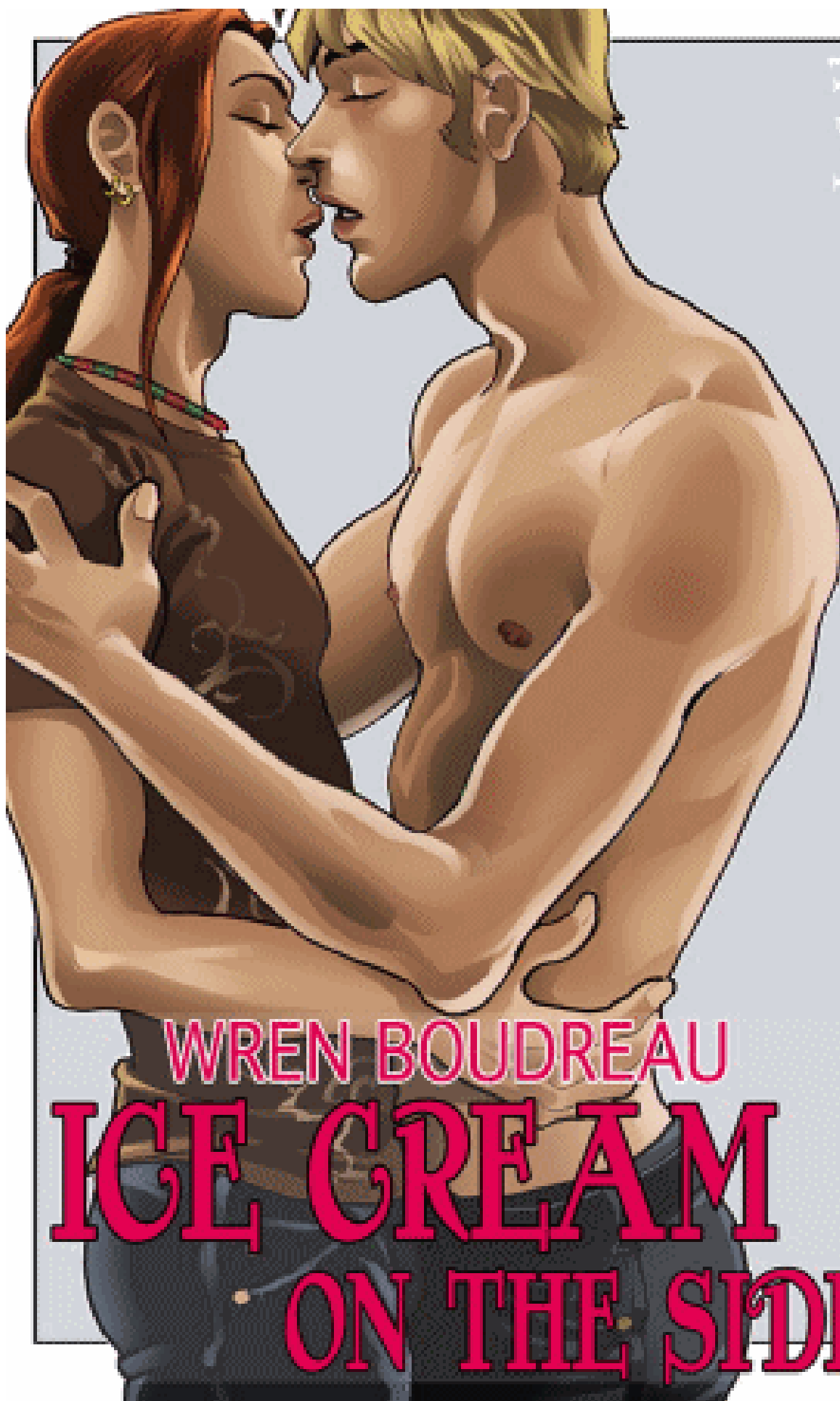


1998



WREN BOUDREAU
ICE CREAM
ON THE SIDE

Ice Cream on the Side

Table of Contents

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Wren Boudreau

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Erotic Suspense

Dylan Forest is really pretty happy. He's a successful architect, lives in a great little town, and has good friends. More than ten years ago, Dylan's first boyfriend betrayed him. Since then he's learned to appreciate men briefly and intensely, with no lingering complications. But Dylan finds himself wanting something more with Michael Gilmore, the new art teacher in town.

Michael moved to Raven Pass to get away after a bad break-up. He just wants to teach and he's got an exhibit of his own work coming up. He doesn't expect to find himself attracted to anyone just yet. He has to give up his fear so he can explore a possible relationship with Dylan.

The guys manage to get past their insecurities and into bed, where they find out just how compatible they are. Before their romance gains momentum, however, life gets complicated. An old dead body and a new murder are both connected to Dylan's love life, and it appears that Michael will be next.

What's going on? And can Dylan and Michael stop it before it stops them?

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

Chapter One

I'd always been a nut for schematics. This phase of architectural design stirred my creative juices like no other, seducing me into a trance-like state. I was lost in just such a stupor when a loud buzz jolted me back to reality so fast that I jumped in my chair and hit my knee under the desk. The resulting litany of curse words couldn't hide my receptionist's voice coming over the intercom. "You're really going to want to take this call, Dylan."

Sandy knew I needed time and quiet to concentrate, but she also had a knack for knowing which calls I needed to take. I rubbed my knee and sighed. "Okay, but only if I can have a cherries-and-cream from Ricky's."

"Okay, I'll get you your ice cream fix. Just take the call."

I stared at the phone for a minute before I reluctantly picked up the receiver. "Dylan Forest here." I cast a yearning glance at the schematics.

"Hello, beautiful!" The baritone that once upon a time had made me tremble with desire still sent a shiver down my spine. "How is my favorite blond, blue-eyed stud today?"

I preened a little, even though I didn't want to. "Ian Gallagher! My God, you're on my phone." I stood up from the desk as if Ian had walked in the door and wanted to shake my hand.

"Well. That paints an interesting picture." Ian's sparkling laugh was the same as always. The last time we laughed together had been over a year ago, when Mai Li got married. Our group of friends from college got together for the important landmarks in each other's lives, even if contact between those events was minimal at best for most of the group.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Gallagher, and tell me: to what do I owe this call from the great artiste?" I leaned against the casing of the large window that overlooked the village square. The ice cream shop across the way was doing a brisk business between tourists and the local kids and my staff.

"Oh, Dylan, always cutting to the chase." I heard the click and breath of Ian lighting a cigarette. "What are you doing July twenty-sixth? Think you could make it to Philly for the evening?"

"Well, considering that you're giving me more than a month's notice, it's probably safe to say I can be there." I gave up my study of the shop windows below me. "What's up?"

Ian chuckled and blew out cigarette smoke. "I'm headlining at the Lampeer Gallery..."

"Of course I'll be there. Tell me all about it." I dropped into the leather chair and propped my feet up on the desk.

"The opening is July twenty-sixth, and the gallery and my agent are making a big to-do out of it. There will be two young, new talents on exhibit as well." Ian paused for more of the ci-

garette. In a quieter, more serious voice, he said, "I never anticipated the day when I'd be the old man on the block, but I guess I've been around long enough and have enough of a rep to escort new artists onto the scene."

I studied the painting over the sofa. A blend of collage over-painted with acrylic, it depicted the clearing by the mountain stream where our group of college friends used to gather at least once a month during the school year. Strong friendships had been forged around that campfire. The painting caught the eye of everyone who entered this office. "Thirty-two isn't old, Ian. We haven't even hit the prime of our lives. So congratulations, my friend." I dropped my feet to the floor and reached for a pen. "I'm writing the date on my calendar..."

"Do people still use those?" Ian laughed.

"What?"

"Calendars you write on?"

"I do," I said, then grinned. "And besides, my assistant will put it into digital form later. If I don't make a note of it right away, I'm likely to forget. And, please, no comments about aging. I just have a lot going on right now."

"Ah, the life of the successful architect." Ian's smile registered in his voice. "Tell me: are you too busy to add an extra day or two to visit with me before the show?"

This was an odd request, and it caught me off guard. "I think I can spare the time. Where will you be staying?"

"Actually, I wondered if you'd mind it if I came see you, spend a little downtime with a friend in a quieter place. Would that be okay?"

I thought I heard a note of sadness, or maybe weariness, in Ian's voice. "Is everything okay? Is the age thing bothering you that much?"

"No, it's not that, really. My ups and downs have been a little intense lately. I just...sometimes I need to take a step back from it all, you know?"

His request to visit one-on-one unnerved me. We'd been more than just friends for most of our third college year. Our discovery of each other had given us the strength and courage to come out to family and friends and to explore our sexuality in depth. We lost our virginity to each other, which was like unlocking the doors to the candy store. I followed Ian's lead as we sampled everything; his sense of adventure was contagious. We professed our love for each other between heaving breaths as we made love by the lake, in the studio, on the roof, under the trees... We poured our hearts out to each other as we said good-bye before I left for my year abroad. A stream of e-mail and phone calls connected us, kept us firm in each other's hearts.

When I returned, we rekindled the heat of the relationship, but it didn't take long for me to find out that while I was studying architecture hands-on in Rome, Ian had been studying most

of the gay male population—hands-on—on campus. Sparks flew, but not the good kind. He tried apologizing more than once, but I couldn't trust his sincerity, and eventually, he stopped trying.

I worked through—okay, avoided—the pain of our breakup as I focused on completing my degree and searched for a job. Ian concentrated on his master's. I tried hard to not hear anything about his love life, and he managed to be discreet. Over time we settled into friendship, buffered by the safe circle of our other friends.

Now Ian wanted to step outside the circle. It was the first time he'd reached out to me, and while I didn't know what to make of it, I could sense that something was wrong. I wouldn't have turned away any other friend if they'd asked to visit.

I heaved an inward sigh and said, "I'll block off a couple extra days."

"Thanks, Dylan. I'll get back to you soon, when my plans are confirmed. Right now, I've got a few more calls to make."

We said our good-byes.

Sandy let herself into my office after a soft tap at the door. She offered the cup of ice cream to me like a suppliant before a king. "Wiseass," I muttered around a spoonful as she backed out of the room.

I returned to the window as I savored the cold treat. The square below disappeared in my mind's eye as I lost myself in memories of Ian. The bitter ones weren't as strong as they used to be, but I certainly had scars. I'd been idealistic, firm in my beliefs but naive about Ian's. Since that time I'd had my own share of adventures, learning to appreciate the men who were like the ice cream I enjoyed: delicious, a treat for the senses, a brief, intense experience, with nothing leftover to return to.

I wondered what was truly going on with Ian, but I couldn't brood over it. There were too many other things on my schedule for that. I would deal with Ian when the time came.

* * *

When I couldn't find the papers I wanted in the mess on my desk, I punched the button on my phone that linked me directly to my personal assistant. "Betsy, where are those files for the Roswell Burns addition?"

Betsy Duke had been with me since before the beginning of Forest Architecture. She'd been a secretary at Ice & Associates, where I worked from college until I moved to Raven Pass. Blonde and energetic, Betsy had many admirers and admired many. She'd crooked her finger at me once or twice, metaphorically speaking, but after I explained that female fingers weren't my thing, we'd developed an easy camaraderie. She became the big sister I never had, and I was happy she'd left Ice & Associates to come work for my risky little start-up.

"They're on top of the left-hand file cabinet." Her cheerful voice rang through the intercom. I looked up and yes, there they were.

"Um...thanks."

"No problem. You want some coffee to go with that ice cream?"

Jeez, she knew everything. "Yes, please."

When Betsy brought in the coffee, I asked her to add Ian's visit and the art show to my electronic calendar. She rolled her eyes and smiled, stepped up to my laptop, pressed a few buttons, and strolled out. Sometimes I think she got off on showing she could take care of me. Before I had a chance to get too comfortable at my desk with the files, Jeff Archer knocked on the doorjamb, grinning like a loon.

"I'm here to let you know that Quentin MacGregor gave the preliminary sign-off for the Barn Theater plans!" Jeff flounced into one of the visitor chairs.

Jeff wasn't a partner in my business yet, but I thought that with a couple more years of experience, he would step into that slot nicely. I had hired him not long after I opened the doors of Forest Architecture. I'd been surprised when he answered my ad; he'd completed an internship with a prestigious firm in Atlanta, which almost guaranteed him a permanent job there. I suspected, because you can't actually ask it in the interview, that the reputation of Raven Pass as a liberal haven appealed to his political and sexual preferences.

"Congratulations." I smiled. "If I wasn't already eating today's quota, I'd offer to take you for ice cream."

"S'okay, boss. The endorphins are doing enough celebrating for both of us. He wants you to meet with him for the final sign-off. I've already got Wellstone and Sons lined up to start the demolition of the old shack and prep for the foundation."

Quentin MacGregor had been one of my first clients here, a sculptor who'd hired me to design an art gallery-slash-bookstore—which he cleverly named "Art & Books." He had made a pass at me once or twice, early on, and while I liked Quentin, for whatever reason I wasn't sexually attracted to him. He took it gracefully and, every now and then, made a fresh attempt just to, as he put it, "test the waters."

His latest project was a community theater, to be built on land just outside the town limits. This was no small project; the town of Raven Pass was growing into its own little tourist mecca. Quentin's theater would be the cornerstone of an arts complex that would not only complement the town's galleries, cafés, and myriad shops, but could become a draw in and of itself. Quentin had no small plans and was nervous at having a junior architect in charge of the project.

"Okay," I told Jeff. "I'll give him call."

"Thank you. Let me know when he's pressed the big red button." He fairly skipped out of the office. I finished my ice cream and tossed the paper cup. Before I hit the keypad on the phone, Sandy's voice chirped, "Quentin MacGregor for you. Line two."

I picked up. "Are you a mind reader now?" I asked him.

"Say what?"

"Jeff and I were just talking about you."

He laughed. "I knew my ears were ringing for a reason."

"It sounds like your new venture is moving right along. When do you want to meet?" We set up a time, talked shop for a bit. I asked how Art & Books was doing.

"Pretty well. I wish I could get a big name or two to put some work in there, maybe draw in some big spenders."

Since I'd just been talking to a big-name artist, I figured Quentin's sixth sense must have been in overdrive. "Ian Gallagher is a friend of mine. I might be able to get him to place a couple of pieces with you. He has a new exhibit opening in a month, and he'll be here to visit for a couple days before that. I'll see if I can get him into Art & Books while he's here."

"Thanks, Dylan. I'll be grateful. See you soon."

Just like that. I shook my head. There was something about Quentin that made everything fall into place for him.

I buzzed Betsy and asked her to update my calendar to include the meeting with Quentin, along with a reminder to talk to Ian about placing some art in his shop. I waited a minute to be sure the quiet would actually settle in, then reviewed the paperwork to prepare for my afternoon meeting with the renovation committee at Roswell Burns.

* * *

Betsy and I arrived at Roswell Burns Academy a few minutes early. We made ourselves comfortable in the library, where we would meet with the renovation committee. The private prep school had received a sizable gift to fund the addition of a new wing for the arts, and since our last meeting, three weeks ago, we'd broken ground and had begun construction in earnest.

As the committee members filtered in, I rose to shake hands and offer greetings. When the school president, Shayla Green, entered, she brought with her a young man I hadn't seen here before. They approached me just as I turned to say hello.

"Dylan Forest, I'd like to introduce you to Michael Gilmore. Michael is a new addition to our team of arts instructors, now that Elliot Fielding has retired."

We shook hands. Michael had a firm grip, his fingers long and slightly calloused. I held on to them a bit longer than I should have, because his brilliant green-flecked-with-gold eyes captivated me. As he was several inches shorter than my six-one, those eyes looked up into

mine, perfectly framed by long, brown lashes.

"It's good to meet you. I've heard great things about your work here, Mr. Forest."

God, was I that old? "Please. Call me Dylan. Welcome to the wonderful world of construction." Our hands slowly slid apart.

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to it."

Before anything further could be said, the other members of the committee settled in at the table. Shayla pointed Michael to a seat, and I resumed my place. I opened the meeting with responses to questions raised last time. Betsy kept me organized with a working file for these meetings, and she always took copious notes so that I could focus on the conversation. This was an especially good thing today, as my focus was equally split between the conversation and the newest member of the committee. Maybe not equally. The conversation wasn't nearly as fascinating as Michael Gilmore.

Several committee members voiced opposing opinions regarding the style and expense of the lighting for the art studios.

Shayla interrupted the squabble. "At our previous meeting we didn't have an art instructor on hand to voice an opinion. Now we do, so let's hear what he has to say."

Michael cleared his throat but otherwise didn't show any discomfort at being the focus of every eye in the room. "Is the studio facing north?"

"Yes," I replied.

His manner of speech was so confident that even the naysayers nodded. "Might I make a suggestion about the design of the room?"

I liked the sound of his voice, so of course I encouraged him to go on. "Please do." I tried not to bat my eyelashes.

"The northern exposure is great; I'm so glad that's already been thought out. Would it be possible to angle the ceiling and put in skylights to make use of that natural light in the most advantageous way? The more daylight we can access, the less artificial light we need. We want to be green, right?" He addressed that last question to Shayla. "And we want to save some green too, yes?"

Fervent nods all around.

Michael directed his brilliant smile at me. "There you go, then."

A strand of long, chestnut hair strayed from its band, and he tucked it behind his ear. An ear that had two rings pierced through the lobe. I wondered if Michael had piercings in other, more interesting, places.

I pulled my thoughts back before the blood could drain from my big head to my little one. "Yes. Well. There we go." I straightened the papers in front of me. "Does anyone have further questions on the lighting issue?"

A chorus of “no's” accompanied by shaking heads answered me. “Thank you, Michael, for clearing that up for us.”

He gave a little shrug and sat back in his chair. He might have winked at me, but I might have made that up.

I worked hard to be attentive to everyone at the table for the rest of the meeting. Near the end, I noticed Michael watching me as one of the board members posed a convoluted, long-winded question. I got lost in Michael's gaze, and the question degenerated into white noise. When Betsy kicked me under the table, I blinked and said, “I'll look into that,” and hoped that Betsy would know what the hell the question was. Michael ducked his head, and I caught the shy smile that proved he'd caught my mental recess.

I wanted to speak to him again after the meeting, even though I wasn't sure what I would say. He stood across the room, in conversation with a couple of the committee members. I started toward them, but Mona Stockbridge caught me before I got three steps. She rested her diamond-ringed fingers on my arm.

“Dylan, I'm looking into that new neighborhood going up on the north end of town. I think it's called Shady Ridge. Have you heard about it?”

“I think I read something in the...” I looked back across the room, but by then, Michael was gone.

After I dropped Betsy off at her car, I had a conversation with myself wherein I decided that it would be a good time to resume my exercise routine. It had fallen off the priority list the last few weeks as my work seemed to multiply, but I told myself that I couldn't let it slide if I wanted to stay healthy. That was it; I had to make sure I had balance in my life, not all work, work, and work. It had nothing to do with Michael Gilmore and the shape of his thighs inside those tight blue jeans.

Chapter Two

When the next renovation committee meeting rolled around three weeks later, my pants fit more comfortably at the waist, and my shirt sleeves hugged my biceps a little tighter. I'd given a lot of thought to the new teacher at Roswell Burns and had decided to ask Michael out for a sandwich or coffee after the meeting. Given the eye contact and the handshake at the last meeting, I was pretty sure he would say yes. I was still nervous about it, though. It had been a very long time since I'd felt inclined to pursue someone who wasn't a one-off from a club in the city—an “ice cream” guy. I needed to be careful, because I wanted to be able to look him in the eye whenever I saw him.

I told Betsy I had another meeting after this one so that she would drive separately, and I wouldn't have her as an excuse to chicken out.

Construction on the new wing was proceeding according to plan, but even so, it was still bare bones, and the committee didn't have much to discuss. This time, I was waylaid after the meeting by board member Norm Willard asking for help in acquiring the services of a qualified electrician. I tried not to be rude as I listened with half an ear, told Norm to call my office the next day, and hurried out of the room. Several other people lingered to socialize in the hallway. I needed a taxi light over my head so I could turn on the “not in service” sign after these meetings. Trying to project that thought, I said my good-byes and strode to the doors Michael had slipped through just a moment before.

I slowed to a saunter out in the parking lot, trying to look around without looking like I was looking around. I heard my name, and I turned to find Michael propped against the door of an SUV.

“Michael. Hello.” So smooth.

“Hey. You seem to get tagged with lots of questions after these meetings, huh?”

“Yeah. It comes with the territory.” I hoped to God Michael wasn't going to ask about electricians or plumbing or a new house. Or... Well, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

“I hate to bother you, too, but I do have something I'd like to discuss. It's related to the new building here. Would you, ah...” He stuck his hands in his back pockets like a teenager would. “Would you join me for a sandwich, or a cup of coffee, so we can talk about it?”

Huh.

“Why, yes, Michael, that would be fine.” I distinctly heard my father's voice come out of my own mouth. Who the hell says “Why, yes”? Apparently, Michael didn't notice. Or maybe he thought I always talked that way. Great.

“Good. How about the Crescent Café?”

"I'll meet you there." I figured the less I said at this point, the better. As I drove, I pondered the existence of synchronicity, since I was clearly living in a maelstrom of it. First Quentin with his phone call at the coincidentally right time to snag some Ian Gallagher art, now Michael beating me to the punch with his invite. Fortunately, the drive was too short for me to make a study of it.

We pulled into parking spaces one after the other and met up at the front of the restaurant. I opened the door and ushered him in.

"Hey, Michael." The hostess beamed at him. "Dylan. How are you?" she said when she saw that I was standing behind him.

"Hi, Gretchen," Michael replied.

"Just fine, and you?" I said at the same time.

Gretchen laughed. "Are you together this evening?"

While I paused to sort out the reality from the fantasy, Michael said, "Yes, a table for two, please."

The café was rather small and had a decent late-dinner crowd, but a booth near the side window was open, and she led us to it. With a cheerful "Enjoy!" she handed us menus and moved on. The waitress greeted Michael by name, filled our water glasses, and took drink orders. Iced tea for two, as it turned out.

I set the menu aside; I had most of it memorized. "I thought you were new in town."

Michael looked at me, confused.

"You seem to be on a first-name basis with the staff," I prodded.

He gave a short laugh. "I am new in town. I just eat here a lot. I'm not crazy about cooking for just myself." He took a sip of water. "Well, really, I'm not crazy about cooking, period."

I nodded my understanding, but my brain was tallying a point in the "he's single" column. It seemed that neither of us had to look at the menu. The waitress returned with the tea then took our orders. After she withdrew, I leaned back, waiting for Michael to ask his questions. He seemed a little nervous, adjusting his silverware and napkin, so I thought I should make some sparkling chitchat. Unfortunately, all I could think of was, "So, how'd you end up in Raven Pass?"

