised O and he glanced back and forth between us.

"I'm not surprised you turned queer," he said, shifting on the bed, the inadequate hospital gown, revealing all his unappetizing parts and pieces.

"I prefer gay," I said, without refuting that I was...er, gay.

"Whatever. I never was a politically correct kinda guy."

Jackson started fussing with the many flower arrangements on the wall ledge of Hank's windowless room. All the flowers must have been bought in the hospital kiosk. They were all yellow daisies in various stages of bloom.

Hank's gaze moved from Jackson's dead-heading activities and traveled back to me.

"Yeah...she was a wonderful girl, Chrissie," he sighed.

Jackson turned, a bright smile on his face. "I've heard nothing but wonderful things about her. She was very beautiful, wasn't she?"

"She certainly thought so," Hank responded. "She thought she was a flippin' beauty queen."

Jackson's smile vanished and Hank rearranged his scanty hospital gown to give me a full view of his dangly bits. I stared at the wall, hoping he'd stop giving me the creepy peep show.

"Yeah." Hank sighed again. "I had a glimpse of what my life with her would have been like when we had a date one night and she wouldn't let me

order bacon with my scrambled eggs. What kind of lunatic orders eggs without bacon?"

"What kind of lunatic orders eggs for dinner?" Jackson countered, tossing a few perfectly good stems into the trash.

"The hungry kind," Hank responded. "I could see the writing on the wall. Well, my dinner plate actually. "She told the waitress not to bring me dessert. I suspected once we got married, butt-fucking would be off the menu, too."

I stared at Jackson. Chrissie always told me I was the only man to fuck her in the ass.

"Your memory is faulty." Jackson's tone was icy. "Chrissie adored sex with you, she was the best sex you ever had."

"You knew Chrissie?" Hank asked, surprised. "She thought she was a good lay. And she was, I admit. But I hate a domineering broad. It was all over for me when she handcuffed me to my bed and left me there. I had to call my mother and get her to come over with a locksmith."

I choked on those words and Jackson threw me a guilty look. I had suspected she would do this to me, which was why I resisted.

"She probably forgot," Jackson bleated.

"Yeah, so she said. I took the easy way out. I balled her best friend, only her best friend didn't tell her."

"You balled Josie Maskin?" Jackson shrieked.

"Her, too. I balled four of her friends before Chrissie twiggged and dumped me."

Jackson picked up a vase and was about to hurl it, but I grabbed it just in time. Hank shifted on his flabby ass and let loose a gigantic fart.

"Sorry, had to do it. Anyway, I wanted to say that I carried hard feelings for you all these years and for that, I apologize. In case I drop dead in here, I wanted you to know that...and that you know, I appreciate what you did for me today." He closed his eyes.

Jackson and I stared at him. Had he died?

Hank opened an eye. "That's all I have to say." He closed his eye again.

Jackson and I left the room, daisies strewn everywhere.

"He is lucky I don't shove 'em down his mouth," Jackson said as the elevator arrived and I escorted him into it.

I put my arm around him and Jackson kissed me.

"Come on, giraffe lover," he said. "Let's go home."

Chapter Nine

“Fangster, cut that out!”

I stood in the doorway of the men’s room of Dip, the swanky Fondue restaurant where we’d just had a fantastic meal. I watched in mild horror as Jackson waved his hands around his head. We’d been given the prime window seats and a few people shopping on quaint Main Street stopped and stared. A few laughed.

“He’s a character,” a voice said at my ear. I glanced at the man standing beside me. It was my diner-owning pal, Foster Cranham, looking chagrined.

“You must accept my apology. I had no idea you were gay...man, you didn’t just bust that closet door down, you took the roof off the building!”

He grabbed my hand and pumped it. He had been drinking, but wasn’t drunk. Maybe loose enough to let his feelings show. His husband, Steve, waved to me from another table and I

trotted over to my manly wife who was now chatting away with a guy I recognized but couldn't place at first.

"Hi," he said and I recognized the toothy, photo-opportunistic Gavin Newsome, mayor of San Francisco. "You and Jackson are poster boys for gay men everywhere and I was just telling him that I want you two to be prominent supporters for the resurrection of the Proposition Eight amendment."