Brilliant, I know. But it seemed to work, because Michael relaxed back into his seat. "I got a great job right out of school, teaching in a progressive high school outside Pittsburgh. I was in a relationship that, well...long story short, it ended badly, and I needed to get away. A colleague of mine had heard about the opening at Roswell Burns, helped me make the contact, and zip—here I am."

There it was again. That synchronicity thing. "That sounds like an amazingly lucky break for you."

"It was. And things like that don't happen to me. I mean, I worked really hard to get the job in Pittsburgh. Did research, made sure I took the right courses, visited, made contacts ahead of time... This job—it just dropped in my lap. Right place, right time, I guess." He shrugged. "I'm not going to second-guess it, though. I'm really grateful. Roswell Burns is an incredible school."

Michael's whole face lit up when he said that. It made me smile. "And so"—I leaned in toward him—"what is it about the school you wanted to talk about?"

He leaned in as well. "I have an idea for an after-school activity for students this fall. I know the building addition will be well under way by the time school starts, but I'd like to get the art students, and maybe other interested kids, involved in the process." He waited to see if I'd bite. I could feel his leg jiggling under the table.

"Go on," I said.

"I know that there will be kids who'll be fascinated by the construction; I'd like to show them how creating a building happens." As he warmed to his topic, he grew more animated, his hands emphasizing his speech. "They would review needs and wants, review blueprints, track how the design gets from the paper to reality. Depending on the size of the group, I would want to have them walking around in hard hats, getting up close and personal. They would see the new wing added from almost the beginning to the very end. It would be like a club—after school, first come, first served sign-ups, parental permission, the whole thing."

His energy was contagious, and I didn't even know what he wanted from me yet. "That sounds like a great idea," I said.

"I'm glad you think so. I was hoping..." He toyed with a straw wrapper. "I don't want to impose on you, and please feel free to say no. I won't be offended..." The wrapper disappeared into itty-bitty pieces.

"Michael, just spit it out." The juxtaposition of his excitement with his nervousness was really charming. I wanted to reach across, grab him by the shirt, and kiss him. But I didn't.

"Would you be willing to help me with planning and laying out the project? And possibly join us at some of the sessions?" He was really nervous about this, could hardly look me in the eye until he was done speaking.

As for myself, I was thanking whatever gods smiled down on me this day. I was sure I would owe them, big time.

I did think for a minute about what this activity would mean. I didn't want to do it if I thought it would lead Michael to disappointment in me or my ability to carry out promises. I weighed the pros and cons. Pro: Michael—we would be together to plan everything out, meet on a regular basis to determine how the sessions were going and set up the next steps in the process...and this would take place over months and months of construction. Con: time—could I

make the time for this commitment? Pro: Community—this was an excellent way to be involved with some of the local kids. And Michael. Con: compatibility—we might find out we can't work together. Pro: This would likely push me the last step into hiring another architect, a need that had been growing for a while now at the firm. Jeff would be ecstatic. And I'd have more free time to spend with Michael. Con...

At this point I realized he was saying something. Something along the lines of, "...I understand. It's a lot to ask. No harm done."

"No. Yes." I shook my head like a wet dog. "Wait. I was thinking."

He stopped talking and smoothed out the paper placemat he had folded into an accordion.

"Michael, I would be happy to help you with your young architects club."

Pro: Seeing him smile.

Her timing impeccable, the waitress delivered our sandwiches. While we ate we discussed Michael's ideas for the club. He had an artist's knowledge of basic architecture and was definitely experienced in the hows and whys of learning. By the time we left the café, I was confident that this would be a great experience for the kids involved. We exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and established a time and place for our first planning session. Saturday afternoon, my house.

As we got near the cars, Michael reached out to shake my hand. "Thank you so much."

"I'm looking forward to it." It was not my imagination that we lingered over that handshake and stared into each other's eyes far longer than was usual. I got the idea that Michael was not going to be an ice cream guy.

Chapter Three

I expected the next three days to drag by, but before I knew it Friday night was upon me. I cleaned the place as if Miss Manners herself were visiting. I think it was the first time in the three years I'd lived there that the carpet under the couch felt the tug of the vacuum. I threw out stuff from my fridge that hadn't even turned green yet. As I contemplated life from behind the toilet bowl, I realized that living alone as a grown man wasn't much different than living with roommates as a young man. Ugh.

Saturday morning found me at the grocery store, stocking up on a variety of beverages, alcoholic and non-, as well as snacks, healthy and not. I had no idea, of course, what Michael liked, and I wanted to be prepared.

I put fresh sheets on the bed and stacked clean towels in the bathrooms. Because I was always so thorough in my cleaning.

I thought the best place to work would be the kitchen table. My large country kitchen had been created out of two smallish rooms. The farmhouse table was big enough to spread out full sets of blue prints, as well as the other paperwork I pulled from the Roswell Burns file. The kitchen was also a nonthreatening kind of space. I thought if I sat next to Michael on the couch, I might be tempted to touch him in ways he might not appreciate. I felt unusually conflicted; I was attracted to Michael on a sexual level, yes, but I also itched to learn more about him. I enjoyed our dinner and conversation, and I thought I got a similar vibe from him. I worried that I might do something that would scare him away.

At noon I sat on the couch of temptation, looked around at my nice and shiny abode, and reveled in my domestic dorkiness.

At two o'clock I woke up to a ringing in my ears...no, the doorbell. Jesus H. Christ, I'd fallen asleep. I stumbled to the foyer and swung open the door. There was Michael on my front porch, backpack over one shoulder, six-pack of Yuengling in hand. He stood in that side-ways way people use when they're at the door but don't want to stare at it. He seemed to be checking out the sugar maple tree that lorded over the front of the house. He wore straight-leg jeans and a brown T-shirt with a faded design down one side. The sun brought out red and gold highlights in his hair. It was banded at the nape of his neck, which accentuated his jawline. Either he'd recently shaved or his beard wasn't heavy—the skin of his face lacked any sign of stubble. He was, quite possibly, the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

I felt like Quasimodo on a bad-hair day.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I replied.

"Um..." He scratched the back of his neck and looked at me through his eyelashes. "You gonna let me in?"

"What? Oh, yeah, come on in." I stepped out of his way and realized I needed to dispel the fog surrounding my brain. "Listen, I took an unplanned nap on the couch, so do you mind if I take a minute to regroup?"

Michael chuckled. "No, go ahead. I've been there."

"Thanks." I pointed toward the kitchen. "You can go on in there. I've laid out everything I thought would be helpful. Make yourself at home. There are snacks in the fridge. Bottle opener is in that top drawer. I won't be long."

I went to the bathroom, splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, and studied my face in the mirror. I had showered and shaved earlier, but I couldn't do much about my hair at this point. I ran my fingers through and got the strands corralled. Okay, so maybe not Quasimodo. I traded my wrinkled T-shirt for a clean blue one, a little voice in the back of my mind suggesting it would bring out the blue in my eyes.

When I returned to the kitchen, Michael looked up from poring over the blueprints. "Feel better?"

"Much."

He smiled and offered me one of the beers he'd brought. I took it and put the rest of them in the refrigerator. I sat in the chair next to his, took a long sip from the bottle, and said, "Okay, let's get to work."

We got lost in planning the adventures of the Young Architects Club. We slid easily into the jargon of each other's fields of expertise, batted ideas back and forth like badminton shuttlecocks, and finished each other's sentences. He was almost constantly in motion: jiggling his leg, pacing, tapping a pen. It made me feel uncannily calm, and I wasn't usually one to sit still. We had a few beers. Somewhere along the way, he dumped his backpack out, rifled through the mess, and withdrew his planning calendar.

The pile from the backpack was an interesting assortment of things: tins of charcoals and pastels, pencils of different sizes, crumpled papers, an orange, several sketch pads, an iPod, headphones, tubes of acrylics, a six-inch wooden manikin, and a notebook computer.

The whole thing reminded me of Mary Poppins's carpetbag. "If I stuck my arm in your backpack, would I pull up a hat rack?"

He didn't bat an eye. "No, but you might get a floor lamp."

Michael used the computer to make notes and write an outline of our plan. His fingers flew over the keyboard. When I tried to think, my eyes were drawn to his hands, and thoughts of architecture were replaced with thoughts of what those hands would feel like... I had to get up and move around the room in order to speak coherent sentences.

Eventually, my stomach pointed out that I hadn't eaten yet by growling loud enough to be heard in New Jersey. Michael stopped typing and tilted his head to listen.

"Sorry," I said. "Snack time?"

"Good idea." He closed the laptop, set it off to the side, and stretched his arms toward the ceiling. My mouth watered when his stretch exposed a strip of skin at the bottom of his shirt. I turned rapidly toward the fridge and stuck my head in, hoping the cold would wash all the way to my cock.

"Do you feel like veggies and dip, or chips and salsa?" I yelled from the bowels of my Amana.

"Definitely chips and salsa." His voice sounded from right next to me, and I nearly gave myself a concussion when I jumped. My scowl was lost on him; he only grinned at me when I straightened up. I handed him the salsa, and he poured it in a bowl while I dumped the chips into a basket. We each grabbed another beer and returned to the table, sitting at the far end away from the mass of papers strewn about. Michael turned his chair to face out toward the deck. Our conversation turned from our project to other topics.

I discovered, among other things, that he was originally from western Pennsylvania, had two sisters and a brother, graduated from my alma mater—Penn State—with a major in art education and a minor in graphic design, and at twenty-six, was six years younger than me. He learned that I was born not far from right here, my mother died when I was ten, my favorite thing to do was design buildings and landscapes, and gardening was a stress-relieving hobby.

I was just about to ask him about the kind of music he liked when I noticed a glob of salsa at the corner of his mouth. "You've got some, um, salsa, there." I tried to point without pointing, to, you know, be polite.

"Where?" He rubbed at the wrong side of his mouth.

"No, the other side."

He wiped a spot on his cheek. "Did I get it?"

"Here," I said and scooped the offending sauce off with my thumb, which somehow then ended up in his mouth.

I watched with fascination as he sucked gently, pulling the digit in, swirling his tongue around it, his eyes closed as if this were the best thing he'd ever tasted. My other fingers rested on his face, feeling the suction through his cheek. He pulled back and opened his eyes; I got lost in them for a minute. When I moved my hand to the back of his neck and drew him to me, he gave no resistance. Our lips met, flavored with salt and salsa. We shared a series of little kisses, tasting each other gently.

He had turned his chair around, and we sat facing each other. His hands rested on my biceps, and my hands slid to his chest—where they noticed that Michael did have more interesting piercings.

The soft little kisses grew stronger. The more I had, the more I wanted.

Without moving his lips away, Michael said, "I've wanted to kiss you since I met you."

"So kiss me," I mumbled back.

I caught his tongue with mine and sucked on it, a hopeful foreshadowing of events to follow. He pulled on my bottom lip with his teeth. The frenzy meter ratcheted up, our lips and tongues exploring, probing, claiming. I felt his hand in my hair, and my own hand twisted his shirt. Breathing became a secondary need, behind tasting. When air proved to be necessary, we slid back into short, small kisses. It didn't take long for me to feel refreshed, and I plunged back into kissing him deeply, rolling my tongue across and under his teeth. He groaned when I held his face between my palms and bit lightly at his lips. He tried to take back control, but I couldn't get enough of tasting him.

His tug on my hair pulled me away enough to look in his eyes. "Dylan," he whispered.

"Shh," I said. "A moment." We were still, just breathing, and I could feel the reverberation of each kiss.

He gave me that moment; then he leaned back. "Wow." His hands slipped away from my shoulders as he stood up. He walked to the sliding glass door and leaned against the jamb, staring out across the hills. This did not seem like a good sign to me. I didn't know if I should follow or back away. I opted for the middle road, stood up but stayed near my chair. He turned toward me.

"I...that was..." He shook his head. "I've never been kissed like that."

"That makes two of us. Why are you over there?"

He looked out the window again. "I'm overwhelmed. This wasn't what I expected."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Neither. Both. I'm not sure." He crossed the room to where his belongings were piled. "I have to go... I need to think."

"Michael, no. I want you to stay." This time I did follow him, stopping just within reach. He threw his things into the backpack. I grabbed his hands to hold them still. "Listen. I maybe didn't do this right. I moved too fast." He stared up at me, waiting. "I like you, and I don't want to screw this up." I thought about the different men I'd been with and how everything with them happened so fast because there was so little time for it. I realized I was walking new ground, here. "I'm sorry I scared you."

He clenched my hands. "No...don't...I think I scared myself. You remember I told you about the relationship I'd been in?"

I nodded.

“When I left, I promised myself that I would not jump into another one. I can't do things part way.” He let go of me, and his pacing emphasized the words he spoke quietly. “Tim—my ex—and I, we were together almost a year, and I completely misread him. I was so excited about our being together—I was looking at houses and furniture, but he was looking at other men. Our arguments left me realizing that I expected too much—made too many big plans. Tim said some cruel things to me, but he made me think about not only ours, but other relationships I'd been in. I leap too quickly. I can't trust myself.” He stopped moving, shrugged, and gave a little unhappy laugh. “My mom used to tell me I was too passionate about, well, everything. My brother used to tell me I was a nervous breakdown waiting to happen.”

He suddenly looked so very young. I felt like a lecher. I wanted to rewind back to where we were building a friendship. Before I could say anything, he continued.

“I thought I'd learned my lesson, but you were so unexpected. And it threw me.”

I've been called a lot of things, but “unexpected” was a new one. “I'm not sure I'm following you.”

His pacing brought him to the opposite side of the table. He leaned on it. “I never expected that I would find anyone like you in this place. You're smart. Funny. Kind. Gorgeous. I've been thinking about that kiss for so long, I was sure the reality would never live up to the fantasy. I was wrong. It was better.”

I stood speechless. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I replayed his words in my head a few times so I wouldn't forget them.

A sigh came from deep in his chest as he shoved his belongings into his bag. “It scares the shit out of me.” He zipped up the backpack and headed to the front door.

I tried to shake off the fog that was swirling around my head and stopped him with my hand on his arm. “Wait. Can't we work through this together?”

“I just need a little time. I don't want to go into anything blinded by my fantasies. And I don't want to ruin something with exploding baggage before it begins.” A look of fear passed over his face. “Oh, God, have I ruined it already?”

I was too flummoxed to answer anything with conviction. “No, no, you haven't ruined it. I think we both have baggage we need to unpack.”

Michael gave me a shaky smile and reached up to kiss me on the cheek. As he opened the door and stepped out, he said, “I will call you. I know that sounds stupid, but I promise I will.”

Before I could think of anything else to say, he was gone.

Chapter Four

I spent the rest of the weekend laboring in my yard. I weeded flowerbeds, pinched dead-heads off the annuals, fertilized the perennials. When that didn't satisfy my urge to evade my feelings, I decided to dig out the section in back of the house where I wanted to install a pond. By Sunday night I was filthy and sore enough that after a soak in the hot tub, I slept like the dead.

There was enough going on at work, as usual, that I immersed myself completely. I itched to call Michael, but respected his need for time and space. This made me a little crabby. I didn't offer the reason for my testy attitude, and everybody rolled with it in their own way. Sandy huffed at me when I declined ice cream, but forgave me by bringing in a loaf of her famous banana bread. Betsy cast me penetrating glances from time to time, brought me coffee and reminded me of appointments, and took care of the irritating calls and paperwork. When I snapped at her, she just stared at me until I apologized. Jeff seemed to stop in frequently with questions about the jobs he was working. When we reviewed the floor plans for the theater, I thought he might be brushing up against me more than usual.

He decided I needed a field trip, so we drove out to the MacGregor property to check on the progress of the construction. Well, it was mostly de-construction at this point. The old, abandoned structures were now nothing but a bit of rubble. The land-moving equipment was ready to take over. This was an expansive piece of property, and I sincerely hoped Quentin's theater would be a rousing success. If so, it could generate a lot more revenue for the town.

I really warmed up to that idea, and Jeff and I animatedly discussed the possibilities of an entire complex devoted to the arts. We walked up over a rise, and I almost fell into a gaping crater.

"Holy shit!" I yelled as Jeff grabbed my arm and hauled me back. "Did a meteor land here?"

"Good Lord, settle down. It's MacGregor's Marsh." He gestured widely across the open space.

"Okay." I breathed. "If this is the marsh, where's the...marshy stuff?"

He laughed and patted me on the back. Like that was going to restore the year I'd just taken off my life. "It's been drying the last year or so. I've kept an eye on it since Quentin starting making noises about building here. We'll use it for the backfill, and by the time the project is done, it will make a lovely spot for a courtyard, tables and chairs, wine and cheese before and after the show."

I nodded, looking down into the muck and water still covering the bottom of the hole, feeling my pulse return to normal, even as I imagined ladies in evening gowns sipping wine and

slowly sinking into the earth. Jeff took my elbow and steered me gently back to the car.

Friday afternoon arrived, and I had planned an elaborate evening for myself, centered on and around the couch of temptation: put on my softest sweats, order pizza, drink beer, watch *Con Air*, followed by *Armageddon* or maybe *Independence Day*, and fall asleep surrounded by pizza cardboard and beer glass. My conniving staff, however, had other plans and dragged me to Villa Italiana, where I was forced to enjoy a meal of chicken marsala, accompanied by a disgustingly refreshing pinot grigio, followed by a trip to Raven Pass Retro Cinema to snicker along with the witty banter of Nick and Nora as they solved the case of *The Thin Man*. Afterward, as I savored the cherries-and-cream ice cream at Ricky's, I had to admit I'd enjoyed myself. That night, I rolled into bed and slept peacefully for the first time in almost a week.

Saturday was sunny but humid, with rain on the way, and I worked hard to shape the pond I'd shoveled out last weekend. I got the tarp down and anchored before dark and hoped it would hold the soil in place. I woke up Sunday to the deluge, registering a small prayer of thanks that I had a roof over my head, a well-stocked kitchen, and nowhere else to be.

I burrowed under the covers, greedy for a little more sleep, but my thoughts turned to Michael instead. I especially enjoyed remembering the kisses we had shared. After a moment of that, though, I felt a wave of anger. I hadn't heard from him yet. He said he would call. Promised. I berated myself because I knew better than to put much stock in promises. On top of which we hadn't finalized the plans for the Young Architects' Club. I felt invested enough in that project that I wanted to see it through.

My frustration grew as I thought about my own inability to handle a normal relationship. Then I realized that maybe I didn't know what normal was. I hated being part of the problem. I much preferred blaming it on someone else. Clearly, I had issues. The wave turned into a tsunami, figuratively and metaphorically, and since I couldn't dig up the backyard at the moment, I retreated to the kitchen. Serious baking was a good second to serious digging.

When I finished banging around the pots and pans, another, more musical sound surfaced. It took me a minute to identify the Ride of the Valkyries. If my cell phone hadn't been set to vibrate as well as ring, I might never have figured out that my ringtone had been changed. I'd wondered what Jeff had been doing while we waited for our ice cream.

I stalked over to the phone, yanked it off the charger. "Hello," I growled.

There was a second of empty air, then, "Dylan?"

Against my will, my righteous umbrage deflated at the sound of Michael's voice. "Michael." The growl became a purr.

"Hi. Are you all right? Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"I'm fine. I was just in the middle of..." A hissy fit? A pot-swinging rampage? A flour-butter-sugar blitzkrieg into my arteries? "...loads of laundry." Sheesh. "Not a bad time at all."

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

“I told you I would call...” Pregnant pause.

“You did.” Yes, and I reminded myself to never again accept a promise without a due date attached.

He drew a deep breath. “Could you come over for dinner tonight?”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah. Dinner. Around six thirty, seven?”

This could be an I-want-to-be-with-you-let's-talk-it-over dinner. Or it could be an I-can't-do-this-let's-be-friends dinner. I was pretty sure it wasn't a get-the-hell-out-of-my-life dinner, because, really, why bother? Then I remembered what he'd said at the café.

“I thought you weren't crazy about cooking?”

“Who said I was cooking?”

“You said dinner. I guess I assumed that dinner involves cooking.”

“Dinner involves food. Cooking is secondary.”

“True. Will you be feeding me raw vegetables and ice cream?”

“You'll have to come over here to find out.”

As much as I harbored doubt, as much as I ached over promises broken, as much as I felt my skin growing thinner, I said yes.

Chapter Five

Willow Street ran along the border of the county park, where the little bungalows each sat on a generous lot fronted by a tree-lined easement. Michael's house was at the end of the street, set back from the turnaround, where it enjoyed exposure to the park from the back and the side.

I pulled into his driveway at six forty-five, took a few deep breaths, and dashed through the rain to the front porch. He opened the door before I had a chance to ring the bell.

I shook off the water as best I could and stepped in. The entryway opened right into the great room, which looked out to the parkland through large windows. The kitchen and dining area were visible from the entry. A hallway off to the left suggested a short trip to the bedrooms. The furniture was absolutely comfortable-looking, and even though Michael hadn't been in Raven Pass very long, the home felt lived-in. The smell of meat cooking wafted through the air; I sniffed appreciatively.

"Not veggies and ice cream, then?"

Michael smiled. "There are veggies in the stew, thank you. Ice cream's for dessert. Come on in."

I toed off my shoes and followed him in to the kitchen.

"Beer? Wine? Soda? Other?" he asked.

"Beer is good." I took the proffered bottle and made an encompassing gesture. "You have a beautiful home. It looks like you've lived here forever, none of that awkward, new-house atmosphere."

"Thanks. It belongs to Elliot Fielding, the teacher I'm replacing at Roswell Burns."

"Really?"

"He moved south, but hated to give up his northern home just yet. I'm renting it. A lot of this furniture is his. Want the nickel tour?"

"Sure."

He spread his arms out and turned in a circle. "Kitchen. Dining. Living." He pointed to an archway off the kitchen. "Laundry. Mudroom. Garage." We walked through the great room to the hallway I noticed when I came in. He gestured to a bathroom on the right. "For company," he said. We continued on through a doorway at the end of the hall, and I saw that we were in the master bedroom, with a well-appointed bathroom and a walk-in closet adjoining. "Self-explanatory," he said and walked back out again. I suppressed my disappointment that he didn't suggest we stay there to work things out, and trudged along.

Michael stopped in front of another door on the hallway, his hand on the knob. "I don't show this to many people." It seemed like he was going to say more, but he didn't; instead, he

opened the door and stepped off to the side. I walked in, took three steps and halted in my tracks. This was a large, airy room, situated so that it stuck out from the house on three sides. The windows started about three feet from the floor and ended a foot from the ceiling, on all three walls. A stone fireplace with a wide wooden mantel and a shale hearth broke the flow of the center wall. Skylights opened the slanted roof to the sky, and even the curtain of rain couldn't really darken the room. It was an amazing space, and the sense of being in a forest clearing was remarkable. You could see nothing but the trees of the parkland out those windows.

The wall abutting the house boasted cabinets and a long counter with a deep double sink. Tools of the artist's trade littered the countertop in various states of array. The floor was hardwood, but most of it was covered with overlapping canvas drop cloths. Stretched canvases, unused, filled one corner. A few completed paintings leaned comfortably against the walls. I stepped closer to inspect them, stopping when I remembered my manners.

"May I?" I asked him.

He nodded and perched on a stool by the sink. I hadn't really thought about Michael as an "artist." I knew it was the subject he taught; he had to be good at it to be working at Roswell Burns. His hands were stereotypical of an artist: strong, with long graceful fingers. I had been so caught up in my attraction to him, then in our excitement about the Young Architects' Club, and finally in my angst, that I hadn't been able to think about him in other terms. His work was completely new to me as I looked at it without any preconceptions.

The first painting was a surreal landscape, creating a sense of warring factions coming to a truce.

"Take a few steps back," Michael advised me.

Keeping my eyes on the painting, I did as he asked. As I moved, there emerged from the landscape two faces, a man and a woman. It was an optical illusion of sorts—look at the painting one way, see the land, look at it another way, see the people. There was something familiar about them. I glanced at Michael, ready to ask a question, when I saw it. "You look like them," I said.

"I hope so." He laughed. "They're my parents."

"This is amazing. How did you work them into the landscape like that?"

"Trade secret. Not telling. Besides, how do you know I didn't work the landscape into their portrait?" He teased me.

"Hmm...maybe. I take it there is some significance to the combination?"

"Yeah. My dad is from Scotland. Mom's parents were from the central region of Italy, where the Apennine Mountains are at their wildest. So the landscape shows their ties to the earth of their ancestors. Their faces are as I knew them growing up." He lifted himself off the

stool and stood beside me in front of the painting. "I plan on giving this to them for Christmas. Just have the frame to do."

I was speechless, so I just nodded and moved on to the two paintings sitting side by side nearest the fireplace. Michael walked with me, but stayed quiet to let me study.

The pictures seemed to be a pair, or maybe pieces from a series. The centerpiece of the first one was a dragon, beautiful in its rage. A bloody wound gaped in its chest. In the lower right corner, a knight in gray armor stood poised to throw a long spear tipped by a serrated edge.

In the other painting the dragon lay, clearly defeated, the spear standing out from its neck. The knight's helmet lay near his feet, his shield nothing but splinters on the ground. He reached for the sword embedded in the dragon's side, but his head was turned as he caught sight of the vision descending from above. A terrible and beautiful woman on horseback hovered over the dragon and glared down at the knight. One strong arm held a spear, which pointed at the knight in accusation, and in the palm of her other hand, an orb of light blazed.

I imagined that a third picture would show the knight splattered across the canvas.

The detail was incredible. The more I looked the more I saw. The colors vibrated, except where darkness nearly sucked the color out.

"Oh, Michael," I breathed. "More. This is a story, isn't it?"

He seemed to study me a minute, then his face broke into the smile I remembered. "Yes. It is a story. These are just a piece of it. They're the rejects from a series I'm going to have on exhibit..."

"Rejects? Good Lord, how are they rejects?"

"They're almost duplicates of other paintings in the group. The differences are very subtle, and my agent felt that they unnecessarily cluttered up the chronology. So we left them out."

I continued to gush over them, as well as the few other paintings he had here. As I completed the circuit of the room, my eyes fell on a canvas almost tucked in the corner. It seemed to bear no resemblance to anything else he'd done, as it was almost completely dark.

"Don't mind that one—it's trash."

"What is it?" I asked, one second before I realized that it was a portrait that had been splashed with black paint. I could just make out the tops of two heads, one light, one dark.

"Satisfaction," he responded.

I looked at him curiously, then the light bulb went on. "Oh," I whispered. "Your former..."

"Yes." He turned me toward the door. The canvas on the easel, the painting he was currently working on, stopped me in my tracks. It was a modern-looking angel, with lovely muscles, covered only by a tight pair of jeans. I would have said they looked painted on, but, well, they were. Although the background was empty yet, he seemed to be leaning in a door-

way, one arm extended in invitation, the other hand tucked in his front pocket. The sexiest angel I'd ever seen. The wings were white, with enough blue to make them seem translucent; they were not completely unfurled, giving a casual appearance, if wings could be said to be casual. His hair was almost finished, billowing softly around his head. It was light brown near his scalp, transitioning to a golden color at the ends. Blue eyes peeked out from hooded lids, and the soft lips, the bottom one plumper than the top, invited attention. There was something familiar about him.

"Whoa." I closed my eyes, counted to five, looked again. "Michael. Is that...?" I couldn't even bring myself to ask.

He gave a little half-snort, half-laugh. Looked down at his suddenly interesting toes. Looked up at me through his eyelashes. "Yeah. It's you." It came out on a sigh, as if I'd forced him to tell me his deepest secret.

"I...um...Jesus. Michael. I don't... This isn't... Huh." Usually I only spoke like that when all the blood had shifted from my head to lower regions. This time, though, the blood was rushing to the surface of my skin.

"This is. You do. Look like that, I mean." He spoke the same language.

I shook my head.

"Yes." He nodded emphatically. "Okay, maybe the wings are an exaggeration. But when I look at you, Dylan, when I think of you, this is the man I see. This idea came into my head, and I knew I wouldn't be able to stop it until I got it out on canvas. All week I've worked on this. When I sketched it out, I tried to put you in different poses. You know, arms crossed, or braced on the doorjamb over your head. Floating, sitting, sprawling. I tried other emotions too. Tempting. Threatening. Pleading. But this is the one I kept coming back to. Where your feet are firmly planted, and you're inviting me into your world."

I swear I'm not a guy who cries, but I couldn't stop the tears that sprang into my eyes. When I tried to wipe them away with my sleeve, he stopped me with one hand on my arm. He cradled my face with his other hand, bringing us close enough so that he could kiss the tears away.

"I feel like I've walked through a portal into a new reality," he said, pulling away enough to rest his hands on my shoulders and look at me directly. "And I realize that if I fight it, I'm closing myself off. I might keep myself from getting hurt, but I'd also be keeping myself from the experiences of body and mind that give life to my art and make me happy. I don't want to be that guy. I want to accept and work with whatever life is throwing at me. So, Dylan Forest, I apologize for letting fear and bitterness get in the way. I apologize for any hurt I've caused you, and I'd like to make it up to you, starting this evening."

He hugged me to him, and my arms went around him without any prodding from my brain. My lips happened to rest near his ear. "I don't know what to say. I owe you an apology too. I wanted to take things slowly, and I..."

"No, it's okay. We're okay." We stood there for a minute or two, holding on to each other. His hands rubbed small circles on my back, and his breath hit my neck. I pressed him closer to me and licked the rim of his ear. I felt him tremble a little and did it again. His grip tightened on my shoulder blades. His cock pushed hard against my thigh, and my cock strained against the confinement of my jeans.

"So, um, how did you plan on making it up to me?" I whispered in his ear.

Stepping away, smiling slyly, he took my hand and pulled me out of the studio and to the bedroom. Ever the gracious guest, I followed willingly. Never releasing my hand, he turned on a couple of dim lamps. He pulled me to sit next to him on the bed and again kissed my eyes, then moved on to my temples, my cheekbones, my jaw. When his lips finally landed on mine, I was ready to devour him. My tongue circled his, traced the edges of his teeth, and caressed the roof of his mouth. He nibbled on my lips, drawing them to chase after him. When he couldn't plunge any deeper or press any harder, he moved on to my neck, kissing and licking. He found the spot behind my ear that made me squirm, and I could feel his smile against my skin as his hands moved up under my shirt. He bit lightly on that spot again; his hands followed the shiver down my spine.

Michael grabbed the bottom of my T-shirt, pulled it up over my head, and tossed it away. Before I could act in kind, he was kissing my collarbones and tugging on my nipples, effectively short-circuiting my actions. Panting, I felt a low moan work its way up my throat. I clutched his waist, reached the button on his jeans, and managed to open it.

"Wait," he murmured, back at my mouth. "This is for you." He popped open my fly and pushed me back a little so he could lower the zipper, which he did carefully. Sliding his hands back and forth around my waist, he prodded me to lift my hips. He loosened my jeans and briefs and drew them down, careful to keep my now-weeping cock from bending with the clothing. Slowly, oh so slowly, he sank to his knees.

His tongue traced a trail from my chest to my navel, and I descended into helplessness as he bit gently on the skin of my abdomen in a rough semi-circle above my cock. I moaned; maybe I said his name. My pants pooled on the floor, and my legs, with no direction from me, spread wide.

Michael's strong hands grabbed my thighs at the same time his sweet mouth closed over my cock.

"God! Michael!"

"Hmmm?" he hummed. I couldn't keep my hands from his head, but I tried very hard not to push his face into my crotch.

He circled his tongue around the crown of my prick, spreading the moisture, then pulled it farther into his mouth, sucking, licking, sucking. I stared down at the top of his head, his beautiful hair covering and falling around his neck as his head bobbed up and down. The heat and friction from his mouth made my prick swell up more. With a speed that would put a striking rattlesnake to shame, he covered my entire length in one fell swoop, letting the tip of it touch the back of his throat. I groaned. Loudly. Before my neurons fired the command to explode, he slid up and off and licked my balls. I moaned. Loudly. He looked up at me and smiled wickedly as he licked.

"Fucker," I whispered.

He nodded. As he mouthed my balls, he brought one hand around to grasp my cock.

My hips began to thrust in time with his pumping. "Yes," I hissed. "Feels so good."

His hand dropped away, and I dropped away from the edge he'd brought me to. I might have growled then. His tongue danced up and down the shaft, periodically circling the head, pressing on the sweet spot just below the crown. "Please." I rasped. He kept on with his steady pace, oblivious to my plea. I could see his arm moving down below.

I glanced up, to see a mirror on the wall directly behind him. I watched his body undulate as he knelt before me. I was mesmerized by what I couldn't see: my cock in his mouth, his hand on his own prick. I supported myself on one hand and watched in the mirror as his head sank down and pulled up, his arm pumped between his legs...and I brought my other hand up to my own nipple and pulled on it, looked at my face flushed and eyes bright with excitement, my hair tousled. "Holy fuck!" Maybe I did look a little like that angel.

Michael plunged his mouth down over my cock again, and this time, when the tip reached his throat, he swallowed. The action squeezed me, the gentleness of it a direct contrast to the firm grip his lips had at the base of my cock.

"Gonna come," I warned him. I felt the explosion work its way from the base of my spine, up into my prostate. He swallowed again, and the heat shot out of my prick and down his throat, spasm after spasm. He pulled back a little so he could breathe, and at that moment, his moan reverberated around me as he poured his own climax into his hand.

He kept his mouth on me until my shudders stopped. I slithered down to the floor, leaned into him, and brought his cum-covered hand to my mouth. I wanted to taste him, so I licked him clean.

"Dylan..." His voice was a caress. "That is so hot."

I kissed his palm, and we smiled at each other. Before the moment could become any more tender, his stomach produced a drawn-out growl. We dissolved into laughter and helped

each other up. He zipped his jeans. I pulled mine up and located my shirt.

"That was amazing, Michael. Thank you." I wrapped my arms around his waist.

"So, do you think you can accept my apology?" He draped his arms over my shoulders.

"If I accept, does it mean I get more like this?"

"I think that can be arranged."

"Do I get to do this?" I kissed him, circling his tongue with mine.

"Frequently."

"Will there be other benefits as well?"

"I expect there will be a lot of them."

"Then I accept your apology, Michael Gilmore."

"I'm ever so grateful, Dylan Forest."

Chapter Six

We cleaned up and sauntered into the kitchen, where the stew was keeping warm in a slow cooker. Michael explained that while he didn't care to cook much, there were a few things he'd learned from his mother; the savory beef stew was one of them. Along with fresh bread, it made a very satisfactory meal. We ate and talked and talked and ate. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so completely at ease with my surroundings and myself.

We shared more ideas for the Young Architects' Club. Michael promised to have the formal plans typed up by August first, ready for presentation to the principal.

We traded some of our life stories. I gave him a brief history, including some college highlights, my first boyfriend and our evolution from bad blood to friendship, and the friends who still mattered in my life. I talked about my job in New York and the move to Raven Pass. I even told him my ice-cream-guy theory and how that may have affected our rocky start. He enjoyed the analogy and kissed me before I could apologize again. Michael shared a little more of his artistic background. His mother was a sculptor, and her father had been a master craftsman, his furniture winning awards and filling the homes of Italy's finest. Michael had had the good fortune to attend a magnet school for the arts at an early age. As he spoke, something niggled in the back of my mind. I worried over it until he sensed that he'd lost my focus.

"Something wrong, Dylan?"

"No. Yes. Wait." I held up a hand. "I'm thinking. And before you burst out with any smart-ass remarks, give me a chance." He shrugged and took the dishes to the sink. His motion jogged my memory. "Did you tell me earlier that your work was being shown somewhere?"

"I might have mentioned it when you were looking at the dragon." I watched him expectantly. "What?"

"So... give me the scoop. When artists have shows, there's usually a clamorous blaring of trumpets, and newsboys hawk special editions."

He rejoined me at the table with fresh beers. "Well, when I first found out, there were trumpets. You might have been occupied elsewhere. Digging holes or something." His eyes glittered as he nonchalantly sipped his brew. When I didn't take the bait, he went on. "That's why I don't have many pieces sitting in my studio at the moment. My agent got me my first big show: a piggyback at the Lampeer Gallery."

I just blinked at him.

"That's in Philadelphia."

"I know where it is. What does 'piggyback' mean?" Although I thought I already knew.

"It means that a lesser-known artist gets the opportunity to exhibit alongside a more celebrated one. It gives the unknown exposure to people who might not otherwise come to a show of just his own work, and it provides a little variety for the crowd already familiar with the better-known artist. In my case, there will actually be two of us piggybacking on the coattails of the star."

"And when does the show take place?" Oh, it was too weird. Too creepy. Too synchronous.

"As a matter of fact, the show opens this Saturday, the twenty-sixth."

The color must have drained from my face, because Michael was leaning toward me, his hand on my forearm. "Dylan, what's the matter? Are you okay?"

I shook the cobwebs of coincidence from my brain and took a long drag from the bottle. "Yes. Fine. Just. Strange."

"Huh?"

"Can we sit on the couch or something?" I asked, feeling the need for something soft beneath me. We moved to the great room and sank into the comfort of the sofa. "Mmm, nice." I was not the only owner of a couch of temptation.

"Okay. Spill." Clearly Michael was not going to give me time to luxuriate.

"Remember when I told you about college, and the guy—the artist—I thought I was in love with until I got back from Rome."

He scowled a little. "Yeah..."

"Um, is the artist you're piggybacking Ian Gallagher?"

I could see the light go on above his head. "You have got to be kidding me."

"No, I'm not."

"Shit." He jumped up from the couch and began pacing. "I'm exhibiting with your former lover, who completely betrayed you and is now your good friend?"

Man, did that sound like a soap. "There's more." I hated to do it, but it couldn't be helped.

He stopped to look at me. "What? More?"

I nodded. "Ian's coming to town on Wednesday for a visit."

"Fucking rat farts."

I might have laughed if Michael wasn't clenching his fists so tightly and staring at me like I killed his cat. "Wait. Just wait. Breathe."

He visibly drew in air and let it out in a long huff.

"Come back to me." I held out my hand. He returned to the couch. "Okay, I'm okay." I thought he was trying to convince himself.

"Look," I began rather sternly, "Ian called me a month ago. I don't know why he asked to visit here before the show. It threw me for a loop, but I decided to just deal with whatever it is

when the time rolls around.” And it was definitely rolling now. “He’s arriving Wednesday; then he leaves Friday morning for the city. His time here will be brief.”

I slung my arm over Michael’s shoulder. He didn’t pull away, which I took as a good sign. I could feel him trembling, though. “Now listen to me, Michael Gilmore. Just this very evening, I accepted your apology and gave you mine. I did it with complete sincerity, and I am looking forward to the many happy consequences of it. I am not interested in sharing such consequences with anyone else! You”—I emphasized the word—“have my focus. Completely.”

He threw his arms around me, and we pulled close together. I held on tight and breathed in the scent of him. We stayed like that, holding each other, listening to the rain, our breaths gradually falling in sync, lulling us into a doze.

The clap of thunder jolted both of us upright.

“Shit!”

“Holy crap!”

We fell back against the couch and laughed until tears streamed down our faces. My stomach hurt—obviously not doing enough crunches at the gym.

“Dylan?”

“Huh?”

“Are you staying the night?”

“Are you asking me to?”

“Well, we haven’t had our ice cream yet.”

“Then I’d better stay.”

Our lips met in a soft and sensual kiss. I ran my fingers through his hair. He traced circles on my biceps. He threw one leg over my lap, and I pressed my hand to his chest. We tasted the traces of salt left by our laughing tears, and our lips brushed tenderly.

A brilliant flash of lightning accompanied another peal of thunder.

“I think we should make sure everything is closed up tight and move this to the bedroom,” Michael said.

“Good thinking.” I kissed him one more time. Then once again. He pulled away and dragged me off the couch with him. I kept one arm around him as he traced a path through the house—I thought he must have a routine he followed to feel safe and secure each night. Assured that the doors were locked and lights were off, we moseyed into the bedroom.

We split up at the bed so we could jointly pull down the comforter. Dropping it at the foot of the bed, we turned to each other. I reached for his shirt, and he raised his arms in invitation. I drew it up over his head and off. I almost came in my pants when I finally saw his chest. Two shiny silver rings glittered there, one in each nipple, standing out proudly on his smooth chest.

"Oh," I said. I gripped and twisted his shirt in my fists to keep myself from grabbing them.

"You like?"

"Oh," I said again.

"Dylan?"

"Yes. I've never... Can I touch?"

"Please. Touch."

I dropped his shirt and reached a tentative hand to the ring on his left. Traced the circle with my index finger. He inhaled quickly, as if surprised. I tugged on it, just a little, and the nipple scrunched into a hard tip. I knew about the connection between one's nipples and one's cock. I hadn't realized there might be a connection between someone else's nipples and one's own cock. Mine expanded as much as possible in its confines. I lifted my left hand to the other sensitive nub and watched in fascination as it immediately sprang to attention with just the brush of my thumb. Michael gave me a little moan, the good kind, and I tugged on the rings a bit harder. He grunted, drawing my gaze up to see his head drop back. The long line of his neck was beautiful, but I couldn't tear myself away from those silver circlets to kiss it. Willing to experiment now, I grasped both rings and twisted. Not too much—I didn't know what the limits were yet.

The results were extremely satisfying, as Michael groaned and squirmed and groaned again. "Oh, God!"

As if to punctuate his expression, another peal of thunder echoed outside, and rain pelted against the window.

At some point he had wrapped his fingers through my belt loops, and now he pushed his hips in closer, the bulge in his jeans pressing against my thigh. I looked into his eyes for the first time since the nipple rings appeared. The heat that bounced between us was palpable. I pushed Michael onto the bed, and he scrambled to lie on his back in the middle as I pounced.

I tugged on one of his nipple rings with my teeth. He reached over his head to grab the spindles in the headboard, which caused his back to arch in an extremely provocative way, which I liked very much. I played there for a while, alternately tugging and licking. I found that when I licked around the areole, Michael's muscles relaxed. When I tongued the very tip of his nipple, he smiled and gasped. I bit gently, behind where the ring was embedded, and he firmed his grip on the headboard and made little humming noises in his throat. I repeated my ministrations on the other nipple, wanting to treat them equally. His happy sigh when I switched sides confirmed my decision. All the while our hips pulsated in a slow dance, rubbing against the layers of cloth between us, the friction creating increasingly pleasurable sensations.

When I felt that both nipples had received equal amounts of lip service, I pushed up and rolled off the bed. "Hey," Michael muttered, his heavy eyelids blinking at me.

I pulled off my shirt and tossed it across the room. "It's getting a little warm in here, don't you think?"

"Mmm, yeah," he replied. "You're right." He fumbled for the zipper of his jeans.

I batted at his hands. "I've got it. You don't have to do a thing."

He let his arms fall back to either side of his head. "Have at it."

I managed to unzip him without damaging any body parts and shimmied the jeans and underwear down his hips and off his legs. It was my first good look at him naked, and he was a living work of art. Chestnut hair fanned across the pillow in an attractively disheveled way. His eyelids rested seductively at half-mast under gently arched brows. He'd been biting his lower lip, so it was more swollen than the top, giving him a charming, pouty look. His lightly sculpted body lay relaxed on the rumpled sheets, but his cock was hard against his groin. I ran one finger lightly up the length, and he squirmed a little, bending one knee to open himself for me.

He was a smorgasbord, and I had an open invitation to dine at my leisure. Where to begin?

"Dylan?" Michael's voice called me back from my wonderings.

"Huh?" Being around Michael seemed to cause complete deterioration of my higher brain functions.

He gave a short laugh. "I'm feeling a little self-conscious here. You gonna join me?"

"Yeah, I think I might." When I stepped toward him, I realized I still had my jeans on. With a disgusted "oof," I got them off and tumbled back to the bed.

"Much better," Michael said as I situated myself half on, half off his body.

"Mmm," was all I could manage as I pressed my lips to his. He opened for me, our tongues dueling, lips stretching. His cock brushed my hip. The touch coursed through me like the lightning in the sky outside. He began to rub my shoulders, and some need in me surged forward so that I grasped his arms and moved them back by his head, holding them in place while I poured kisses across his jaw. I licked his neck, tasting a slight trace of salt. I traced the outer edge of his ear, which made him turn his head farther to the side even as his breath hitched.

He made a token effort to pull his hands from my grasp. When I only gripped his wrists tighter, he moaned and curled his fingers.

"Do you like it when I hold you down?" I whispered in his ear, then sucked on the earrings, tugging the lobe.

Michael's "yes" was like a purr. It kicked the current of my excitement up to a higher level. I kissed along his neck until I could feel his pulse with my lips, and then I bit him. He cried out,

stretching his neck even more in invitation. I worried the skin until I was sure I felt blood vessels breaking; then I lapped at what would be a bruise later. I couldn't recall the last time I'd given someone a hickey; I didn't know if I'd ever been so excited with a lover. Michael was intoxicating. The storm that swirled around us helped to drive my passion to new heights.

I guided his hands back to the headboard. "Keep your hands here." He wrapped his fingers around the spindles. Incredibly, my cock got harder. Before I rubbed it too much against him, I lifted and lowered myself so I could lap at his nipples. From there, I worked my way down his chest, zigzagged across his abdomen, traced circles around his navel, and licked at the soft spots above his hips. Michael squirmed in a most satisfying way, making little humming and grunting noises as accompaniment. I had never tasted sweeter flesh, nor heard lovelier sounds, until he yelped and rammed his foot into my thigh, causing me to jerk away and bite my tongue.