"You've got it," I said, and suddenly I understood why Chrissie came back. We had a chance to make a difference in the world, as well as to love each other harder.

It took a while to extricate ourselves from our mayor, but we ran down the street, hand in hand. The crystal shop on the corner of Seventh Street was still open and an old-fashioned Fortune Teller's booth stood just inside the doorway.

"Oh, I want to know my future," Jackson said.

"I can tell you all about that, or would you prefer I showed you?"

"Show me," he said and we ran down the street to our car. I fucked him first as a woman in the back seat of my old 1967 Chevy Impala, the hand-me-down gift from my father. I was delighted that Jackson wanted to romp in the backseat of our upgraded wheels. We drove down to Miramonte Pointe Road and with a splendid view of the

sheltered Half Moon Bay, climbed into the back seat.

We got into a heated sixty-nine, moaning around one another's cocks.

He caved in first. "Ya gotta fuck me," he grunted.

"I don't know...is that eel still swimming around?"

"Nope, he went off to mate. Now it's my turn."

I lost no time getting his legs open and pressed against my shoulders. I licked his ass like it was the dregs of my last supper and he humped my chin, murmuring my name over and over. I realized I wanted him to do this to me, too, but for now, I was calling the shots. I took out my cock and he gripped it with possessive fingers.

"Oh, stick it in. For God's sake. I gotta have that cock."

I gave it to him. It was an astonishing experience. I was aware I was fucking the woman and man I loved and all of a sudden, I felt some resistance and a kind of release...I saw Jackson's facial expression change to bliss as I moved all the way inside him. He bucked and thrust against me. I held on tight to the seat leather as he thrashed against me.

"Oh, Christ...that's it...baby. Can you feel it? What you're doing to my prostate?"

"No," I whined. His face turned red, his eyes flew open. "Holy fucking fuck!"

He came hard and fast all over my belly, come shooting everywhere. It was not how I pictured our first fuck as man and man, but it sure beat the heck out of anything else I'd ever done with him as a woman.

It beat the heck out of anything I'd ever done with anybody. His ass muscles clamped down on my cock and I lost all control, coming hard inside him.

"I feel it, I feel it," he shouted, clawing at my back, urging me on to deeper joy.

His legs opened wider and his ass dragged me in harder. I thought I would stop breathing, but at last, I regained my breath.

Coming down from that experience took some doing. I slumped over my man, wondering if it could possibly be this hot when he fucked me. A part of me feared the pain. A part of me welcomed it.

"Get a room," somebody shouted outside and I grinned against Jackson's bristly chin.

"Not a bad idea," I said and kissed his face.

He lay underneath me as bright lights shone into our car. I looked up. Great. Cops. There went my good merit badge, my keys to the city.

"Don't stress, it's just car thieves," Jackson said, thumping on the windows, surprising the guys who scuttled away like bugs.

"That was fantastic," he said, as I pulled out of him and climbed over the seat.

When I walked into the store the next morning, Jordan was already there and every spare inch of blank wall was covered in newspaper clippings. Looking closer, I suppressed a moan. Each and every one was about me. The local hero.

Man, wasn't that story old yet? I suddenly wished a celebrity would pull a crazy stunt so all the attention would be off me. Where was an heiress and her missing panties when you really needed her?

"Hello!" Jordan sang out way too happy given how early it was. I grunted in response as I shuffled over to one of the stools near the front of the store. As I sat down, I stifled a yawn behind my fist, as I continued to study the newspaper articles in distaste.

"Where's Jackson?" she asked as she handed me a cup of coffee. She'd made it up exactly the way I liked it, with lots of cream and one sugar. There was even a cookie on a separate plate to go with it. God, she was good, worth at least a hundred Carons.

"He was still in bed when I left," the words spilled from my mouth before I'd even realized just how revealing they were. Jordan got a speculative gleam in her eyes as she grinned. I noticed she had two dimples. It made her cute, but not enough to get away with the giggle that bubbled past her lips.

"Are you going to give me all the juicy details?" Jordan wagged her eyebrows at me.

"No, I'm not," I sputtered, feeling a heat come to my cheeks. "My god, woman, that perky blonde hair and country girl look is all a façade, isn't it?"

"You betcha. Under all this is one dirty bird." She gave a smile that was as far from innocent as one could get without finding themselves on *America's Most Wanted*.

"Why do I get a feeling we're never going to have a boring day now you're working for us?" I slowly shook my head.

"Oh, you love me and you know it. Heck, even your eel adores me." She blew a raspberry at me as she walked away, disappearing into the back room.

I snorted to myself as I started to bring the mug to my lips. Then I realized what she'd just said and I jumped so hard in shock, I spilled the hot liquid on my lap.

How did she know about the eel?

I grabbed some paper towels, dropping the roll onto the floor because my hands were shaking so bad. How in the hell did Jordan know about Fangster? Unless Jackson decided to yank my chain in more ways than one and put her up to it. I was still mulling that over, when he came in.

"Did you tell Jordan about Fangster?" I demanded.

"What?" he seemed genuinely confused.

"Jordan just mentioned my eel. How would she know about him unless you told her?" I tossed the wet paper towels into the garbage.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Did you ever think of asking her?"

"Asking her?" I echoed incredulously.

"Yeah, that is usually what people do when something confuses them."

"So you didn't put her up to this?" I still wasn't ready to buy that this wasn't some big practical joke.

"Now why would I play a prank like that?" Jackson sounded hurt.

"Stop reading my mind," I replied tiredly since I'd made that same damn request so many times I was beginning to feel like I had Chronic Repeat Syndrome.

"I will once you stop doubting me and my motives all the time," Jackson shot back. There was a wounded look on his face that instantly

made me feel like the biggest ass on this side of the country.

"I'm sorry." I ran my hands through my hair in frustration. "It seems like I don't have control of anything in my life these days, not even my own temper."

"And I apologize for eavesdropping on your thoughts again. I'm trying hard not to do it, but I still slip sometimes," Jackson replied, his gaze so tender it made my heart thud in my chest like some oversexed teen girl.

"I know you are and I shouldn't have been such an ass about it."

"That's okay, you're probably just tired because you didn't get much sleep last night," Jackson drawled with such a sexy smile that my body came awake, despite the lack of caffeine.

"You better watch it," I warned with a grin of my own. "If Jordan hears you talking like that, she's going to demand very descriptive and lurid details."

"Not our innocent girl." A slight frown marred Jackson's face. "We do need to figure out how she knows about Fangster. For all we know, he may not be the only thing she's aware of."

"What do you mean? You don't think that she could possibly know about you?" My stomach did a weird flip, making me glad I hadn't drank that coffee after all.

"There are certain people who possess the gift to see us." Jackson pursed his lips together into a tight line, deep in thought.

"So do you really think we should ask her?" I swallowed hard. "I'm not even sure how to start a conversation like that."

"Let me handle it," Jackson said. I quickly nodded, more than happy for him to take the lead in this one since this kind of thing was his specialty. Let's face it, even with everything that had happened, I still wasn't on intimate terms with all this hooky-dooky stuff. I had never even seen Fangster. Okay, maybe I had named it, but that didn't exactly count.

"Jordan," Jackson raised his voice. "Can you come out here for a minute?"

"Sure thing," she yelled back, her voice sometimes had a southern twang to it, and at this moment it was out. As she came through the door, she was all smiles. "Well if it ain't Mr. Sleepy Head."

"I was wondering if you could tell us a little more about the eel you were talking about earlier," Jackson coaxed in a tone that didn't judgmental, but it didn't sound entirely open either. Jordan's smile left her face so fast you would have thought someone had come up and slapped across the cheeks.

"Oh." Her lips formed a perfect O and I didn't have to be a mind reader like Jackson to know she was scrambling for a way to explain things away. "You heard that, huh?"

"Yeah, he did," Jackson deadpanned.

"I have a really good explanation for that." Her eyes were now as round as her mouth had been and her twang was heavier than ever.

"Okay, what is it then?" Jackson crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"What's what?" she replied as she nervously twirled a lock of her hair around one of her fingers.

Did she just say what's what? Is there even such a term or had she just pulled it out of the big black void that she called a brain? Jackson and I exchanged incredulous expressions before he let out an aggravated sigh. The one he usually reserved for me.