"Ouch!"

"Sorrysorrysorry." Michael reached for me, concern etched on his blushing face. "That tickled."

I rubbed my leg. "It's okay. Is my tongue bleeding?" I stuck the muscle in question out at him.

He leaned up on one arm and wrapped his other hand around my neck, pulling me closer in order to study my mouth. "No, I don't think so. Let me inspect." He gently licked at my tongue, then wrapped his lips around it and, in a matter of seconds, confirmed his original diagnosis.

My cock had lost some oomph during Michael's assault, but reasserted itself with his tender ministrations. I wrapped my fingers around his hard shaft. My thumb traced a circle around the velvety head, and Michael's breath stuttered. I nudged him, and he slid to his back once again.

Now that I had him in my hand, I left behind any thoughts of tickling. His cock was beautiful, perfectly sized and cut. The drop of precum there soothed my tongue as it circled around the head. I gently pumped my hand while I licked, and Michael responded with an increasing restlessness.

"Oh, God, Dylan." His pelvis lifted, but I pushed back with my arm, wanting to torment him a bit longer. I took him deeper into my mouth, pressing against his straining flesh with my tongue, embracing it with my lips. When I began sucking in earnest, Michael vibrated beneath me.

He moaned. "Jesus. That feels so good." One of his hands clutched at the sheets; the other was back at the headboard. I bobbed up and down, letting my saliva mix with his precum to smooth the way. I could feel his veins on my lips. At the top of one stroke, I twirled my tongue

around the top. "I'm close, Dylan, so close." I didn't want him to come yet, so I pulled away from his cock. I soothed his growl with a deep kiss that left both of us breathless.

"Condoms? Lube?" Complete sentences weren't all they were cracked up to be.

Michael rolled toward his left to open the nightstand drawer, and I rolled along with him, tasting the flesh of his shoulders. My hand found its way to his ass. I rubbed and squeezed and let my fingers glide gently along the crack. Michael had grown completely still. He had the strip of packets and battered tube in his hand, which rested on the open drawer. I traced a path up his back and down his arm, took the items from his hand, and leaned in to whisper in his ear, "Can I fuck you, Michael?"

He shivered and nodded. "Yes. Please."

"Move this way." I pushed and tugged until he was on his stomach, no longer hanging off the side of the bed. He eagerly spread his legs for me. With the cool gel on my fingers, I reached for the sensitive spot behind his balls and stroked up from there to his hole. The heat poured off his skin as I touched him. He thrust his ass up, as if begging for more, and I let one finger slide into him as he pushed.

"God, Dylan," he moaned. I circled my finger just inside his opening. "Fuck. Quit teasing!"

I nipped at the smooth skin of his ass, and when he jumped, I pushed a second finger in. He was so hot for it, for me. I rubbed his inner walls, enjoying the search for his prostate. A long, low moan spilled from Michael's lips as I found that sweet spot, and his hips rolled. More than a drop of precum leaked from my own cock, and it occurred to me that if I didn't fuck him soon, I'd spurt without having the pleasure.

I breathed hard. "You ready?"

"Please."

I had one free hand, with which I grabbed the condoms. I looked at them, looked at my fingers in Michael's ass, and decided to open the packet with my teeth. It might have worked flawlessly in romance novels, but when I did it, I got the taste of foil, latex, and lube—and I ripped the damn condom.

"Fuck!" I spit out the remnants. "Shit."

Michael grew still. "What's wrong?" Obviously, I'd stopped the little massage I was giving him, but since my hand was firmly attached to his butt, his position didn't change.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"Nothing's wrong. Just a little glitch. We'll get back to our regularly scheduled program in a second." I shoved the condoms at him. "Open one of these, will you?"

Propped on his elbows, he studied the little packets, including what was left of the one I'd torn, looked up at me, smirked, and then opened one. "Do you need help dressing?" He held

the condom out to me.

I took it gingerly. "I can manage, thanks. Are you snickering?" Michael's face was buried in the sheets. His shoulders started to shake. "Hey!" I pulled out of his asshole and slapped one round cheek.

He threw his head back and gasped. Then he laughed and looked slyly at me over his shoulder. I groused. He wiggled. I smacked his other cheek. Then, because they hung there so beautifully, I fingered his balls and gently squeezed them. He spread his knees farther apart and pushed his ass up at the same time.

"Fuck me now, Dylan."

I ran my hand over the red marks my hand had left on him. "Yes." The condom went on without drama. I added more lube and centered myself behind him. Bit by bit, I slid my cock into his tight channel. The heat I'd felt earlier from his skin was nothing compared to the inferno inside him. "So tight," I muttered. "So hot." Sweat beaded on his back, where the muscles undulated as he thrust against me. It only took a second until we were in sync, him pushing back as I lunged forward. It started slowly, our coming together. I leaned over him, weight on one arm as I wrapped the fingers of my other hand around his cock.

"Yeah. That's good."

The rough edge to his voice gave urgency to my thrusts, and soon we were rutting frantically. The orgasm building in my body seemed connected to how I pumped Michael's cock. Like lightning bolts shattering a night sky, my climax surged through me, and while I shot hard and heavy inside Michael, he pulsed his release over my hand. Our grunts and groans echoed the thunder outside.

We both collapsed. I pulled out, tossed the condom, and stretched like a lazy cat beside him. "That was incredible." I nuzzled his cheek. If I could have purred, I would have.

"Freakin' amazing." He smiled and blinked sleepily at me. I threw my arm over his back, and started to wrap one of my legs around his. "Hold on." He pushed at me until I rolled to my back; then he snuggled up next to me with his head on my shoulder. "Wet spot."

* * *

I woke up with Michael spooned in front of me, my arm over his waist, my feet tangled with his. As the fog of sleep lifted, I realized the rain had stopped, and I could faintly hear the songs and chirps of birds in the nearby woods. The curtains were closed, but a little sunlight managed to spear through the edges. I would have had to lift my head to see the clock, and I just couldn't bring myself to move. I grasped Michael's hand with mine and drifted back into a light sleep, more content than I'd been in...well, a very long time.

I dreamed of the band shell in the town center, an orchestra performing, fireworks shooting up from the riverbank. The Ride of the Valkyries blared in time with the rockets.

"What the hell is that?" Michael muttered.

"Huh?"

"That noise."

I listened. "Oh, that's my phone." We listened for another few seconds.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

"You expecting a call?"

"Pffft. It's just annoying." He still hadn't moved.

"Okay. I'll get it." But by then, it had stopped. "Or not." I shifted to my back, and Michael rolled with me, his arm landing over my stomach. My cock tented the sheet when I felt him nudge me. We both reached to stroke the other. Valkyries started up again. "Shit. What time is it?"

He lifted his head to locate the clock. "Eight thirty." He dropped his head back down on my chest. I reluctantly slid away, groaning my unhappiness, and followed the sound of my phone. It had somehow ended up on top of his dresser.

"Hello?" I plopped down on the edge of the bed and listened to Sandy's hysterical voice on the other end of the line. "Jesus. You're not serious! How did it...? I see." Michael sat up and rubbed his hand lightly over my back. "All right. Tell them I'm on my way."

"What's going on?" Michael asked as I closed the phone.

"The construction team found a body on the MacGregor site."

Chapter Seven

The brilliant sunlight served as an ironic backdrop to the serious group of people gathered on Quentin MacGregor's building site. As I approached them, Jeff, broke away and flung his arms around my neck, burying his face in my shoulder.

"God, Dylan. It's just awful!"

I patted his back and watched the sheriff approach. Eli Granger was about as far from the stereotypical small-town sheriff as you could get. Tall, trim, and handsome, maybe eight years older than me. Intelligent, too; he probably could have a more prestigious position in law enforcement anywhere. And maybe he had—he'd arrived here in Raven Pass just a couple years before me. Like many of us who made this little tourist town our home, he liked living here more than wherever he came from. He made it a point to know what was going on in his town, knew almost everyone by name. He had a reputation for being patient and fair and for not taking shit from anybody. The only people who called him "Sheriff Granger" were those who didn't know him. Those who knew him but were in trouble with him tended to use the title as well.

"Dylan."

"Eli. What happened here?"

He gave a brief nod toward Jeff. "Do you mind stepping aside with me?"

I gently pried Jeff's arms off me and suggested he go wait in my car. Eli and I walked slowly across the muddy ground toward the little crowd standing near the edge of the former marsh.

I didn't see the one figure I was sure would be among that crowd. "Where's Quentin?"

"On his way. He was up north. On business." When I didn't comment, he continued. "You got that a body was discovered here, right?"

"Yes, but that's about all I got. Sandy wasn't exactly coherent when she called."

"This hole in the ground used to be MacGregor's Marsh."

"I know. I was out here last week. There's not much marsh left."

"No. Not much. Between the work going on here, earth being moved from one place to another, and the heavy rains we had this weekend...well, things got shaken up a bit."

"What do you mean?"

He heaved a sigh. "It looks like the body's been here quite a while, maybe stuck under some roots or rocks that were disturbed enough to release it."

"How long is 'quite a while'?"

"Won't know till forensics examines the remains."

I just stared at him.

"Jesus, Dylan, it's bones and rags, mostly. It's been buried under mud and marsh."

I had drawn pictures in my mind of something entirely different from what he was describing. Maybe because the only dead people I'd ever seen were just recently dead, having arrived there in the usual ways. My thoughts were scattered, overloaded with all that was happening, but I wondered. "Was this an accident, Eli?"

Eli studied me for a minute. "I don't know. Not yet." He waited for that to sink in. "Dylan, do you think you could take a look at the body? I know it will be disturbing, but I've had everyone here look just in case they can identify something."

"You had Jeff look too?"

He nodded.

"No wonder he's green."

"Come this way."

At first, it looked like a pile of debris covered with mud. I was oddly transfixed. Soon, I started seeing identifiable shapes. Skeletal bones of a hand, a foot. The rounded top of a skull. Ribs. Things I thought were bits of cloth intertwined with twigs and leaves, all the same muddy brown. I walked around to look from a different angle. The bottom part of the jaw, lying atop the spine, was easier to see here. The sun reflected off the water drops and puddles, as well as bits of the remains, as the wet mud dripped and slid from its moorings. I was pretty sure the face of a watch peered up between the wrist bones. A glimmer of something resting on a collarbone caught my eye.

"What's this?" I asked Eli.

I'd watched enough crime scene procedurals on TV to know not to touch. He reached in with a pen and poked at it, lifting a length of gold chain. Hanging from it was a Celtic cross, unusual in that the arms of the cross were finished in intricate knots, and a heart filled the center space.

I'd only ever seen a pendant like that once before; it had been a gift from his parents. I felt the earth spinning beneath me, felt strong arms catch me before I hit the ground. Eli gripped my biceps.

"Dylan, what is it?"

The jolt as I shifted from objective observer to emotional stakeholder shook me bone deep. "I know him. You know him." I struggled to find the words.

"Who is it, Dylan? Who?"

"Oh, God, it's Jason Fairbanks."

* * *

My connection to Jason Fairbanks was a small but significant blip in the history of my romantic relationships. He was Quentin MacGregor's personal assistant at the time I designed Quentin's gallery-slash-bookstore. Jason and I quickly developed a mutual understanding, and while we didn't share any deep emotional attachment, the sex was exciting and satisfying. I was new in town, focusing on making a name for myself, he was young and trying to figure out his future; we were fuck buddies. Occasionally he would make noises about staying in Raven Pass, to see if our relationship might develop into something. I just let him talk. I was settling down, but he bounced all over the place. He was impulsive to a fault, doing everything from knocking on my door at midnight with pizza and beer in hand to jumping on his motorcycle and heading off to who knew where for the weekend. Jason was the one guy I'd gone out with who exceeded the ice cream analogy. He was more like an entire sundae, maybe a banana split. I'd cared for him, but I'd seen the writing on the wall, which is why I hadn't been terribly surprised when he disappeared.

I figured he'd finally decided to see the world, or take up mountaineering, or sign on to a fishing boat. When I'd asked Quentin about him, he just shrugged and shook his head. Jason had no living family we knew of. His personnel file listed Quentin as his emergency contact. I'd sent well wishes to the universe on Jason's behalf, grateful for the good times I'd shared with him, and imagined his boundless energy would continue to amaze and inspire some other lucky men.

I never once imagined he was lying dead under the muddy water of MacGregor's Marsh.

Chapter Eight

Michael was anxious to hear the news and listened intently while I told him the details over coffee. He invited me to stay with him again that night, and I took him up on it. After work I stopped by my house for a change of clothes, then drove on to Michael's. He knew what I needed, holding me through the night, speaking softly in my ear when I shouted in my sleep.

Sandy, Jeff, and Betsy had all known Jason, so there was a layer of solemnity over us at work the next day. Dead bodies just didn't pop up in Raven Pass. Jason had been known and well liked, and the whole town grieved.

I tried to function normally and succeeded most of the time. I reached Quentin on his cell phone. He'd taken one look at the scene at the marsh and gone straight to Philly to meet with his legal staff there. He was the type of man who wanted everything orderly, no questions, no surprises. The discovery of a body on his land was more than enough surprise to send him off to make sure no legal ends were left dangling. We spoke briefly, offering condolences to each other.

I forgot Ian was coming until he called me Wednesday afternoon.

We went out to dinner, and over our first bottle of wine, he explained that he recently received a commission for a series of paintings for an upscale restaurant in Los Angeles. Before I could congratulate him, he shook his head, the well-gelled hair never moving.

"I'm so nervous about it, Dylan."

"Why? This seems like great recognition for you."

"It is, no mistake about that. I've just never done anything on quite this scale. The paintings will be huge: ten to twelve feet high, fifteen wide. The buyer is dictating the subject matter and color palettes, so my creativity is limited. It's not the way I really like to work, and I'm afraid I won't be able to pull it off. It has really got me twisted up in knots." The tension in his shoulders was obvious, his edgy nerves apparent in the way his fingers drummed on his glass.

I tried to be the good friend he needed by giving him all the reasons he would succeed at this, boosting him up in a way only having history provided. By the time the second bottle of wine arrived, along with a plate of antipasto, he seemed much more relaxed and was able to inquire about what had been going on in my life.

I brought him up to date, but my instincts told me to leave Michael out of the story. I gave him details about the discovery of Jason's body, since Ian had met Jason at the grand opening of Forest Architecture three years ago.

"I remember him," Ian said. "Quite well." He studied the wine in his glass.

“Really?”

“We, um, he and I...” Ian looked ready to crawl under the table.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing, no doubt disturbing the peaceful meals of the other restaurant patrons.

“What?” Ian tried to look affronted, his brown eyes wide, but the smirk on his face betrayed him.

“You slept with him!” It wasn't a question.

“Well, I wouldn't call it sleep, really. He had a lot, I mean a lot, of energy.” Ian was full-out smiling now.

“I know,” I said. I was surprised by how little it affected me to know he'd had sex with someone I'd had sex with.

He slammed his open mouth shut with a click of teeth and raised his glass. “Here's to Jason Fairbanks.”

I lifted my glass to his, touching gently. “To Jason Fairbanks.”

We spent the rest of the meal reminiscing and continued the discussion at home. We caught up with what we knew of any developments in the lives of our friends. It was after two a.m. when Ian finally toddled off to bed. I hesitated to call Michael so late, but call I did.

“Hello?” It hardly rang once.

“It's Dylan.”

“Hi. How are you?” The question was fraught with hidden meaning, but I thought I knew what he needed.

“I'm okay. A little drained from visiting with Ian, but he's tucked in bed—in the guest room—and I really wanted to see how you're doing.”

“God, Dylan, how can you even think about me with everything that's happened? I'm fine. But...thank you.”

We only talked a little longer, until he started to laugh at my yawns. That night I dreamed Ian seduced Michael and had sex with him under the willow tree by MacGregor's Marsh.

I woke up and wandered to the kitchen around ten and heard Ian moving about soon after the aroma of brewing coffee floated through the house. I called in to the office to check on things, and Betsy assured me there was nothing out of the ordinary going on, scolded me for hovering, and instructed me to have a nice time with my friend. I thought I could hear her fingers making quote marks in the air around the word friend. I told her to shut up. And have a nice day.

Ian and I decided to spend the day being tourists. Raven Pass was home to artists and craftspeople of many kinds and, all in all, quite charming. I didn't take many opportunities to see the place as visitors did, so this was a welcome activity. We ate brunch on the patio at the

Peanut Grill. Ian enjoyed shopping and made several purchases he planned to save for Christmas gifts. While I didn't buy much, I looked at everything and wondered what things Michael would like and what things he'd roll his eyes at.

Ian drew a fair amount of attention in the stores; women had always found him attractive and that hadn't changed. His dark eyes and dark hair—highlighted and styled—atop a body that screamed sex no matter what he wore drew many eyes, not all of them female. I thought about the painting Michael was doing of me and wondered if anyone else saw me the way he did. Thinking about it gave me a headache, so I let it go.

As promised, we spent time at Quentin's Art & Books, where I explained the whole business to Ian. He was impressed enough with the sculpture and other work exhibited there that he agreed to send along a couple of his paintings. "I have a few that didn't make it to the show. They're still good pieces, though." We talked to the manager and settled the details. Of course, after that, we had to go into every art gallery in town. None were very large, but some did showcase fine work. Whatever original art I had in my home came from these shops, but I questioned how financially viable this business could be. I asked one owner about the Web site she advertised.

"The Internet is where many of my sales come from," she informed me. "I sell some here on site. Some visitors take our card and look us up online and maybe tell some of their friends. And some people just happen to find us on the Web. The work is unusual enough to grab their interest."

I told Ian about this, and he looked at me like a patient teacher with a slow child. "Just Google me, Dylan. You'll see."

We stopped by my office so he could see how it had changed in three years and to renew his acquaintance with Sandy, Betsy, and Jeff. While they chatted, I gave Quentin a call to let him know about Ian. He'd already heard from the gallery manager and needless to say was very happy about the whole thing.

Sandy talked us all into an ice cream run, which we did and ended up sitting in Ricky's discussing Ian's career and upcoming exhibit. He gave them each a card and encouraged them to attend the opening. "It's a great excuse to spend the night in the city." He had discount coupons in his wallet for a hotel just across from the gallery, which he also handed out. Betsy thought it was a great idea, a chance for a change of scenery. Jeff suggested they could all use an escape after this week's drama, and Sandy agreed. We left them back at the office, but I suspected there was more discussion about when to leave and what to pack than any actual work being done.

All in all it was an enjoyable day, more than I expected when Ian first proposed his visit. We picked up steaks and potatoes on the way home, grilled our dinner, and ate in comfort on

the screened porch.

When the dishes were put away, we relaxed on the porch with cognac Ian had picked up that afternoon. We sat in companionable silence, but it seemed the tension he had arrived with was back.

"Dylan?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

Nothing good ever came of a conversation that started with that sentence. "Oh?"

He gathered his thoughts a moment; I took a large swallow of my drink. "I've really missed you, Dylan."

Shit. See? "Hey, Ian, how much of this stuff have you had?" I raised my glass at him.

"No, it's not the drink. I've been thinking about this for a while now. I've had this conversation a thousand times in my head. I'm going through the motions of day-to-day living, but I'm feeling nothing."

"But Ian, you're riding high right now. So many things you've worked for are coming to pass. I don't understand."

"You're right; there is a lot of good happening now. It seems empty, though, without someone to share it with. Someone who really knows me, who'll be there through the ups and the downs." Almost to himself he added, "And God, there are so many ups and downs." He looked at me, trying to convince me with his eyes. "I've never stopped loving you, Dylan. Please. Can we try again?"

His words echoed in my head. Probably because my brain had drained out. "What? Ian! Jeez!" I put down my glass and got off my chair. My instinct was to move far away from him, but I stopped before I plowed a hole through the screen. "No. I mean, I don't want to hurt your feelings or anything, but Ian, you completely fucked me over."

"And I will be forever sorry for that, baby."

"Don't call me that." I stared out over the surrounding hills.

"We had a special connection, Dylan. A relationship made in heaven."

I began to think he had indulged in a little more than cognac. Peyote, maybe.

"I know I have a lot to make up for, and I will keep apologizing until you forgive me." He stepped up behind me, close enough I could feel his breath at my neck. A picture of Michael formed in my head. I savored it for a moment.

"Ian." I turned around. He thought I was reaching for him, but I pushed him away instead. "Whatever we had, and it sure wasn't made in heaven, was over a long time ago. I've moved on. I thought you had too."

He snorted at me. "Moved on to relationships like the one you had with Jason Fairbanks? Is that your preference these days, Dylan?"

How had this escalated into an episode of The Twilight Zone? "Christ. What are you on?" I stormed into the house. He followed me. My phone rang before I could say anything else, and I thanked the gods of fortuitous interruptions. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me." Michael.

"Hi." I didn't even try to be gracious about it; I just stayed right there in front of Ian.

"I know I might be calling at a bad time, but I just wanted to ask you to call me later when you can talk."

"This isn't a particularly bad time, but I'd rather wait if you can."

"No problem. I realized I hadn't invited you to the exhibit, and with Ian there, I didn't know...anyway, call me?"

"Of course. As soon as I can."

"Okay. Till later, then."

"Till later." I closed the phone. By now, Ian was stewing.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"How is that any of your business?" I was feeding the fire, and I didn't care. "In one breath you're offering me your love and devotion, and in the next breath, you're calling me a slut. What makes you think I feel like telling you anything?"

It was as if he hadn't heard a word I said. "Was that one of your fuck buddies, Dylan?" The look in his eyes pissed me off and scared me at the same time.

I spoke through gritted teeth. "Get a grip."

"I came out here to apologize to you, to renew our romance. You loved me once. Why can't we have that again?" He grasped my arms and tried to pull me toward him. I twisted and bodychecked him. The move surprised him. He let go and fell against the wall. It may have knocked some sense into him, because he slid to the floor and covered his face with his hands. "My God, Dylan, I'm so sorry."

I stood looking down at him, shaking. I didn't want to tell him about Michael. And I didn't want to give him the chance to deride and sully my good fortune with his jealousy.

"I must be more stressed than I realized," he said. "I didn't mean those things I said. I mean, I hoped we might pick up the romance again, but I knew we might not. I don't know what came over me." He picked himself up off the floor. I stepped back, well out of reach.

"You need help, Ian. The psychological kind. I don't know what else to say to you." I turned toward my room. "I know you're heading to the city tomorrow. I have to go into the office in the morning, so it's unlikely that I'll see you before you leave. Please lock up when you go."

“Dylan, I...will you still come to the show?”

I thought about Michael and his beautiful paintings. No way would I miss it. But what I said was, “I expect a lot of our friends will be there, and I haven't seen them in a long time, so I'll keep my hotel reservation. Good night, Ian.” And off I went, to call Michael and work out the details of the weekend to come. Damn right I'd be at the exhibition. I locked my bedroom door. Just in case.