"What's your explanation?" he asked in a deadly calm voice. Even though he acted like he was on the edge, I knew as far as he was concerned Jordan was one of the few good people in the town. That didn't mean she was going to get off acting dumb though and that was what she was doing. Playing the dumb-blonde card to get out of answering the real question.

"I'm still trying to think of one," she admitted as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Why don't you try the truth?" Jackson suggested, raising one dark brow sardonically.

"No, that won't fly." She waved one hand dismissively at him.

Jackson started to glower at her so I shot him a be-nice glance. "Are you afraid of us?" I asked as gently as possible.

"Oh, no." Jordan shook her head so adamantly her ponytail smacked her cheeks. "I'm never afraid of, y'all. Not even when Jackson gets that grumpy look on his face like he has now."

"Then what is it?"

"Well..." she hedged, still working her lip. "I just don't want you to think I'm crazy or anything.

Too late!

I kept that Negative Nancy thought to myself and instead urged, "Go ahead and tell us. You'd be amazed at what we would believe."

"I see things." She kept her gaze directed at her loafers, refusing to meet our gazes.

"What kinds of things?" Jackson tilted his head to the side, speculatively. Kind of how one would look at an experiment at a High School science show.

"Stuff that no one else can." She traced a pattern in the carpet with the toe of her shoe. "Ghosts, spirits, angels and guardians mostly."

"So what is Fangster?" I blurted, excited at the possibility of getting an answer to what in the hell had set up camp around my head.

"Have you ever heard of how Native Americans had animal totems?"

"Yeah, sure."

"It's kind of like that." She shrugged, still refusing to meet our gazes.

"Do I have one?" Jackson asked.

"Well, you used to before you—" She clamped her lips shut and refused to finish the rest of her sentence, but she didn't have to. My stomach clenched like it had taken a hard hit and I could hear a gasp of shock coming from Jackson.

"Before I died?" he finished for her, his voice so tight it was almost unrecognizable.

"Yeah, when you were still Chrissie you had a little puppy that followed you around. When you came back, the dog wasn't there anymore." She lifted her face, her big eyes wet from tears. "You all don't think I'm crackers, do you?"

"No, sweetie." I pulled her into a tight hug. "We don't think that at all."

She burst into tears, blubbering on and on about something that I couldn't understand over her sobs. So I just patted her on the back and gave her a couple of *there, there's* while I waited for it to end. It wasn't until I had a fairly large wet patch on the front of my shirt that she pulled back. Not

before she rubbed her nose back and forth, getting snot on me, too.

"Is that how you knew Caron was sneaking booze into church?" Jackson ran his thumb over his bottom lip in a lame attempt to hide the fact he was smiling at my predicament.

"Yes," she sniffed. "The spirits and ghosts are always talking to me. Sometimes it gets so bad that I can't sleep at night or even concentrate during the day. It gets me so flustered that I mess things up a lot. I think that's the real reason I lost my job."

"No, you lost your other job because it was fate," Jackson declared as he came over. He settled for just rubbing her on the back instead of giving her a full-blown hug. Probably because he didn't want to go around the rest of the day with a matching snot streak on his shirt.

Coward.

"Fate?" Jordan let out a loud hiccup, sob. "Why would you say that?"

"Because there is nobody else in the world who could fit into our crazy lives but you." Jackson reached out and tweaked her nose.

"How long have you been able to see these kinds of things?" I asked.

"For as long as I can remember. My mom had me in and out of hospitals for it all through my childhood. She thought I had some learning

disability or mental problems since I was always talking to myself." She shuddered, showing those memories weren't ones she liked to think about.

"Do you still talk to her?" Jackson had finally gotten brave enough to pull her into a half-hug, a fierce protective glint in his eyes showing that he would do anything to protect her from ever being hurt again.

"Mom cut me off the day I told her that husband number two was cheating on her with the town librarian," her voice sounded so forlorn that it made me want to hug her again, snot or not.

"Do you want me to go beat him up for that?" Jackson offered. "I have big muscles now so I could do it."

"No." Jordan giggled as she rubbed her red nose. "All that crap led me to you guys and I couldn't ask for better friends or bosses."