Chapter Nine

I should have known the gods would laugh at any plans I made.

Michael needed to be in Philadelphia by two o'clock, to meet with the gallery owners and his agent. We were going to go in together. My old friends coming to the exhibition were staying at the Bendix Hotel, the one near the gallery, as were Michael and I. I expected to meet up with them while Michael took care of business, then we'd play it by ear after that. I looked forward to sharing a luxurious hotel bed with Michael and to spending time mucking about the city. I booked the room through Sunday night, thinking he wouldn't want to rush back after what was bound to be a late night Saturday.

Instead, I had to send him off alone so I could spend the time with Detective Karl Neilson, whom I'd never met before, telling my part of the story of Jason Fairbanks's life, trying to remember "the events leading up to his disappearance" three years ago.

When Detective Neilson began asking me the same set of questions for yet the third time, I stopped him with an upraised hand.

"Yes?" he inquired.

"You're investigating this as a murder, aren't you?"

"I'm investigating an unusual death. Murder or not hasn't been determined yet. Now, Mr. Forest..."

"No. Wait." If this was a murder investigation, and I'd been sitting here all day answering questions, did it mean I was a suspect? Worse, had I said anything to implicate myself in Jason's death? I skipped right over amazement that anyone would murder anyone, especially in our little piece of paradise called Raven Pass, and hopped right into I-didn't-do-it land. "Detective Neilson?"

"Yes?"

"Am I a suspect in the death of Jason Fairbanks?"

"It hasn't been determined that his death was the result of foul play."

"So you're not detaining me and interrogating me because you suspect me of wrongdoing?"

"We are just trying to get to the bottom of this mystery, Mr. Forest."

"Before I say anything else, I need to speak with my attorney. And I think I'm free to go, am I not, unless you are charging me with something?"

He didn't respond at first. I thought a flush of purple might be working its way up from his collar, but he got up from his chair before I got a closer look. "That'll be all, Mr. Forest." He opened the door and motioned me out. "Thank you for coming."

By the time I got out of there, it was after five. I ate a toasted bagel with cream cheese for supper and took a shower. The hot water felt so good that I stayed under it much longer than I intended. I let it wash away the fear, anger, and worry I'd been immersed in all day. Even the supersized water heater had its limits, and before it turned completely cold, I got out, dried off, and wrapped the towel around my waist. I still needed to pull together an overnight bag. I was choosing ties—what was appropriate for the opening of an exhibition of a new lover's art?—when the sound of shattering glass destroyed my reverie. I jumped and screamed like a little girl. Then I stood there with my hands over my mouth, mostly to keep my heart from leaping out.

I held my breath and listened. But I found out that when you hold your breath and your heart is in your mouth, all you can hear is the beating of it. Then you see spots.

So I took a breath, shallowly, then another. I slunk to the bedroom doorway. Imagining that Ian had gone completely around the bend and was standing bloodied and raging in my living room, I peered slowly around the corner.

The large picture window in my living room was in pieces across the carpet. In the midst of the broken glass sat a rock about the size of my two fists together. From my vantage point, I could see a large manila envelope was duct-taped to the rock. I heard nothing, saw no movement. I waited, frozen in place, for an endless amount of time, which was probably five minutes. I backed into the bedroom and called the sheriff.

He told me not to touch anything and that he would arrive shortly.

I called Michael next.

"Hi. Are you on your way?"

"I'm not. I'm..." My voice sort of got lost at the back of my throat.

"Are you okay? What's going on?"

I huffed a ragged breath and started over. "I'm going to be later than I thought. Somebody threw a rock through my window. There's glass everywhere."

"God, Dylan, are you hurt? Do you want me to come back?" I heard him rustling around on his end of the phone.

"No, I'm fine. You don't need to be driving between here and the city when you've got the show to think about. I called Eli, and I'm waiting for him to get here."

He sighed. "You're sure?"

"I'll be fine. I'll call you later, let you know what's up."

I caressed the phone a little as I thought about how lucky I was to have Michael to lean on while these crazy things were going on in my life. Even though he wasn't with me, I was comforted by the fact that he was a phone call away.

The ringing of the doorbell jolted me from my reverie. I jumped off the bed and dropped the phone, but managed to keep my inner little girl under control. I had the presence of mind to slip on a pair of running shoes to protect my feet from broken glass before I trotted to the door. I ushered Eli into the house.

"You okay?" He looked me up and down.

"Yeah. Startled. Shaky. Getting mad, I guess."

He nodded and stepped farther into the room. "Tell me what happened."

I briefly chronicled my activities from the time I got home to the time I called him. He walked carefully around the perimeter of the mess and made a phone call.

"Aren't you going to look at what's on that rock?" I asked.

"I want to, but I think I'll wait till tech comes here so they can maybe figure out where the rock came from."

"How will that help?"

"You never know. I've learned to take nothing for granted, leave no stone unturned, so to speak." He smirked at me.

"Ha. Ha."

"Do you think you might want to put some clothes on before your house is crawling with people?"

"Shit."

I threw on sweats and a T-shirt, then found him in the kitchen, by the door to the porch. "Any ideas who'd want to redecorate your living room?"

"Well..."

He must have sensed a story, because he stopped at the door and turned around, eyebrow raised. I hated to think badly of Ian, but I wanted to be honest. I'd always thought of Eli as a man who would do The Right Thing, but always with discretion.

"Look, I really don't want to cast stones." When Eli laughed I had to stop to think about what I'd said. "No pun intended. A friend of mine was in town the last couple of days. We'd been...close...in college, but the relationship ended badly. We've managed a friendship ever since. But last night he acted so strangely." I hardly knew how to describe it.

Eli nodded. "Go on."

I paced. "It was like he developed a second personality or something. One minute we're talking about life and art and all that, and the next minute, he's telling me how much he wants to get back together with me, how sorry he is for what happened. And when I rebuffed him, he got mad and insulted me. Then he broke down and said he didn't know what came over him." Suddenly tired, I plopped down on one of the kitchen chairs.

“What happened after that?”

“I told him I wouldn't see him in the morning, to lock up when he left. His plans were to head to Philadelphia this morning. He's got an art show.”

“So you didn't see him again?”

“No. I left before he woke up. He and all his things were gone when I got back this afternoon.”

“And this behavior of his—you'd not experienced that before?”

I shook my head. “No. But do you think he could've done something like this?” I motioned toward the living room.

“Who knows? People do all sorts of things you'd never expect.” He shrugged. “Anybody else you can think of who might have a grudge against you?”

“Well, the dry cleaner wasn't happy with the mustard stain on the last suit I brought in, but I don't think he'd throw rocks at my house to get back at me.”

Eli's deputy arrived, along with the tech people who were going to evaluate the physics of rock throwing. There was a lot of waiting around. Eli called the emergency window-repair company. I made coffee, wished I had some cookies to set out. When the okay came that Eli could have the rock, he slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and picked it up. He set it on the kitchen counter, and we both looked at it.

“It looks pretty much like a regular rock to me,” I said.

“Yep, it does that,” Eli said.

After that exhaustive analysis, he tugged at the duct tape that criss-crossed the envelope and circled the rock. He was slow and thorough about extricating the envelope; I wondered if he was like this on Christmas morning. The doorbell rang. When nobody else seemed interested in answering it, I tore myself away from the unwrapping and opened the door. The guys from Triple-A Emergency Window Repair looked entirely too happy to be working on a Friday night, and I invited them in. The deputy cleared them to examine the damages, and they set to work. I was making a mental note to call my insurance company when the phone rang. Wow, I thought, they really are good neighbors. But then I saw that it was Quentin.

“Hi, Q. What's up?”

“Are you in Philadelphia?”

“What? No.” I realized that of course he wouldn't know where I was. With the cell phone, I could be anywhere. And the last time we talked, I'd given him the information for Ian's exhibit and told him I'd be there for the weekend. “No. Something came up, and I couldn't leave today. I'll be there tomorrow, though.”

“So I guess a nightcap isn't doable, is it?” he joked.

"Dylan," Eli called from the kitchen.

"Sorry, Q, I've gotta run, but I'll catch you at the gallery at least, okay?"

"Talk to you later."

I hurried back to Eli. He held in his latex-covered hands a somewhat crumpled piece of watercolor paper, the thick kind with a visibly bumpy texture. It had been folded over twice to fit in the envelope. He spread it out on the table. I put my hands in my pockets and leaned over to look at it.

"Shit." It was a portrait of me, beautifully rendered in watercolor. Whoever had done this was very adept technically. The style was nothing like I'd ever seen Ian do. I didn't know if Michael worked with watercolors or not, but this was far from the manner of paintings I'd seen in his studio. The likeness was incredible, down to my skin tone. The picture stopped just at the collarbones, shoulders bare of any covering. The expression on my face confused me. Was it happiness? Surprise? Secretive?

"Have you seen me with that look on my face?" I asked Eli.

He studied it. "Not sure." He looked at me. "Make some faces." I tried to emulate what I saw in the portrait, but he just shook his head.

"You'll be taking this with you, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I take a picture of it?"

"No. Go ahead." I got my digital camera and snapped a couple shots. I wanted to be able to examine it later, maybe with Michael.

He picked up the paper and started to fold it back up when a second sheet fell from behind the top one. They must have been stuck together. He laid the new one out next to the first. It was another portrait of me, and this time, I did recognize the expression. I'd seen it in Michael's mirror the first night I was at his house having the best orgasm of my life. Below my ecstatic face, circling my neck was a braided rope. The work was so detailed and true to life that I could see the pull of the skin, the reddish-purple start of the bruise under the rope. This was a portrait of me, being strangled and obviously finding sexual release from it.

I dropped hard onto a kitchen chair and looked up at Eli. "What is this?" I whispered. He sat next to me.

"Dylan, I don't know. I wish I could tell you it's just some weird prank, but somebody went to a lot of effort to create these pictures and to deliver them to you in a startling way. I'll do everything I can to figure this out. In the meantime, I suggest you make an extra effort to be careful."

"Extra effort?" I barked. "I was in my own fucking house, minding my own fucking business. That's not exactly a high-risk activity, Eli." I stood. "Is there any reason I need to stay

here tonight?"

"No. Once they're done boarding the window, the house should be secure."

"Until somebody sends another projectile through."

He shrugged as if to say he agreed. "Where will you go?"

"To Philadelphia, where I was supposed to be eight hours ago. You have my cell number; you can reach me if you need to. I'm going to finish packing; then I'm out of here."

"Okay, Dylan. You do that."

By the time I got to the hotel room I was so tired I could barely stand. Michael undressed me, put me to bed, and climbed in beside me. I gave him the highlights of my day before his warm body, the soft sheets, and the darkness all conspired to put me to sleep.

Chapter Ten

I woke up to the smell of coffee, bacon, and maple syrup, and Michael's voice in my ear. "Wake up, sleepyhead. I made breakfast."

"You made breakfast?"

"Well, I made it appear here in our room."

We enjoyed the breakfast feast, heedlessly dropping crumbs in the sheets. I was refreshed enough to tell Michael about my terrible day, and he wanted to hear every detail. My description of the second painting horrified him, and he flung his arms around me to hug me tightly. I had to remind him that I needed to breathe before he would let me go.

He filled me in on his day, which wasn't nearly as lively as mine, thank God. The meeting at the gallery had gone well, he said, and he and his agent were both pleased with the way they had arranged the artwork. He met Ian briefly, but nothing more than that. The third artist, Andrew Begley, was younger than Michael. He worked with tile, a variety of pottery, and plaster to create abstract sculptures. Michael and he had dinner together, and Michael found Andrew pleasant to be with. He declined Andrew's invitation to hit the clubs, though.

Michael hadn't realized that the main reason his agent demanded his presence the day before the opening was that members of the press were invited to a private showing that night.

"She told me she didn't want me freaking out ahead of time," he said.

"Well, how did it go?"

"I have no idea. Roberta seemed to think it went okay. She hovered in the background when any of them asked me questions. I tried to keep my answers simple so they couldn't get twisted much, but I hope I didn't sound like an imbecile. Ian was the one they really focused on, of course. Andrew and I were sort of the afterthoughts."

"Did Ian seem to be functioning all right?"

"I'd never met him before, so I don't know what's normal for him, but he appeared to have himself under control, laughing and joking with the reporters and the staff."

That sounded like Ian. I hoped to God he was over whatever bit him at my house. "Will there be articles about the exhibition in the papers?"

"I doubt there would be anything in the New York Times, but the Inquirer might run something, gallery rags will definitely report in, and maybe the neighborhood papers. There might be some coverage online."

Since Saturday was the big press day for many of the weeklies, we decided to go in search of reviews. We took a long time in the shower, but the hot water just lasted forever, and we really hadn't enjoyed each other naked in days. By the time we made it outside, we

were hungry again. The newsstand near the hotel carried several of the papers published specifically for the arts, as well as two neighborhood weeklies. I bought one of each while Michael waited nervously. We took our treasures and found a table in the window at Lou's Deli.

Chicken salad and a BLT were ignored as I found the first review. "Do you want to read it first, to yourself?"

He bit his bottom lip and shook his head.

"Do you want me to read it out loud to you?"

"No. Read it to yourself first, then give me a sign."

"A sign."

"Yes."

"Like thumbs up, thumbs down?" I demonstrated. "Or dancing on the table versus rending my shirt?"

He laughed. "Just read."

I did, and he fidgeted: the leg bounced, fingers tapped. He played with the straw in his drink, finger over the end, pulling up liquid, then letting it go. Not once did he actually drink or eat anything. I kept my face in a very neutral position as I read about Ian Gallagher's latest success, praise for his ability to recreate himself with each passing year, acknowledgment of his tremendous natural talent. Tell me something I don't know. I skimmed the rest of the paragraphs about Ian and stopped when I saw Andrew's name. A few sentences assured me that the writer thought Andrew was a diamond in the rough, and great things would be expected of him in a few years, but right now he was still struggling for identity and consistency.

The last section of the article focused on "the magnificent new talent that is Michael Gilmore." The reviewer waxed poetic about the "Chooser of the Slain" series, which I determined were the paintings with the dragon. He seemed, in fact, to have been as taken with those works as I had been with the ones in Michael's studio, going on about the colors and the details. Michael's other pieces drew less acclaim, as the reviewer found them lacking the expression and punch of the other work. His overall impression was that Michael was already a force to be reckoned with, even if he was still a little rough around the edges. Really, for a first outing, Michael scored big, at least with this writer. The reviewer planned to attend the opening, just to hear other viewers' impressions of the art. The picture that accompanied the article was a grainy shot of the three artists, posed like kids on the first day of school.

I looked over the top of the paper to find Michael's eyes closed. He held a napkin to his mouth—he'd chewed his bottom lip so hard it bled. "Michael." I used a stage whisper to get his attention. He opened his eyes. "Do you trust me?" He nodded. I folded the paper over until his section of the review faced up, and handed it over to him. He never took his eyes off me as he reached for the paper.

"It's okay?" he asked quietly.

"It's okay." I watched as he read. When he finished, he looked up at me with glistening eyes.

"It is okay." The smile formed on his face like sun coming through the clouds. The dark spell was broken. We plowed through the other papers, locating the reviews. Most of the reviewers agreed about Michael—his talent, creativity, presentation...hell, one of them even liked his signature. They also expressed similar criticisms, and yes, some were harsh. The general consensus was that Michael had created a masterpiece with the "Chooser" series, but that his other work didn't live up to that potential. Many were optimistic that it wouldn't take long for him to figure it out, and all assured their readers that they would stay abreast of any new developments. The columnists all noted how successful Ian had become, and went on to proclaim his new work yet another triumph for the art world. Andrew's name was at least mentioned in every review, but he clearly wasn't seen as ready for the big time. I felt a little sorry for him, but my excitement for Michael outshone everything else.

We ate like starving artists, then went in search of dessert. Ice cream for me, cheesecake for Michael. But the sweetest thing was his smile.

* * *

I had arranged a time to meet with friends before dinner the day of the show. Michael said he was too nervous about the exhibit to meet a bunch of new people, so he stayed in the room and enjoyed the whirlpool bath and a nap.

The hotel bar wasn't crowded. Our group of eight had no trouble commandeering a seating area with couches and chairs. Ian was there, of course, and we exchanged pleasantries, but I maintained my distance. I enjoyed the time with old friends, remembering the old days and catching up on the new. When we got to the subject of everyone's love lives, and the focus settled on me, I blushed, took a sip of my drink and smiled.

"Spill it," shouted Claire, our resident cheerleader.

"Come on, Dylan. We haven't heard anything spicy from you in years." That was Kevin, happily married straight boy.

The others joined in coercing me to divulge my secrets until finally I said, "Yes, there is someone special. No, you don't know him. We're just getting to know each other, and I can't say where this is going." I avoided Ian's gaze as I spoke, but couldn't help grinning. "But I do hope it will go far and last long."

They cheered and tried to get more information out of me, but that was all I was willing to share at the moment, and we eventually moved on to the latest in the saga of Mai Li and Edward, whose on-again, off-again marriage was currently on—and hot.

Everyone had their own plans for dinner, so we said our good-byes until showtime. I hadn't noticed when Ian left, but he wasn't there when the group broke up. My phone rang as soon as I stepped off the elevator. It was Jeff, asking if I'd like to join him and Sandy and Betsy for dinner. I begged off, wanting to spend the time with Michael and knowing he didn't need the stress. We agreed to meet at the gallery.

Michael and I opted for room service. It took him fifteen minutes of waffling between the soup and salad combo versus the chicken. I finally said I'd get the damn chicken so he could taste everything. Which he did not do. He hardly touched the soup and salad. We didn't talk much and got dressed without any teasing or playing. His hands shook too much to tie his tie; I did it for him, and he kissed me gently.

We held hands all the way to the gallery, arriving thirty minutes early as instructed by his agent. The gallery staff met us at the door. They congratulated him on his reviews and commented on how proud I must be of him. Michael's agent appeared just a minute later. She was a striking brunette, with startling blue eyes. I guessed her age to be anywhere between thirty and fifty. Michael introduced us.

"Roberta Meyers. Dylan Forest. Dylan. Roberta." He spotted the bar and moved toward it. Roberta and I laughed with each other, then realized we had best stop Michael before he drank something stupid. She ordered a still water with ice and lemon for him. He appeared to be quite happy with that. Wanting to stay clearheaded for Michael's sake, I ordered the same. When I turned back from the bar, Roberta had her arm over the shoulders of a young man with curly blond hair and a deer-in-the-headlights look.

"Dylan, this is Andrew Begley, also featured in tonight's exhibit. Andrew, this is Dylan Forest." We shook hands. Before another word could be said, a flurry at the front door caught our attention. Ian had arrived.

If he knew I was there, he didn't show it, pouring his attention instead on the statuesque blonde on his arm. The gallery staff fawned all over him, and he preened.

Andrew and Roberta stepped off to the side for a private conversation. "So," I said to Michael. "Show me."

He pulled me through the gallery to the far wall. This long, unbroken expanse was the backdrop for the six panels of "Chooser of the Slain."

Maybe it was the lighting or the setting, but these paintings were even more beautiful than the ones in his studio. The color seemed more vibrant, the dark spaces more menacing. Each figure was almost three-dimensional. The amount of detail made them each beautiful.

The first panel showed the dragon and the knight facing each other, ready to strike or defend. In the second panel the two figures moved into the dance of the battle.

The next two paintings were the ones similar to those back home, where the dragon was mortally wounded, and the hovering woman appeared.

The dragon's shape changed to that of a man reaching out in supplication in the fifth panel. At the end, the woman and man flew through the sky.

Suddenly the word came to me: Valkyrie. Chooser of the Slain. The music pulsed in my head, and this time, it wasn't my phone. I made a mental note to ask Jeff what he'd been thinking when he reprogrammed my ringtone.

"Dylan. Dylan." Michael's whisper invaded the trance I was in. I slowly turned to face him. "I think you're going to break my fingers." I looked down and saw I was squeezing the life out of his hand. I let go immediately.

"Michael. I'm sorry." He flexed his fingers a few times before I brought his hand gently to my lips and kissed them. "You are an amazing artist, Mr. Gilmore. You actually trapped me in your paintings." He brought our hands to his lips and returned my kisses. I was suddenly aware that there were now a number of people milling about the gallery, one or two of them vastly entertained by our little drama. We smiled sheepishly and floated back to the bar for more still water.

"There you are." Roberta swooped in on us. "Michael, there are people here you need to meet." She smiled apologetically at me as she took his arm. "I hope you understand..."

"I do, I do. The meet and greet is part of the package. Find me when you're done. I'm going to look for some friends."

She dragged him off. I caught sight of Claire and Kevin and made my way over to them. We ooh-ed and ah-ed over Ian's brilliant work, enjoyed the colorful whimsy of Andrew's sculptures. Several others joined us as we lingered over Michael's paintings—the ones not part of the series. As we approached the six panels, I left them to it and returned to the front to get another glass of water.

Quentin strolled in the door and, catching sight of me, made a beeline straight over. "There you are!"

"Hi. Glad you could make it." And since I was standing right next to the bar: "Want a drink?"

He ordered his usual gin and tonic.

"I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you much last night. There was an...incident..." I told him about the rock and the pictures.

"God, Dylan. You've had quite the week. First Jason. Now this..."

"And I haven't even told you about my time with Ian."

He sipped his drink. "Oh. I'm all ears."

"I'll have to tell you later. Where are you staying?"

"The Bendix."

"We are too. Maybe a drink in the afternoon?"

"We...?"

I hadn't told Quentin about Michael yet. "Oh, look, here's Ian now."

Ian had somehow managed to extract himself from the rich and famous and sidled up to me. He threw one arm over my shoulders and extended his other hand to Quentin.

"Ian Gallagher. And you are..."

"Quentin MacGregor." He shook Ian's hand but raised an eyebrow at me.

"Oh, right. Art & Books." I tried to slide out from under his arm, but he had a grip, and I couldn't do it without making a scene.

"Yes. And thank you so much for helping us out."

"No problem." He studied Quentin's face. "Have we met before?"

"We have, but that was a long time ago, at Dylan's grand opening."

I recalled how Quentin looked that day. "His hair was a different color. Streaks of blue, I think."

"Now I remember!"

Quentin blushed. "My experimental phase. Don't worry—it was a short one."

"Quentin, I need to speak to Dylan alone for a moment. Do you mind? I hear that if you head over that way, you'll see some pretty fabulous art." He pointed, of course, at his own work. "I'll join you in a minute to see if any of my pictures interest you."

"Yes, of course." Quentin withdrew gracefully.

"He's pretty, Dylan, but a little old to be a toy, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?" I removed his arm from my shoulder with a firm twist.