"Yeah, we're pretty lucky to have you, too." Jackson gave her a chaste kiss on the top of her head.

"Does this mean you'll kiss each other for me?" she teased, that glint back in her eye. "I think it's so hot to see two guys making out."

Chapter Ten

That evening, as we sat eating dinner, I was still mulling over the events of the past few days. It was hard to believe that just a week ago, I had been in such a deep state of depression it was a chore to simply get dressed. Now I was so happy, I couldn't stop smiling. Funny how life had a way of working out one way or another.

"What are you thinking about, Chuckles?" Jackson asked before taking a sip of wine.

"Why don't you just read my mind and tell me what I'm thinking," I countered.

"Hey, I told you I was trying not to do that. So now I'm running around blind like everyone else."

"I was thinking about you," I confessed in a rough voice.

"Really, do I even want to know if it was good or not?"

"I still can't believe all you went through to come back for me." I got choked up a bit with emotion. I held in the waterworks, not wanting to

have a slobbery fit that would compete with Jordan's earlier bout.

"Of course I did," he replied, his voice a little gruff, too. "I have always and will forever love you."

"I'm so glad you did." I reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

"Even though I'm a man now?"

"That doesn't matter to me."

"Do you want to know a secret?" His dark gaze grew serious, a sexual spark in his eyes.

"Of course I do, unless of course you're going to tell me there is another eel stalking me," I joked.

"I like being a man better. The sex is so much intense," his confession was laced with a raw sensuality that had me shivering.

"I have an admission, too. I like it better, too." I ran fingers along the back of his hand, smiling when I saw goose pimples develop on his arm.

"So does this mean that you're going to let me fuck *you* this time?" he pleaded in a husky voice.

Mouth suddenly dry from both anticipation and fear, I locked gazes with him as I slowly nodded. Did I really want this? Yes, I did. I needed it and I knew he did, too.

Still sitting, he pushed his chair back a couple of feet and ordered. "Come here."

Gazing up at me from under his dark lashes, a total come-hither look on his sexy face I would

have walked off a cliff for him at that moment. So getting up and going to stand in front of him wasn't that big a task. He grabbed me by the waist of my jeans and pulled me even closer, so I was in between his knees.

"I've always liked this shirt on you," he observed as he pulled at the hem of my red polo. "Get rid of it."

"Now?" I looked pointedly at the food still on the table, the open front window. While it was too late for any of the kids to still be outside, anyone coming to our front door would have a great view of the show.

"Yes, now," Jackson commanded, harsh lines of need forming on his strong face. "I'm going to lay you down on this table and screw you senseless."

"Fuck," I breathed, my body getting hard in response to his crass language.

"The shirt, Chuckles," he chided. "Don't make me ask twice."

My hand were shaking as I rushed to follow his orders, pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it the side. As soon as my flesh was bare, he ran his fingers up and down my abdomen, stopping just short of the waistband of my jeans. My legs felt weak so I braced my hands on his shoulders to support myself when his tongue darted out to trace a heated path along my stomach.

"Are you sure you don't want to take this into the bedroom," I panted as I darted another worried glance over to the window. He didn't respond, instead giving me a warning bite before he continued to kiss, suck and lave at my skin. My grip on him was so hard by now I was probably leaving marks, but he didn't wince, too intent on his sweet torture. He would make a path all the way down my front, stopping just short of my waist, before he would work his way back up.

"Please take off my pants," I groaned as I arched my hips forward a bit, hoping he would get the hint and give my aching cock some much need attention.

Jackson pulled back so he could undo my pants and slid them down my legs, soon my underwear followed and I was standing nude in front of him. He took my cock in his hand and slowly ran one finger up and down, making it jerk in response.

Giving me one more heated look, he turned long enough to push the dishes to the side before growling, "Get on the table."

I scrambled to obey and soon we were facing each other again, me sitting on the edge of the table, him still in the chair. He wasted no time before bending over and taking my erection into his hot, eager mouth. I moaned, the erotic sight of his full lips stretched over my cock, so hot it almost made me shoot off before we'd even gotten

started. It was only by sheer will that I was able to hold back.

He sucked me for several moments before he gave his next command, "Lie down on the table."