"I saw you," he said as he scanned the room. "Holding hands with Michael." I felt the temperature drop as the chill flowed from him. "He's your new toy, Dylan? He's the one you plan to go far and last long with?"

"I am not having this conversation with you." I spotted Betsy by the door, signing the guest book. "I've got to go."

"This isn't over, Dylan," he growled as I walked away.

Jeff and Sandy followed Betsy into the gallery, and I greeted them like long-lost friends. I didn't want to get into a rehash of the great rock mystery, which none of them had heard about yet, so I took on the role of docent and led them through the exhibit.

"Ian's work is really impressive," Sandy said.

"Yes, it is." What else could I say? He does okay for a raging, schizophrenic psychopath?

Jeff sipped champagne and admired the painting in front of us. "Wow. Between his looks and his talent, I can see how you might be attracted to him."

I couldn't even formulate a response to that.

"Dylan?" Betsy held out the show catalog she'd picked up at the door. "Is this our Michael Gilmore?" She knew Michael from the Roswell Burns meetings. I hadn't said anything about my attraction to him or our subsequent relationship, though. When I nodded affirmatively, she explained to the others how Michael was "ours"—our hometown boy, so to speak. Just then, Claire caught my eye, and I excused myself from the trio, encouraging them to enjoy the champagne and the art.

When I reached Claire, I saw she had focused her gaze back over my shoulder. I turned to see Ian chatting up my staff. "Is there something going on with you and Ian?" she asked in my ear.

"Why do you ask?" I was the picture of innocence.

She raised a thin eyebrow at me. "Dylan. Cut it out."

She had me on the ropes, so I gave her the CliffsNotes version of Ian's visit. "And that's not all. The object of my affection, the man I referred to this afternoon?" She nodded that she followed my drift. "He's standing right over there."

Her low whistle signaled her approval.

"Michael Gilmore. One of the other artists exhibiting here."

"Jesus, Dylan. You don't do anything in a small way, do you?"

"Hey. I try. I really do. I can't help it if the gods find it amusing to fuck with me."

I spent the next hour or so mingling with friends, looking at art, and trying to eavesdrop on other people's conversations. I wanted to know what they thought about Michael's work. I made it a point to take a good look at Andrew's work; the more I sat with it the more I liked it, and I decided to purchase one of the pieces I was particularly drawn to. Michael would appear at my shoulder from time to time, and we'd share a quick kiss. He said he was checking in with me, but I suspected he just needed to recharge periodically. Whenever I caught sight of Ian, I moved in the opposite direction.

Eventually, the evening drew to a close, and the attendees drifted out into the night, although most of my college friends remained, huddled together as good friends do. Michael found me, slipped his hand into mine, and kissed my cheek. He was bouncing a little. Roberta told Michael she would speak with him tomorrow, and then she and Andrew said their good-byes and left. The staff began the tedious job of cleaning up. Ian spoke to Betsy, Sandy, and Jeff at the door before the three of them departed. The woman he'd arrived with was nowhere to be seen.

I'd had about a gallon of lemon water, which was now insistent about release. I introduced Michael to Claire, who took charge of him while I went off in search of the men's room. It was tucked away down a little corridor. I finished my business and opened the door to find Ian on the other side, a cat poised waiting for its prey.

There was little room to maneuver in the tight hallway, and I didn't think I could slip around him. So I tensed, ready to slam him again if I had to. He pounced, but instead of hitting or pushing me he grabbed my shoulders and planted a wet kiss on my mouth.

I tried to back up, but the wall was right there. My attempts to push him away were thwarted by the tight grip he gained on my forearms.

"Please, Dylan, please," he growled, the smell of alcohol strong on his breath.

"Ian, you're drunk! Get off me!" My yell startled him, and his hold loosened enough that I was able to shove at him. When he slammed into the opposite wall, a bulletin board, along with its flyers and such, fell to the ground, pins and papers flying. I managed to escape the confines of the corridor, but he was right behind me.

"I love you," he screeched as he grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

"Whatever it is you feel for me, Ian, it isn't love."

This must have been the breaking point, because the next thing I knew, his hands were tight around my neck, his face a mask of rage. I slammed my knee into his groin. He released me with a grunt, and before he could even double over, I punched him in the face. He crumpled to the floor. I wiped my face with shaking hands. When I looked up, I saw the faces of my friends, shocked, afraid, confused, looking from me to Ian in complete silence.

"Well." Claire's voice rang clearly through the quiet. "How about that?"

Chapter Eleven

Fortunately, the altercation was so surprising and played out so quickly that no one thought to call the police. The only damage we'd done to the premises was to the bulletin board, and the gallery manager didn't care enough about that to even consider my offer to pay to replace it.

Mai Li—also known as Dr. Ryell—took a look at my neck. “You won't have more than a little bit of bruising there,” she told me. “Ian didn't have his hands on you that long.” Someone from the staff handed her an ice-filled napkin, which she put on my knuckles. “This will help the swelling.”

Michael held it in place for me after Mai Li walked away. He kept himself so composed that I couldn't tell what he was feeling.

After some conversation among themselves, several of my friends lifted Ian to his feet and half walked, half carried him out the door, Ian groaning all the while.

“Mai Li says she'll check him over at the hotel, but she's pretty sure he'll be fine,” Claire told me. “Will you be all right?”

It felt like my entire body was vibrating, and I couldn't quite catch a deep breath. I didn't think there was anything wrong with me that a little time and distance wouldn't cure. I looked at Michael, and he at me. “Yes, I think so.”

“Do you have any idea where to go from here with this?”

“I don't. Will Ian try to follow me home? Do I have to worry about him popping up out of nowhere? Shit—do you think he'll stalk me?”

She shook her head. “He's pretty messed up, Dylan. I think there must be something going on with him that none of us knew about, maybe something medical? I'll talk to him when he's sober, see if I can figure anything out. I'll talk to you later.”

I gave a curt nod. “Thanks, Claire.”

Without speaking, Michael and I walked back to the hotel.

* * *

I opened the door with the key card, then held it open for Michael to go in first. I flipped the lock and connected the chain. My skin felt too tight. I yanked my coat off and tossed it on the chair. My hands shook as I dumped my cell phone and wallet on the dresser and unbuttoned my cuffs. There were words I wanted to say, thoughts forming in my brain, but they couldn't make their way past the lump in my throat. I unbuttoned my collar, loosened my tie, and threw it on top of the coat. Michael stood there, looking uncertain. We stared at each other for a moment, and all the trembling I'd been doing turned to heat. I was going to explode if I waited any longer to touch him.

I grabbed his lapels and shoved him up against the wall. "Need you," I growled. His pupils grew so large there was only a fine outline of green around them. I kissed him then, all heat and passion, bruising and strong. I couldn't get enough of him.

"Dylan, I..." He tried to speak but I didn't want that.

"Shhh," I hissed. "Don't." I pulled his jacket down and off, fumbled with his tie until it was loose enough to yank over his head, all the while kissing his lips, his jaw, his neck. He got his hands around my waist and pulled my shirt out of my pants. He couldn't seem to get to the buttons, so he slid his hands up under it and caressed my burning skin. I couldn't be that gentle; I wrenched his shirt up and, latching on to the front panels, ripped it apart. His intake of breath flew out on a moan as I planted my mouth on his right nipple, the metallic taste of the ring racing across my tongue. His nails dug into the skin at my waist. I tugged on his left nipple ring with one hand while I latched on to his ass with the other.

"Fuck. Oh God. Dylan!"

He managed to get my shirt off over my head. I snarled even as I helped, not wanting to lose the feel of him for a minute. He wrapped his arms under mine and up my shoulders. His head tilted, and my lips found the sweet spot on his neck. I couldn't stop myself, and his sighs urged me on as I drew up a mark there. His shirt hung off his shoulders a little, so I pushed it until the cuffs caught on his wrists, trapping his hands at his sides.

He lifted his head up to kiss me some more. My tongue was captured between his lips, and he sucked on it while I unbuckled his belt, pulled it off, and opened his pants. His engorged cock was in my grasp in a second. His moan rumbled from his mouth into mine, and his struggle to get his hands free fueled my frenzy. One cuff finally turned inside out, and he was able to open my pants too. He released my cock and, with a firm grip, pressed it against his own. Our hands wrapped together around our two shafts.

"Jesus, Michael. You feel so good." I felt his teeth on my neck, nipping down its side, stopping at the place Ian's hands had bruised. He sucked and bit, and I knew he was branding me, covering Ian's mark with his own. I made noises I'd only ever heard in porn films.

I shoved at his pants and got them and his boxers to fall to the floor, and clamped my hands on his tight ass. He released our rubbing pricks and spread his hands across my back. He loosened his other sleeve, and the shirt slid away. Somehow we managed to kick off the remainder of our clothing. I pressed him hard to the wall, and he wrapped one leg around my hip.

"I want to fuck you," I said between clenched teeth while I ground against him.

"What's stopping you?" he muttered.

My fingers curled around his butt into the crease, brushing up against his hole. He was so fucking hot.

"Please." He moaned.

I didn't want to leave him, but I still had enough sense to grab the lube and condom I'd stashed in my pants pocket. It took me three seconds to get them, straighten up, and drag his leg back around me. This time when my fingers brushed his hole, they were slick. I pressed one on his opening and pushed to get it past the ring. Even as I did that, I could feel him pushing down, letting my finger all the way in.

"More," he said.

I inserted another finger, scissoring and stretching and touching on his prostate. "I can't wait anymore...I have to..." My voice came out in a rasp.

"Fuck me!"

I didn't need him to ask again. I slipped my fingers out and got the condom on; one quick thrust had me seated deeply in his ass. He braced his hands on my shoulders, and we stood still, panting. I fought the need to lunge as I watched his face for a sign that it was okay to move. I felt the subtle shift as his body relaxed around me, and he swung his other leg up so I was forced to reach under his thighs and push his back up against the wall to support him. His arms around my neck kept his upper body close.

We both moaned, wordless mutterings interspersed with fuck, yes, good, Christ, and shitshit. Neither of us could reach his cock, but it enjoyed the friction of our bodies nonetheless. Precum dripped, helping it slide on our skin. The energy built inside me with the steady rhythm of our thrusting. He shifted, just slightly, but it was enough to cause my prick to rub against his prostate. "There!" he shouted. "Right there!" And we slammed together, all rhythm lost as his orgasm fired through him shooting stream after stream between us. The contractions of his channel set off my own release; I held still as my cock fired and pulsed.

"Fuck!" I breathed as the last spasms shook me.

Michael set one foot on the floor, then the other, before my knees buckled. His hands roamed up over my ass and back. I slid my fingers through his hair as we kissed tenderly, and the calm settled in.

"So," I said, clearing my throat. "We're okay then?"

He grinned. "Better than okay, I'm thinking."

"Good. That's good." I nodded. I was drained, yet sated. It was a good feeling.

"Shower?" Michael rubbed at the drying cum on his chest. I disposed of the condom.

"Also good."

The hotel phone rang, startling both of us. We shrugged at each other, and I answered it.

"May I speak with Mr. Forest or Mr. Gilmore, please?"

"This is Dylan Forest." I sat on the edge of the bed. What now?

"This is the front desk manager?" It was phrased as a question. What, he didn't know who he was?

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to, um, disturb you, but it seems...there seems to be a...well, we received a call. Um, more than one, actually." I started to get the gist of where he was going with this and held the receiver out a little, inviting Michael to lean in so we could both hear.

"Yes, go on," I encouraged him.

"We've received some calls about the, ah, noise level in your room." Michael had to pull away—the spurting noises he made as he tried not to laugh would be heard through the phone. If he'd been drinking milk, it would've blown out through his nose.

"What about the noise level in our room?" I tried to sound concerned. Michael listened in again.

"Well...is everything okay there, Mr. Forest? The gentleman next door was quite worried that, what with all the...pounding...against the wall, and the...ah...moaning, and...um...shouting, that someone might be hurt. Or something." I could hear a little smile creeping into his voice now. "And another caller tried to describe what she heard, but seemed to be confused as to whether she heard people, or...animals." He snorted a little, stifling a laugh.

I had to cover the mouthpiece with my thumb so I wouldn't blast the hotel manager with my guffaws. Michael laughed so hard he fell off the bed, making yet another...pounding...noise. He wiped the tears forming at the corners of his eyes. When I thought I could speak without dissolving completely, I said, "I do apologize for disturbing your other guests. No one has been injured." A little laugh escaped from me. "And I can safely say the only animals here are the human kind, and we will try to be quieter from here on out."

"Thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

"Oh, and Mr. Forest?"

"Yes?"

"The napkin under the complimentary fruit basket makes an excellent gag."

* * *

After our shower, we took advantage of the twenty-four-hour room service. It wasn't long before we enjoyed ham and cheese sandwiches and a pint of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream. I hoped the front desk manager enjoyed the plate of assorted cookies I had sent to him.

When we finally crawled into bed it was nearly three a.m. I thought I would sleep into next week, I was so tired. I was surprised to wake up at six thirty—a.m.—and even more surprised

to look behind me to find Michael staring at me, bright-eyed as well. We found several ways to tire ourselves out—the manager had been right about the napkin—and fell asleep again around eight.

We woke to the strains of the Ride of the Valkyries. “I’ve got to change that,” I muttered. The one eye I opened found the clock—2:15.

“Rrrmm,” Michael growled.

I couldn’t seem to extricate myself from his arms; his head nestled comfortably in the crook of my shoulder. I thought that even if Armageddon were taking place outside our room, it wouldn’t be enough to make me move.

“Open Up! Police!” This was punctuated by three sharp knocks on the door.

“Shit!” I hissed as I untangled myself from Michael and the sheets. I lurched off the bed and struggled into my jeans.

“Fuck!” Michael fumed as he searched for his.

“Just a minute,” I yelled when the pounding started again. Michael zipped up his pants, and I opened the door. Two police officers stood there. “What’s going on?” I asked.

Of course, they didn’t answer my question. “Are you Michael Gilmore?” Cop One asked.

“I’m Michael Gilmore.” He stepped up beside me.

“Then you must be Dylan Forest,” Cop Two said to me.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Are you familiar with”—Cop One checked his notes—“Ian Gallagher?”

We both nodded.

“We’d like you to get dressed and come down to the station with us, please,” Cop Two said.

“What?” I asked at the same time Michael said, “Why?”

“Ian Gallagher was found dead this morning. We’d like to find out what you know about it.”

Chapter Twelve

I grabbed on to Michael's arm, and he kept me from falling to the floor.

Cop Two cleared his throat. "So, if you could get dressed, please..." he prodded.

"How did it happen?" Michael asked. "When?"

"Where?" I took up his questioning. "God, did he...?" I looked at Michael, not wanting to finish the line of thought that led to did-he-kill-himself?

"If you'll just come with us, I'm sure all your questions will be answered." Cop Two again. What else could we do? We got dressed—they did allow us each a moment in the bathroom—and went with them.

We were separated immediately. I asked about Michael periodically throughout the day, but could never get a straight answer from the detectives, who were the only people I spoke with after our arrival. Detective Montrose was a young woman, a brunette, whose petite exterior was probably a cover for a black belt in three martial arts and the know-how to make a weapon out of a hankie and a safety pin. She scared me. Detective Brooks was a man slightly older than Montrose, with very broad shoulders, who wore a suit that looked like it just came from the cleaners. He probably didn't need to know martial arts; he probably carried three guns and a knife. He scared me too.

Together and separately they asked me question after question about Ian. How I knew him, how long, the nature of our relationship, how we both came to be at the gallery last night, what happened the last time we met...all the standard and expected inquiries. I tried to stay away from describing Ian as a raging lunatic, but had to admit his recent behavior toward me had been more than a little bizarre. As I answered their questions, I gleaned some information from them as well. Apparently, Ian died in his hotel room during the night. Probably drunk off his ass. Suffocated with a pillow by someone he let into the room. I was sure the detectives considered me a prime suspect, but I didn't let that stop me from shedding a tear or two for Ian, wishing I had been able to understand his personality shift, wishing we hadn't come to blows in what turned out to be our final moments with each other.

After learning all they could from me about Ian, they moved on to Michael. I really didn't like this line of questioning and kept my answers as brief as possible. They seemed to focus, however, on what happened after the altercation at the gallery, and it came to me that they wanted to ferret out where both Michael and I were at the time Ian was killed. Well, I thought, this I can explain. I gave them a narrative of our nocturnal activities, including the phone call from the manager and the delivery from room service.

The detectives informed me that they knew about the discovery of Jason Fairchild's body, the kind of relationship I'd had with him while he was alive, and the possibility that his death

involved foul play. They'd also picked up the story of the paintings that rode a rock through my window. They knew the names of my staff, and my biggest clients. They came in with a list of the names of everyone who signed the guest book at the gallery. They gave me a copy of the list and had me check the names of anyone I knew and how I knew them.

There were more questions about my night with Michael, specifically regarding the times I fell asleep and woke up. And was I a heavy sleeper or a light sleeper? Could I be sure Michael was in bed with me the whole time I was asleep? My nerves were shredded and finally I just stopped talking.

Detective Brooks spoke. "All right, Mr. Forest. You're free to go. We have your contact information, and we'll be in touch." I nodded at him. Was that a threat or a promise? I didn't ask. "Don't plan on leaving the country any time soon." I shook my head. "An officer will drive you back to the hotel." I nodded. Just yesterday I would have been able to think of a witty comment about men in uniform. Today? Not so much.

The detectives walked me out to where a plainclothes officer waited.

"Will you be heading home soon, Mr. Forest?" Montrose asked.

"That depends. Is...will...Michael Gilmore..." I didn't know what to ask. "Do you know—will Michael be released soon?"

The detectives exchanged a look before Montrose responded, "I'm afraid I can't say, Mr. Forest."

"Then I can't say for sure when I'll go home."

They turned me over to my escort. The drive to the hotel was blessedly brief. I was grateful to discover the key card still in my wallet and even more grateful that it actually worked instead of being nullified by my credit cards or driver's license or the little ticket from the parking garage. I tossed the card and my wallet and my phone in the general direction of the dresser. In a moment of drama, I heaved a deep sigh and threw myself on the bed. When I realized that was completely unsatisfactory, I got up and rummaged around the mini-bar. I found a little bottle of scotch, poured a respectable amount into a glass and downed it. The burn as it dropped through me felt really good in that pain/pleasure way, and I poured another, finishing the bottle.

The lights of the city drew me to the window. The night was clear; the neat rows of streets and avenues blinked as cars made their way up, down, across. I thought about how we think our lives are moving along, blinking like those cars, smoothly traveling as we direct. And how, in just a moment, it can all become a horrible conglomeration of twisted metal and flashing lights, and you can't tell what's real and what isn't.

Ian Gallagher was dead, that was real. He'd been my lover, once upon a time, and my friend until just recently. The body of Jason Fairbanks had been found after disappearing

three years ago. That was real. Michael Gilmore, the man I was currently dating and falling head over heels in love with, seemed to be a suspect in Ian's death, but no one would tell me anything, so how real could it be? I was a "person of interest" in both deaths. That couldn't be real.

As the numbness set in, I heard music and thought how great this scotch must be if it came with a musical accompaniment. It took me a second to realize it was the Ride of the Valkyries. I checked the top of the dresser, the table, my pants. I followed the music until I found the slippery little bit of technology under the dresser. I flipped it open in a rush.

"Hello?" I sputtered.

"Dylan! Help!" Michael whispered on the other end.

"Where are you?"

"Dylan! You've got to... Oh God... I can't..."

"Michael! Tell me where you are." I could hardly speak, as my heart was in my throat.

"The roof...hanging...flagpole..." Then there was silence.

* * *

I had enough wherewithal to grab the key card before I raced to the elevator and punched the number for the top floor. Since my phone was still in my hand, and thanking God I'd stored the number, I called the hotel and begged them to send someone to the roof, or to meet me on the roof, or whatever they could do to locate a man who I was sure was hanging off the roof. I didn't know if they believed me, but I think the urgency in my babbling had them concerned enough to do something.

The elevator opened in front of the entrance to the pool and fitness area. I ran through and saw there was yet another level above this one. A sign pointing the way to the rooftop garden led me to stairs, which I took two and three at a time. I came out onto a patio, where chairs and tables with folded umbrellas converged. I might have appreciated the garden beyond the patio some other time, but while I raced across it yelling Michael's name, I really couldn't. I reached the edge—a rather low but wide cement wall—and looked over. Jesus, but it was a long way down.

"Michael," I screamed. A distant sound that might have been his voice drifted from my right. I headed toward it, calling again. "Michael!"

"Dylan." Still weak, but definitely closer. I reached the corner and looked over. There he was, hanging from the flagpole by his fingers. Literally.

"Oh my God," I breathed. "Michael, I'm here!"

"Dylan, help me."

"I will. Hang on, Michael." That was a stupid thing to say, I thought: of course he'd hang on. It was all he could do. Stretching as far as I could, my hand still wouldn't reach him. I took

off my shirt. As I twirled it into a makeshift rope, the hotel manager and a custodian found me.

"What's going on?" one of them yelled as they rushed up to the wall and looked over.

"Holy shit!"

I spared a glance at them. "Help me here." I tossed one end of my shirt toward Michael, but it fluttered past him. "Fuck." I yanked the shirt back.

Michael stared up at us. "I can't let go."

"Hold on a second." The custodian unbuckled his belt and pulled it off. "I'm gonna tie this to your belt, then hold it so you can lean over." I turned so he could secure it. It was woven cloth instead of leather, which made it easy to tie.

I knew Michael couldn't see what we were doing. "We're going to pull you up, Michael. Just a couple more seconds." I shouted it into the air, hoping he'd hear.

While we managed the impromptu harness, the manager tied a few knots in my shirt so it wouldn't unfurl so much.

After a few firm tugs we determined things were as good as they were going to get. I leaned over the wall, shirt in hand. The two men behind me braced their feet and held tight to the line at my waist. My feet left the concrete as I reached farther, getting the shirt as close to Michael's hands as possible.

He looked up at me, eyes wide with fear. His white hands gripped the flagpole.

"You've gotta let go. Just one hand."

He didn't respond.

"Come on, baby, your hands are strong. I know you can do this."

He nodded.

"Just open up those fingers and reach a little. The shirt's right there. It'll hold you. I'll hold you."

For a long moment we stared at each other. His jaw clenched just before he wrenched his hand from the pole. He caught the shirt. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

"Almost there," I yelled so the men holding me could hear.

One of them called back, "We've got you."

"Okay, Michael. Now the other one. Can you brace your feet on the wall?"

He scrabbled a little, but got there.

"Good. Get ready to let go of the pole." I put as much power into my voice as I could so everybody could hear me. "On the count of three, we're going to pull you up, understand?"

"Yes." It was a whisper, but I heard it.

"Ready? One. Two. Three." In a miraculous moment Michael grabbed the shirt with his other hand, and we three pulled hard. Michael came flying over the wall, and we all fell back, landing in a heap on the grass of a garden growing twenty stories above the city of brotherly

love.

* * *

After I got Michael to our room, wrapped in a blanket and warmed with scotch thoughtfully provided by the management, he told me the story of how he ended up on the flagpole. When the detectives arrived, he had to tell it all again.

"So, you're saying that after our officer dropped you off here, you went up to the roof?" Detective Brooks asked.

"No." Michael sighed. "He dropped me off, and as soon as I walked into the lobby, the desk clerk called me over, asked if I was Michael Gilmore. When I said I was, he handed me a note from Dylan, telling me to meet him on the rooftop garden."

"Which clerk was it?"

"I didn't get his name."

Brooks tried not to roll his eyes, I could tell. "What did he look like?"

"Short, maybe five-five, five-seven. Red hair, kind of sticking up all over. Young."

"Do you still have the note?" Montrose asked.

"I think so." He wriggled free of the blanket and dug in his jeans pocket. He pulled out a crumpled bit of paper and handed it over to her. I guess enough people had touched it by this time that she didn't care about fingerprints. I hadn't yet seen the note, so I leaned in to look at it. She gave me the hairy eyeball, but I was too tired to be scared of her anymore.

"This your handwriting?" she asked. It was printing, actually, block letters, a style often used by architects and contractors. But it wasn't mine. I shook my head.

"You couldn't recognize if it was his writing?" Brooks asked Michael.

"No. I've only seen his writing a few times, and it's been a while, and why would I think that if I got a note from Dylan it wouldn't really be from him?" Insulted, he wrapped himself back in the blanket.

The rest of us mulled over his question for a minute.

"Okay, go on," Montrose prodded.

"So I followed the clerk's directions to the garden. It was beautiful, and I could appreciate why Dylan might want to meet there. I didn't see him, so I walked around a bit. Called his name. I thought maybe he was planning something—drinks or dinner—to help us relax. I didn't know what his day had been like, but since mine sucked, I thought maybe his did too." This last was pointed directly at Montrose and Brooks, but they didn't seem to notice.

"So how did you end up on the flagpole?" Brooks asked.

"I walked over to the edge. The lights below intrigued me, and I got to thinking about how I could work that into a painting. Something, somebody, pushed me hard. No, not a push. It was more like a shoulder slamming into my back. And I went over. My stomach hit the flag-

pole, and I ended up with it under my arms.” Tears pooled in his eyes. “I don't know how long I hung there. I yelled for help, but nobody came. Then I remembered my cell phone, I could still feel it in my pocket. At first I was afraid to let go of the pole to reach for it. I finally managed to get one leg up over the flagpole and let go of one arm to pull my phone out of my pocket.”

His eyes were closed now, as if he were picturing it happening. I could feel the trembling start in his hands; I held them in both of mine and rubbed little circles with my fingers, trying to calm him.

“I got the phone, got it open. Dylan's on my speed dial...”

“I'm on your speed dial?” I was inordinately pleased.

“Of course you are. Aren't I on yours?”

“Yes, you're two.”

He smiled at me. Detective Brooks cleared his throat.

“It took him forever to answer...”

“I'm sorry. The phone was under the dresser.”

“...and when he did, I could hardly talk. I'd planned on hitting the 911 speed dial after I reached Dylan, but my hand was sweaty, the phone slipped, and I could only hold on to that damn pole and pray.” He turned to look at me, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “You came for me, Dylan. I knew you'd come. You saved my life.” His tears fell in earnest now, and I held him to me, rocking like my mom used to do when I was little and hurting.

“Mr. Gilmore, do you have any idea who might have done this?” Brooks asked. Michael shook his head against my chest.

“Is there anyone who has a grudge, or might be angry with you? Anything?” Montrose pressed. Again the shake, no.

The detectives looked at each other. Brooks spoke to Montrose, “I'd say Gallagher was good for this, except he's dead.”

Montrose agreed, “Yes. That would make him not a suspect.”

I looked up at the detectives. “Can we be done here? Please?”

* * *

We stayed close to each other all night, touching in some way. Michael claimed he wasn't hungry, but I was starving, so I ordered room service. The front desk manager came along with the cart and introduced himself as Nick Taylor, told us if there was anything we needed to please let him know. I pegged his voice as the one on the phone last night, but he was too gracious to mention it now. I was able to get Michael to eat the chicken dumpling soup before he fell asleep with his head in my lap. When I shifted to go to the bathroom, he woke and followed me, wearing the blanket like a cape.

Since we were both there, I turned the water on in the whirlpool tub. It was big enough for the two of us. I got us undressed, having to uncurl his fingers from the blanket. We both used the toilet; then I got in the tub and helped him get in front of me. I held him, cradled in my arms and between my legs, kissing his hair from time to time, until the water lost its heat.

I dried us off, wrapped the blanket back around him, and put my arm around his waist. Together we bolted the door, closed the curtains, turned off the lights, turned off my cell phone, hit the do-not-disturb button on the hotel phone, and got in bed.

We stayed there throughout the next day, leaving it only to use the bathroom. I did call down to the front desk to ask for use of the room for one more night. They must have been expecting that, because the day manager got on the phone and told me we could have it gratis. He asked what he could send up from room service and did we want the messages that had been left at the desk.

"There are messages?" I asked.

"Quite a few."

"Huh. Yes, send them up, thanks."

When I got up to put on the complimentary robe, Michael sat up in bed but didn't try to follow. A knock sounded at the door. I grabbed my wallet and opened the door to not only the room service waiter with his cart but also a bellhop with a handful of messages.

The room service guys were almost family by this point. This one was Pablo. He smiled broadly as he pushed the cart into the room. The bellhop followed. I dug out some singles, and we traded his stack of papers for my cash, after which he made a quick exit.

Pablo pulled up the wings of the cart to turn it into a table and began setting up the service. "You know," he said, "usually this hotel has not much of the excitement. But these days..." He shook his head as he poured the tea. "Of course, we all are sorry that you got such a scary happening. But we all are glad you are not the one who wakes up dead."

I handed him a generous tip and saw him out the door. When I turned back to Michael, he had his face buried in his hands, shoulders shaking.

I rushed to him, thinking he was having a breakdown. He lowered his hands and showed me that he wasn't crying; he was laughing. Between giggles, he stuttered, "I'm glad I'm not the one who woke up dead too."

After that, he was able to relax. He was hungry, which made me feel better. While we ate I flipped through the messages.

"Who're they from?" Michael asked around a mouthful of potato.

"Friends, mostly. Word must've traveled fast. People are concerned about you." I turned another over. "About me, too, I guess. There's notes here from Sandy, Betsy, Jeff, Quentin, some of the friends in for the show. Oh, there's one here from Eli Granger."

“The sheriff?”

“Yeah. Hmm.” I shrugged. “Well, if it was something official I'm sure he would've gotten through. Good Lord, there are a couple here from TV stations.” I crumpled those up and tossed them toward the trash. They made me worry, though, about what was showing up in the news. I opened one of the papers on the table. Some of the information was accurate; much was speculation.

Michael looked up from the newsprint in front of him. “Jeez. I'm sure I don't want to see what they might be saying on TV.”

“Let's not even turn it on.”

“Agreed. I need to call my mom and dad. I don't know if they've caught wind of this yet.”

We finished our lunch. Michael phoned his parents. From what I could tell they hadn't heard anything, so he was able to explain without causing any hysterics. I made a call to Sandy to let her know we were both okay and to ask her to spread the word. I got her assurance that there were no pressing issues at the office and said a quick good-bye.

We spent the remainder of our time relaxing and recovering. Despite every terrible thing, we emerged from the hotel the next day, bodies, minds, and spirits intact.

Chapter Thirteen

As we stood just inside the door of his house, I tried to talk Michael into staying at my place.

"I'd like to," he said, "but I really need to be in my studio. I need to paint. It's like therapy for me."

"What if your attacker shows up?" I tried to project calm, but the worry was a geyser waiting to blow.

"Dylan, do you really think..."

"If they went to the trouble of enticing you to a roof so they could throw you off it, yes, I do think."

"Fuck, Dylan, yours is the house people are throwing rocks at! I'll be fine. Despite all the crying I've been doing lately, I am a grown-up. I can take care of myself." He crossed his arms and huffed a breath out his nostrils.

"Just like you took care of yourself on the roof?" I squinted at him.

"That isn't fair."

"Life's not fair! Get used to it!"

"Is this about Ian?"

"How could this be about Ian?"

"Are you worried I'll go off the deep end too? Maybe if I keep away from the paint thinner I'll stay saner a littler longer?" His hands flew, pointing at me, at himself, illustrating his indignation.

"This is not about Ian." I managed to be loud, even through clenched teeth.

"Then what is it about?" Michael yelled, full voice.

"It's about you! Shit! I just want to know you're safe."

"I know you want to be my big, bad protector, but I'm not your make-you-feel-good-boy."

"My what?"

"Make-you-feel-good-boy. You know. The fragile little guy you keep around so you can feel all manly and strong."

"You are nuts if you think that's how I feel about you. Jesus H. Christ. Maybe 'make-you-feel-good-boy' applies, but only if 'boy' means 'man' and 'make-you' means 'give me' and 'feel-good' means 'the best sex of my entire life!'"

He matched my volume. "Then why don't you just stay here?"

"Why don't you ask me to?"

"I just did!"

“Okay then!”

“Can we fuck now?”

“Shit, yeah!”

* * *

I did go back to work, but when I wasn't there, I was at Michael's house. When I was working, he was painting, with doors and windows locked, alarm system on.

My first day back in the office, I met with Betsy, Jeff, and Sandy and answered as many of their questions as I could. They had met Detectives Brooks and Montrose and had seen the news reports, so it didn't take long for them to get the big picture.

“Well,” Sandy stated, “Ian was a conceited asshole, even without going all stalker-crazy on you.”

“Yeah,” Jeff agreed. “Maybe he annoyed the wrong person one too many times.”

Betsy brought me coffee, reviewed and revised my calendar with me, and handed me a file full of message slips, letters, cards, and a contract or two. And we were back in business.

Michael finished what I came to think of as “my” angel. Behind the angel and the doorway in which he stood, the lights of a nighttime cityscape glowed, just like they would if you looked at them from twenty stories above.

He wanted to hang it in his bedroom, but that just made me feel weird. He placed it on the mantel in his studio, instead, saying that if he couldn't let it inspire his dreams, he'd let it inspire his art. I was okay with that.

I asked Michael to look at the pictures of the watercolor portrait that had flown into my living room. Thankfully, I only had shots of the first one. I'd been too shaken up to take pictures of the second, nasty one. He did agree it was a good likeness of me, but couldn't identify the style as belonging to anyone he knew. He couldn't identify the expression on my face, either, but suggested it was probably one the artist identified with—maybe he'd seen someone else with that look and wanted to transfer it to me.

He bought a new cell phone. When they asked what happened to the old one, he told them. They gave him a 40 percent discount.

I skipped poker night at Quentin's, but did have a drink with him after work one day. He was sorry about Ian's death. I'd never had the chance to tell him about the “new” Ian and found that I really didn't want to hash over it again.

“I bought one of his paintings, you know,” he told me.

“Whose? Ian's?”

“Yes.” He stared off into space a second. “I wonder if it will go up in value now that he's dead?”

"Ouch."

"Sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded; it was just a thought."

"S okay." We drank.

"I bought one of Michael Gilmore's too."

"Really? Which one?"

"The one with the outdoor Shakespeare. I thought it would be a nice touch in the lobby of the new theater." I remembered it. It was set in a park; you could tell that the performers were from "A Midsummer Night's Dream." As usual with Michael's work, the characters were beautiful and enchanting.

"Good choice."

He studied me for a minute and said, "You and he are together now?"

"Well, we seem to be, yeah. Trying to figure it out." I sipped my drink.

"It looks good on you, Dylan." His smile wavered just a little.

"Thanks."

After a short lull, he said, "I'm thinking about commissioning a piece."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Will you let Michael know?"

"Of course."

* * *

From the world of "there are no coincidences, only synchronicity," the new owners of one of the coffeehouses in town had been in Philly over the weekend looking for art to grace their new venture. They loved Michael's "Chooser" series and wanted him to do a mural for them, with strong fantasy elements. He worked out a contract with them and began the sketches.

Michael and I had a long chat about how much had happened in the short time we'd known each other. When we listed everything out, it was damn scary. We both felt we could have Something Special together, but didn't want our relationship cemented with hysteria, anxiety, or death threats. Together, we made the decision to take a step back, ratchet down the intensity; I returned to living in my own house, trusting he would be okay in his. There were no rocks through windows, no weird-ass watercolors. No skeletons, no murders, no forged notes, and no pushing off roofs. Detectives Brooks and Montrose were still on the case in Philly. They called once to check on us, but had nothing new to say other than that our stories of what we were doing the night Ian was killed matched, and the front desk manager as well as the room service people confirmed their interactions with us.

A week later, Claire called to tell me she and Mai Li were having a memorial service for Ian the next Saturday. "Will you come, Dylan?"

"Good Lord, Claire. I don't know. To say my feelings on the subject are mixed would be an understatement."

"It might do you good, sweetie. Purge the system and all." She had a point. "Besides, I know everyone wants to see you, make sure you are okay."

"I'll think about it."

"Bring Michael with you."

"I'll ask him."

"See you Saturday, sweetie."

"See you Saturday, Claire."

* * *

Saturday was an ideal summer day. Blue sky, puffy white clouds, warm but not overly so, with a slight, steady breeze. A perfect day to fall asleep with a good book, on the chaise lounge, under the big maple tree. But no matter how many prepositions I used, I wasn't getting out of the memorial service, and I couldn't get Michael to come with me. Claire had phoned first thing—another wake-up call by the Valkyries—to make sure I would be there.

The phone rang again as I stepped out of the shower. Assuming it was Claire, I answered, "Yes, Mother, I'm getting dressed."

Jeff's laughter cackled across the radio waves. "Ooo, what color is your underwear?"

"Purple with pink daisies, funny guy."

"Bikini, briefs, or boxers?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Just tell me where and when. You know I've always had a crush on you, sweetie pie." He sang the last part like the Gershwin song.

This was getting weird, and I was getting cold. "Okay, really, what did you want?"

"Just wanted to see if you'd like to join Betsy and Sandy and me—we're making a road trip to Fannie's Fruits."

"Gosh, there's nothing I'd like more than to spend the day picking plums with you guys..."

"But..."

"I'm heading to a memorial service for Ian."

He switched gears right away. "Oh, I'm sorry, Dylan. You okay? Is Michael going, or do you need someone to go with you?"

"No, he's not, but I'll be fine, hanging out with old friends. Bring me back some fruit, huh?"

"Will do, boss."

I managed to put on underwear, socks, and my khaki pants before the phone rang again. This time I looked at the caller ID. Betsy. "Yes ma'am, did I forget something?"

"Just checking, Dylan. Jeff called me. You okay? You're sure you don't want company?"

"I'm fine. Please don't worry about me." I tried to find my blue polo shirt.

"Will you be in on Monday?"

"Yes. I plan to be back late tonight, actually." I tore open the plastic bag from the dry cleaners.

"Okay, then. Call if you need anything."

"Thanks."

The blue polo was in the hamper, but I found the green button-down I liked. I had my belt in my hand when the Valkyries rang again. I expected Sandy, but it was Quentin's name I saw. "Hello, Q, what's up?"

"It's a beautiful day. I'm going up to Fox Lake for a little fishing, want to come?"

I suspected he'd be doing more napping than fishing. "Sounds tempting, but I'm going to New York for a service for Ian."

"Oh, huh. You driving alone?"

"Yes, I am." I tried threading the belt through the loops with one hand.

"I could drive you, enjoy the sunshine, and make sure you get home okay."

"What makes you think I'll be incapable of getting back?"

"Well, these things can get pretty emotional, Dylan. And what if there's a lot of alcohol flowing?"

"I appreciate your concern, Q. But I can handle it. Really. You just enjoy your nap...I mean fishing."

After we said good-bye, I had both hands free to buckle my belt. I was really grateful to have friends, but they sure made it difficult to get dressed.

The phone rang again. I was pre-occupied with my shoes so didn't check the ID display. "Grand Central Station."

A short silence followed by, "Dylan?"

"Michael! Hi!"

"Grand Central Station?"

"I've been getting a lot of calls this morning."

"Funny. Hey. You still going to the service?"

"Yeah. I'm almost dressed now." No thanks to anybody.

"Want some company?"

"Sure. What made you change your mind?"

"I got to thinking...if I lost my mind, did some crazy things that hurt the people I loved, I would want them to forgive me, to remember me in a good way, like you said. And even though I didn't know Ian in his good days, there are a lot of you who did; maybe I'll learn

something. Beyond that, I have to forgive him for hurting you.”

This man continued to amaze me. “I’ll pick you up in about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll be ready.”

He actually wasn’t, and he had to run back in the house twice to get things he forgot: first, his wallet, second, his cell phone.

* * *

The service, like everything Claire touched, was really nice. Many of our friends stood up and remembered Ian in the kindest terms, telling stories of the good times. I knew about a lot of them, but some surprised me. A minister from the Unitarian church spoke about life, death, friendship, spirit, and the universe, and somehow tied it all to Ian. We drank coffee, ate desserts, and at the end, toasted Ian with fine champagne, wishing him well. I was glad I went, and even without knowing why he died, I had a sense of closure. Michael released at least some of his anger and resentment, and we drove home with a feeling of peace.

That peace was shattered when Michael opened the door of his house to a scene of broken furniture, tattered books, and smashed crockery. I followed him as he raced to his studio and nearly bowled him over when he stopped short just inside the door. “Oh my God, oh no. This can’t be happening.” It was almost a chant he repeated as we surveyed the disaster. I held him back from touching anything and called the police. We didn’t move from that spot as we waited.

The studio was trashed. The cupboard doors hung open, the shelves bare of the supplies that now littered the floor. Paint was splattered over one set of windows like a Jackson Pollock painting on steroids. The paintings—even the one he himself had defaced—all of them were smashed or covered in smears of paint. The smell of mineral spirits lingered in the air. His easel was nothing but a pile of sticks.

His painting of me had been slashed with something sharp and thrown on the floor. In its place on the mantle was another of those watercolors, this time a full frontal body portrait, of me. With no baseline to ground the figure, it looked like I hung suspended in the air. One leg was bent a little, one arm reached out in supplication, the other hung limply at my side. Bloody gashes marked my throat and chest. My face was the picture of ecstasy. There was something familiar about the pose, but I couldn’t place it.

Words scrawled in black paint across the windows to our right: “He is mine. You will pay.”

Chapter Fourteen

The damage continued into the bedroom, where the sheets were torn and the mattress slashed, and into the garage, where someone had done a number on Michael's car with a hammer.

Eli Granger and Detective Neilson arrived at the same time, along with several deputies and the inevitable tech crew. They quickly determined that whoever did this broke in through the back door to the garage.

"Wasn't the alarm system on?" I asked Michael.

"Of course it was." A pause. "Maybe not. I don't know."

I thought about him running in and out of the house before we left. Maybe he was too rushed to remember it. Neilson checked on it and confirmed that it had, indeed, been off. He also determined that the line of sight from the kitchen windows to the front of the house was clear enough that someone looking for it could see the alarm keypad and how it was lit. They would have known it wasn't on.

Eli placed a call to Brooks and Montrose in Philadelphia. I had no idea how the jurisdiction worked and really didn't care at that point. I sat with Michael at the kitchen table, worried that he would go into shock at any minute.

We reviewed the events that took place when we were in the city for the exhibit. We reviewed the last week. Michael wracked his brain to think of anyone who could be behind this. Night had fully settled when the other detectives arrived.

Someone ordered pizza; the tech crew finished their work, the deputies moved on. In the newly settled quiet, Montrose spoke. "Who are your enemies, Mr. Forest?"

"My enemies?"

"Yes. Who has it in for you? You're the one in those death and ecstasy paintings."

"But it wasn't me who got pushed off the roof."

"No. It was your lover," Eli pointed out.

"And now said lover has been threatened," Brooks observed.

Neilson jumped on the bandwagon. "Michael Gilmore is the you in 'you will pay.'"

"And Dylan is the he," Eli added.

Michael spoke for the first time in a while. "If I'm the you, and Dylan is he, then who goes with mine?"

"Somebody who's not an enemy, then. Someone who is...wants Dylan for themselves," Eli said.

"Someone who's gone over the deep end, who doesn't necessarily have a connection to Michael, other than that he has Dylan, and it's getting in the way of our psychopath having

him.” Montrose had switched to first names, I noticed. “And, this visit was probably intended to be more fatal than it turned out.”

Brooks nodded. “Given the amount of destruction, I'd wager the perpetrator was angry that Michael wasn't home.” I guessed we were all pals, now. Then I realized I didn't know if Montrose and Brooks had first names.

“God,” Michael whispered.

“What about the watercolors, the ones of me dead, or dying, or whatever?” I ran my fingers through my hair and yanked on it for the hundredth time. My life used to be pretty calm, pretty boring. Had something changed in the balance of the universe to bring out the dangerously crazy in people?

“Maybe that's a kind of warning—if they can't have you, no one can,” Neilson theorized. “A projectile through a window is usually considered some kind of warning.”

I was struck by a new scary idea. “Whoever it was, they had to have been at the gallery. Otherwise how could they have made the new watercolor so much like Michael's dying dragon?”

Brooks shuffled through the briefcase he'd brought in with him. “I've got the list in here somewhere.” He looked up from his search. “Michael? Who expected you to be home today?”

Michael shook his head. “I don't know. Friends who wanted to stop in?”

“No, not like that,” Brooks went on. “This wouldn't be someone just dropping in for a visit. This would be someone who came here knowing you would be home, probably alone. Except you weren't.”

“I don't know.”

Something niggled at my brain, but Brooks distracted me with his list of suspects. He dropped the papers I'd seen when they questioned me, the ones that had all the names of the people who had signed the guest book at the gallery.

“Oh. Dylan.” Michael clutched my sleeve. “Do you think that somehow Ian's death is part of this?”

“How's that?” Neilson asked.

“Michael, how could...” My voice trailed off on its own when I understood the connection Michael was making. “Do you think? Is that possible?” My heart pounded in my chest. “What if Ian was killed because this...psycho...thought...”

“That he was your lover?” Montrose finished. I nodded numbly.

“And what about Jason Fairbanks?” Eli asked quietly. No one said anything for a few minutes. A sharp headache started its buildup behind my eyes.

* * *

Our law enforcement officials made calls, sorted through the house, and ate cold pizza.

Michael and I looked at the gallery list until I thought my eyes would fall out. I finally just put my head down on the table and fell asleep. The juice of a ripe, purple plum dribbling down my chin woke me up. Oh. No, it wasn't that. I was drooling.