Whimpering with disappointment because I wouldn't be able to watch him anymore, I still obeyed because he was the one in charge this time. As soon as I was lying down, he rewarded me by taking my cock back in his mouth again. I shouted in pleasure, my back arching against the hard wood of the tabletop.

Still working my cock, he spread my legs out even wider so he could really get at me. Even though I knew it was coming, I still jumped when he moved his mouth away from my cock so he could start rimming my ass.

"Fuck, that's good!" I cried as his velvet tongue left a hot path around my sensitive opening. Again and again he circled the tight muscle, until I was biting my bottom lip in an effort to stop from coming. Then he started to add the fingers, sliding first one and then two inside me. There was a little pressure, but not very much pain and I was shocked to hear myself begging for more.

"Please" I gasped, "I need all of it."

Jackson stood up and I could hear the harsh rasp that told me he was lowering his zipper. It was then that I finally realized while I was totally naked, he was still dressed. Normally that would

have bothered me since I loved to feel his soft skin against me, but right now all that mattered was him getting his cock inside me.

He pushed inside me, taking it slow so my body would have time to get used to the intrusion. The entire time, he crooned words of love to me and tenderly caressed me. It hurt, yes, but the pleasure was so much greater that I was clawing at his back, trying to push him in deeper.

"Easy, babe," Jackson panted, sweat beading on his temple. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Damn it!" I nearly yelled. "Fuck me hard."

With a groan of surrender, Jackson thrust the rest of the way inside me. I barely had time to recover from that jolt of pleasure, before he pulled back and started to move in and out of me in a fast, steady pace. My hands shot out to grip the sides of the table for support as I spread my legs out even further for him.

The intense pleasure was too much for me and I was soon coming, having a blinding hot orgasm. I opened my mouth to yell my release and nothing came out but a breathy gasp as my semen shot from the end of my cock, hitting my stomach in hot waves.

Jackson thrust into me a couple more times before his body grew tight as he moaned my name. I could feel his cock pulsating in my ass as he closed his eyes in bliss.

"I'll never leave you again," he vowed, still out of breath. "Never again."

It was a month before I finally convinced Jordan to take down the newspaper clippings and that was only after I promised she could make up a scrapbook out of them. She was sitting at one of the worktables doing that one bright afternoon as Jackson and I were going over the numbers.

When Hank came rolling in, we barely looked up. Since he'd got out of the hospital, he'd made it a habit to hang out at the store every afternoon so we were used to his presence by now. The lonely guy had latched onto us and we were his newest buddies.

Jackson and I were both surprised to catch the sappy, loving looks that Jordan and Hank shot each other when they didn't think anyone was watching them. As crazy as it sounded, and believe me by now I knew crazy, it seemed like the two were interested in each other.

"Did you hear the latest?" he asked as he went over and helped himself to a cup of coffee. What he didn't know was that Jordan had secretly switched it to decaf out of concern for his heart.

"I swear, Hank, you are the biggest gossip in this town. The red hat ladies don't have anything on you," Jordan declared with a cheeky grin.

"Does that mean you don't want to know my latest juicy tidbit?" he grumbled as he sat heavily into one of the stools.

"Heck, no!" Jordan pointed a pair of scissors at him. "Dish."

"Janet and Kyle got arrested for public lewdness." He barked in laughter.

"No way!" I exclaimed, sharing a look of astonishment with Jackson.

"It's true." Hank nodded as he loosened his tie. "They got caught bumping uglies in the cemetery."

"Ugh." Jackson made a big show of rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands, "I just got a visual of that and it wasn't pleasant."

"I guess this means they're back together," I mused, shaking my head.

"I suppose everyone deserves a happily ever after. Even them." Jordan started giggling and couldn't stop. Soon we were all laughing.

As I gazed around the room, my attention focused and landed on the scrapbook. While the town had called me the savior, they couldn't have been more wrong. This unlikely bunch surrounding me were the true heroes for they had saved me.

Jordan with her kind heart and all-is-sunshine attitude. Jackson with his love and support. Hell,

even Hank. He was the rock that stabilized our crazy family.

Looking over at Jackson I mouthed, *I love you.*

Jackson smiled back and mouthed, *I love you, too, Chuckles. Now and forever.*

About the Authors

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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