I sat up and wiped my mouth, tried to focus on the scene around me. Night filled the windows, and a few lamps left warm pockets of yellow. Michael must have brought blankets out at some point. One was draped across my shoulders. Michael had dozed off in an overstuffed chair, with the list still in his hand. I could hear quiet voices coming from down the hall; Eli and the detectives were probably in the studio.

My stomach gurgled, and I thought a plum would taste really good right now. I wondered idly if Jeff, Betsy, and Sandy brought any back for me from Fannie's as I scrounged in Michael's refrigerator for food. I decided that beer was sort of like food and opened a bottle, standing at the sink to drink it. All at once every neuron in my brain fired.

I shouted and dropped the beer into the sink.

Michael kind of rolled up and staggered over to me. Eli and the detectives ran into the kitchen.

"What? What's wrong?" Eli grasped my arm and looked to see if I'd been hurt.

"Plums," I said. "Plums!" They all looked at me, trying to figure out what language this might be. "Oh my God, I know who knew. The people. The phone calls. Grand Central Station!" It appeared that when all neurons fired at once, none of them actually connected to anything.

"Dylan!" Michael grabbed me, looked hard into my eyes. "Calm down. What's the matter with you?"

I took a deep breath. And another. "I think I know who might have done it." They all sort of pushed me back into a chair at the table and joined me, everyone asking questions at once. When Eli whistled, it startled us into silence.

"Talk, Dylan," he commanded. So I did. I talked about the plans for Ian's service, how Michael didn't want to go. I talked about the series of phone calls I received that morning, my well-meaning friends first offering activities, then company when they found out I was going to the service alone. I talked about Michael's call coming after all the others, when he told me he had changed his mind about joining me, and how the people I talked to earlier all thought he was staying home.

It hit me then, the enormity of what I was saying. Was one of my closest friends a psychopathic, neurotically infatuated killer?

They wouldn't let me ruminate on that, however. Eli and the detectives demanded a word-by-word replay of the phone calls. We noted that Sandy hadn't called, but that she probably

knew as much as Jeff and Betsy did. We eliminated Claire; she and I hadn't discussed if Michael would be with me, and besides, she was at the service with us.

Sandy, Jeff, Betsy, and Quentin had all been at the gallery, had all stayed at the Bendix.

"Wait," said Montrose. "Quentin MacGregor wasn't at the gallery."

"Yes, he was," I assured her.

"Well, his name wasn't in the book." She looked around for the list, and Michael retrieved it from the chair he'd been sleeping in.

I felt bad that I'd missed the fact that his name wasn't on the list. But I had been really trying to think about the people whose names were there. And I was tired. And under duress. "He might have missed signing it. There were times when a lot of people came in the door at once. He was definitely there, though. We talked. Ian walked around with him. In fact, the other day he told me he bought two paintings, one of Ian's and one of Michael's."

"He bought one of my paintings?" Michael smiled.

"He said he did."

"Which one?"

"Shakespeare in the Park. He's going to hang it..."

"Would you two focus here, please?" Montrose never lost focus. "Okay, so those four people were in New York when Ian was killed and when Michael went airborne. They were all under the impression that Dylan was going alone to the service, which meant Michael would be here. What else do we need to know?"

"Strong enough to push a man off a roof?" asked Brooks.

"Jeff and Quentin, definitely. Maybe the women." Eli knew all of them.

"It wasn't just a shove," Michael reminded us. "More like a body slam."

"So it could've been any one of them." Brooks sighed.

"What about the pictures of Dylan? Who could have done those?" Neilson turned to me.

"Quentin sculpts; he's very good at it. I've been to his house for poker games. He has some paintings he's done hanging in his den, but they're abstracts, done in oils. An experimental phase, he told me. Jeff is an excellent architect, and I've seen him freehand a few things that were amazingly good."

"Jeff asked me a lot of questions at the exhibit," Michael offered. "He was very knowledgeable about technique and materials. We were standing in front of the last 'Chooser of the Slain' paintings when we talked." Nobody needed reminding how those paintings inspired the most recent one of me.

"Sandy...I don't know, but if her doodling is any indication, I'd be comfortable saying she couldn't crayon her way out of a paper bag, let alone create portraits in watercolor. I've never known Betsy to draw or doodle, and I can't recall her ever saying anything about art as

something she might do in her spare time. Fruit picking, yes. Volunteering at the library...crossword puzzles...but nothing artistic."

"You're right," Michael added. "Both she and Sandy congratulated me at the gallery, with the usual comments of 'I always wished I could draw' and 'If it's not paint-by-numbers I can't do it.'"

Brooks started to pace. "Okay, so we can't be sure, but it seems like the men are the more likely suspects."

"Well," Neilson drawled, "since Dylan's gay, that does make sense."

"What? Women can't be attracted to gay men?" I was injured.

Montrose ignored my question. "Did any of them come on to you, ask you out, touch too much, that kind of thing?"

I told them about Jeff's reaction on the phone yesterday. "He also touches me a lot, but I think he does that to everyone. He's a touchy-feely guy."

"He didn't touch me at the gallery, except to shake hands," Michael said.

"I can't say that he's ever touched me, even at the marsh the day they found Jason," Eli added. "He did, however, run up and hug you."

"He knows me better than you." Until we proved he was a murderer, Jeff was still my friend.

"I'm a nice guy. I can be comforting."

"Not when you're in uniform, you're not."

Michael snickered. "You the man, Sheriff."

"What about Quentin MacGregor?" Montrose again, focused as always.

"Well, he hit on me not long after we met, which was three years ago when I moved here. I turned him down. We've been friends ever since, and he tests the waters now and again. But he's never serious."

"Do you spend a lot of time with him?"

"I play poker every other week with him and three other guys. We have drinks together a couple times a month. Dinner every once in a while, sometimes to discuss business, sometimes just to catch up if we haven't seen each other in a while."

"And does he touch you a lot, speak in innuendoes, flirt?" asked Brooks.

I tried to remember and was suddenly self-conscious about my own tendencies to touch or not. I recalled how I played along at first with Jeff on the phone. "I don't think Quentin does those things any more than other people. Although..." Nah, it was nothing.

"Although what?" prodded Neilson.

"He gave me a gift, once, after we'd completed the work on Art & Books."

"What kind of gift?"

"One of his sculptures."

Michael sucked in a breath. "That was from Quentin?"

"It was just a gift from a friend."

"Dylan, I have seen that sculpture, and it was more than just a friendly gift."

"What?" the others asked as one.

"It's beautiful," Michael began. "It's on a pedestal to put it at eye level, but the statue itself is about two feet tall, looks like it's made of marble. It's of two men standing, front to back. The one in back is penetrating the one in front and kissing his neck. The front man has his head tilted back, resting on the other's shoulder, his face completely serene."

I sighed. "I've always thought it was nice."

"Dylan!" I think Eli may have wanted to hit me upside the head. "It sounds like an invitation!"

"Okay," I said. "Maybe it was, but again, we completed the gallery almost three years ago—it was one of my first jobs here. And, again, there's been nothing like that since." Really—why was I so defensive about people who might be trying to kill my lovers, or me?

Montrose moved on. "What about the women? Have either one of them ever come on to you?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Look. Don't take offense at this, but would you know?"

"What do you mean, would I know?"

"Well, you're gay. Attuned to the male of the species. Would you know if a woman was coming on to you? It's a legitimate question."

"I might be gay, but I'm not dead. Besides, I've seen Sex and the City. I would know." Man, that woman was irritating.

"Is there anything else we can tie any of them to? What about Jason Fairbanks?" Neilson asked. "The autopsy was inconclusive, but his death could have been murder. Did all these people know him? And did they know what your relationship was like?"

"He worked for Quentin. The others knew him in that capacity. I'm sure Quentin knew about Jason and me. Hell." I snorted. "Jason might have had the same thing going with Quentin; we never discussed it. I'm pretty sure Jeff would've picked up on it, seeing as how he's attuned to the male of the species too." I glared at Montrose, but she just rolled her eyes. "I don't know about Sandy and Betsy. It's not like I make my love life a topic of discussion at work."

"Thank you," Michael said.

"You're welcome."

Brooks leaned in to me. "You didn't have any boyfriends after Jason?"

"No, Detective Brooks. No boyfriends."

"You didn't have sex for three years?"

"Hey. You're getting a little personal here."

"I just want to make sure there aren't any other bodies to dig up."

Through clenched teeth I said, "I had sex, just not meaningful, and not in this town."

"Okay. Sheesh."

Eli brought out some large sheets of newsprint he'd found in Michael's studio, and the detectives made charts and notes and got everything we knew in one place. We had two strong suspects, both of them my good friends.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

Brooks said, "Bring them in for questioning."

"Watch them," Neilson added.

"Have you come on to them and see who bites." Montrose snapped her teeth together like an alligator.

"Set a trap," Eli said. "If we do it right, we can entice whoever it is to come out to play. We'll catch them in the act, and the good guys win."

I already hated this idea. "How are we going to do that? It sounds dangerous—and a lot like Montrose's idea. I'm not that good of an actor."

"I'll do it." Michael spoke very quietly, but he sure had everyone's attention. "It's what makes sense, right?" he asked Eli, who nodded. "After all, I'm the one he wants to get rid of. Let's give him the chance."

"No way." I stood up and my chair fell to the floor. "There is no way in hell you are going to purposefully put yourself in the way of a fuck-nuts crazy killer. In fact, if you thought it through, you would be running in the complete opposite direction—as far from me as possible."

"I am not going to be frightened into leaving my home." Michael proved he could yell and knock chairs over as well as I could. "And I am not—I repeat, not—going to let some fuck-nuts push me away from the man I may be falling in love with!"

"Well, you just better...what did you say?"

"Oh, Lord." Brooks groaned.

"You heard me." The fire was back in his eyes, and I could hardly breathe. There was no one in the world but the two of us. The reality of these ugly events and nerve-wracking days was so far away as to be on another planet, and Michael and I stood in a paradise of possibility, a cloud of could-be, a...

“Okay, okay, save it for the honeymoon.” Montrose knew how to bring the reality crashing back in. “What's your plan, Sheriff?”

“It's not a complicated plan. We put a wire on Michael and set him up where our suspects know he'll be alone. We'll be listening close by; Michael can get him to talk a little, and we can take it from there.”

Neilson jumped off his chair. “Thank God we're actually moving on something. Let's hash out the details. The sooner we get this over, the sooner I can return to my normally peaceful existence.”

Chapter Fifteen

It took a few days to pull it all together. Word got around about the vandalism at Michael's house, so it didn't seem odd that I took some time off to help him clean up the mess—I popped into work once a day to check in, but otherwise managed what I had to at home. This kept me from spilling any beans and allowed me to keep a close watch on Michael. I didn't care anymore who knew that Michael and I were an item; he was more than just a fling, and anyone who'd been at the exhibition had seen us together, holding hands, if nothing else.

The fresh fruit I'd been looking forward to didn't materialize. A flat tire kept Jeff, Sandy and Betsy from making their trip to the farm. So, theoretically, any one of them could have made a visit to Michael's house. I refused to dwell on it.

We got the local paper to do a story on the mural Michael would be painting at the coffee-house. It appeared in Thursday's edition. I made a point of mentioning to my staff how Michael had to work at night because the place was still open during the day, and paint fumes and mineral spirits weren't exactly compatible with roasted coffee and cinnamon muffins. Jeff asked if I thought Michael needed any help with the project. I said I thought he might.

I called Quentin on the pretense of setting up a fishing day to make up for the one I missed, and got to chatting about the mural, and wasn't it great that Michael was getting this exposure locally, and it was too bad he had to work at night, as I'm sure people would love to see him at it. I also suggested that when Quentin finished the theater, he should display the work of local artists, be a community booster and all. He liked that idea and wanted to discuss it further over drinks.

On Thursday night, Michael and I prepared the wall for the mural, hauled in all his paints and materials, and situated everything behind a makeshift barricade of sawhorses, two-by-fours, and plants to keep it all safe from the daytime gawkers, yet easy to return to at night. We played music and made a lot of noise, to keep the psychopaths at bay.

On Friday evening, Eli and the detectives—that was starting to sound like a fifties singing group—gave Michael his instructions and wired him for sound, while I paced in the next room. The microphone and transmitter were hidden under his clothes, but over the protective vest he wore. An earpiece would allow him to hear Eli on the other end, Eli being the best choice because he knew all the players. Detective Montrose braided Michael's hair so it hugged his head and covered his ears, hiding the little device tucked into the right one. I kissed him gently on the lips, too afraid to say anything. He brushed his fingers along my jaw and kissed me back, then drove off to the coffeehouse.

The rest of us hid in an alley, in the van Detective Neilson borrowed to house the necessary equipment. They let me stay only because none of them wanted to deal with the hissy fit

I would throw if they didn't, but Montrose threatened me with death if I did anything to screw up the mission. The van belonged to the owners of the furniture rental place that backed up to the alley, and it was frequently parked there. The store was closed for the week because the owners were on vacation, which is how Neilson was so easily able to "borrow" the van. From where we were positioned, we could see the street on the side of the shop, but not the front.

We could hear Michael moving around, the soft brushing sound of his shirt shifting, the tinny sound of country music in the background.

At ten o'clock my cell phone rang, and even though it was on vibrate-only—or maybe because it was—I jumped and almost pissed my pants. The law people, with their razor-sharp reflexes, just looked at me while I dug the phone out of my pocket and checked the caller ID.

"It's Quentin," I whispered.

"Answer it," directed Eli. "You don't have to whisper. Just don't yell."

"Hey, Q." I tried to sound normal. But I didn't know what normal sounded like.

"Hi. Just checking to make sure we're still on for fishing tomorrow."

"I'm looking forward to it. Did you want me to bring anything? Beer? Worms?" A body-guard?

"No, I've got everything we'll need."

I'll bet you do.

"You okay, Dylan?"

"Sure. Of course. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. You just sound a little, um, stressed."

I tried to laugh, but it came out as a wheeze. "Just missing Michael, I guess."

"That's right; he's working nights now, isn't he? Why don't you go over there and visit?"

"No, I promised I would stay away. He didn't want to be distracted."

"I can understand that." Count to two. "Do you want some company?"

"Thanks, but no. I'll watch a little TV and go to bed. I have to be on my toes for the fish tomorrow."

"Okay then. 'Night, Dylan."

"Good night, Q."

"Nice job, Mr. Forest," Detective Montrose said after I closed the phone.

We listened to the sounds of the artist at work for the next hour. Every now and then Michael would ask if we were still there, still awake. Eli would assure him we were. This surveillance thing was incredibly boring. I wished I had a deck of cards or something. The only thing keeping me awake was the screaming my nerve endings were doing.

Just after eleven, we heard the sound of someone knocking at the door of the coffee-house. All five of us sat up straight and leaned in.

"Hi, Betsy." Michael's voice was loud, presumably to be heard through the door. "What are you doing here?" We could hear a woman's voice, too muffled to make out the words. "You're bringing me coffee?" Good Lord, I thought, the woman lives to serve coffee.

"Let her in, Michael," Eli instructed through the mic. We followed the noises of steps, opening the door, letting her in.

"I thought you might like some coffee to help keep you going through the night," Betsy said cheerfully. "Dylan seems to live on it, and maybe you do too. I don't know how you take it, so I brought cream and sugar along."

"Thank you. That is really thoughtful of you." Rustling noises.

"Aren't you going to drink it?"

"I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I can't drink coffee when I'm working. I'm already a fidgety guy, and when I paint, the adrenaline pumps up. Caffeine makes me too jittery to control the brushes. I do appreciate your thinking of me, though. Really."

"Try to get her to move along," Eli told him.

"I, um, I need to get back to work now, so let me get the door for you." Steps sounded.

"Oh, please can I stay? I'd love to watch you paint."

"Well, you see, I'm not even at the painting stage. I'm still sketching the design on the wall, and then I'll be mixing paint, and it's really not very interesting yet."

"I won't be a bother, I promise. And you might decide you want that coffee after all, and I'll bet there's a microwave in the kitchen." The sound of scraping—a chair on the hardwood?

Michael coughed and cleared his throat. Eli looked at Neilson. Neilson shrugged.

"Just let her be, Michael. See where it goes."

"Is she always this pushy?" Brooks asked me.

"Yeah, pretty much. Only she's usually sterner with me."

"Okay," Michael muttered. We heard the noises that meant he was moving again, interspersed with some static. Neilson fussed with knobs on the equipment, and the static stopped, but the other sounds did too. He fussed some more, and we heard Betsy's voice.

"...love him, don't you?"

Wait—what did we miss?

"It's a little early to tell, but, maybe."

"Does he love you, do you think?"

He stopped moving. "What's with the twenty questions, Betsy?"

"I'm just curious, is all. I don't understand why a man would love another man when there's a perfectly good woman standing by, ready to be his life's partner."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jesus, it's Betsy." I reached for the door. Two sets of strong hands pulled me back.

"We have to wait, Dylan. The timing here is crucial," Brooks explained as he and Montrose sat me down.

"But she's going to hurt him."

"He'll be all right. Now shut up." Good ol' Montrose. Good until she handcuffed me to the seat. "For your own safety," she whispered.

"...were going so well, too, after Jason was out of the picture. Until you and Ian showed..." The sound faded in and out. No one in the van said a word, and Neilson worked on the controls.

"...you doing?" Michael's voice.

"We're still with you, Michael," Eli lied.

The lights of a car hit the side of the building, and the car pulled up and parked there. Out popped Jeff Archer.

"What's he doing here?"

No one answered me. We watched him lock the car and stroll around to the front of the coffeehouse, without a care in the world.

"Hey, there." Jeff's voice. "I just thought I'd see if you needed company, or an extra set of hands. Oh, hi, Betsy. What are you doing here? Michael, are you feeling okay? You look a little pale."

God, why was he pale? What did we miss? I pulled at the handcuff. The rattle seemed to echo around the van.

"Stop it, Dylan." Brooks, sitting next to me, grabbed my arm. "You have to have some faith."

"And you have to fucking shut the fuck up so we can fucking hear!" Neilson showed a side of himself I didn't know existed. I tried to hold still and be quiet. Brooks's big hand on my arm helped.

Eli tapped on the box in front of him. "We're having a few technical difficulties," he told Michael. "Can you still hear me?" A screeching noise issued from the box until Eli slapped the right button to turn it off. He threw down the mic. "Fuck!" The word of the day.

We all focused back on the unfolding drama. It was like an old-fashioned radio play.

Michael: Jeff. Hi. No, I really don't need any help. Except maybe I think I have some water in one ear (jostling noise, like a finger jabbing an ear canal).

Betsy: You should go home, Jeff. Michael and I have some things to discuss.

Jeff: You sure? Because I could just sit over here and wait till you're done talking. Hey, is this coffee (shoes walking across the wood floor)? It's getting cold.

Michael: I didn't want it.

Jeff: Can I have it?

Betsy: Don't touch that coffee!

Jeff: God, you're bitchy tonight. I can't imagine that Michael really wants to talk with you. Maybe you should go, and I should stay.

Michael: Why can't he have the coffee?

Betsy: Because I said so.

Jeff: You're not our mother.

Betsy: Put it down, Jeff.

Jeff: Christ! Is that a gun (sound of liquid pouring, paper cup hitting the floor)?

Betsy: Shut up, Jeff!

Michael: Are you going to kill both of us now?

Betsy: Only if I have to (sounds of shuffling feet). Don't move, Jeff.

Michael: Did you kill Ian Gallagher?

Betsy: I thought he was getting back together with Dylan. He blew into town, stayed at Dylan's. They looked so cozy together. I saw them at the gallery, Ian's arm around Dylan, so possessive, so protective. But he wasn't the one I needed to worry about, was he?

Jeff: Shit, woman. You're crazy.

Michael: What about Jason Fairbanks?

Betsy: Just too cute and fun for Dylan to resist. Jason dropped in to see Dylan one day. Dylan was out to an early dinner with a client, but I told Jason he was due back any second and got up to get him some coffee while he waited—he liked the lattes, with lots of sugar. He couldn't even taste the Laetrile I dumped in it.

Jeff: Laetrile?

Betsy: Cyanide, basically.

Jeff: Oh.

Michael: You killed him, then dumped him in (static noises interfere—Neilson at the knobs) around to save him.

Betsy: Ridiculously easy to do, in the dark of night.

Michael: And what about me?

Betsy: You? You're just harder to get rid of. Can't fall off a roof. Not home when you should be. Won't drink poison. I was getting tired of trying, but I've got it figured out now.

Montrose, closest to the door, shoved it open, jumped out, and drew her gun in one fluid motion. Eli and Neilson hurtled to the door at the same time, but slid around each other to get out gracefully, like some weird pas de deux. Brooks tossed the handcuff keys to the floor.

"By the time you get those and unlock the cuffs, it should be safe for you to come in."

"I fucking hate all of you!" I yelled in his wake. Far be it from me to spurn the word of the day.

The conversation from inside the café continued coming through the speaker.

Michael: What makes you think (static noises again) time?

Betsy: Jeff will help me with the loose ends.

Jeff: I will?

Betsy: Yes, you see, Jeff, you're in love with Michael.

Jeff: I am?

Betsy: Sure you are. And Michael won't leave Dylan (static) shoot him. Then, when you realize what you've done, you set fire to this place and shoot yourself. It all works out in the end. Dylan will be distraught, of course, and with no man left to cry on, he'll turn to me. I'll show him...

I heard a popping noise, which made me realize that I could be scared more than I already was. There was yelling. I couldn't make out the words or the voices, but it catapulted me from my frozen stupor, and I stretched, twisted, and turned until I reached the keys. The sound of things crashing made me drop them. Fortunately they were still in reach, and I got them in the lock on the handcuffs. Another pop made me jump, but that propelled me through the door.

I could never on my own have conjured the scene that greeted me when I raced through the doors of the coffeehouse.

Michael lay on his back, and Brooks knelt over him, touching his shoulder. Eli held Jeff in a sitting position; Jeff's hands were covered in blood, and he was crying. And Betsy, pretty, blonde, smart, energetic Betsy, was sprawled on the floor, eyes staring sightless at the ceiling, a big red, hole in her chest.

Nearby, her satchel gaped open, its contents poured onto the floor. Among its flotsam and jetsam, a sheet of paper had unrolled. I saw my own face in watercolor, smiling up at me, blood dripping from a hole in my temple.

Chapter Sixteen

"I don't know whether to be happy or angry."

The paramedic looked at me, but I was talking to Michael.

"You can be either or both, baby. Just don't go away." A bullet had grazed his shoulder, leaving a deep crease, but nothing life threatening. I think the EMT - Natalie Green, according to her badge—had given him a little something before she wrapped up his shoulder.

"I'm not going anywhere, Michael."

He wrapped his good arm around me and nuzzled into my neck. "Thank you, baby." I kind of liked the "baby" thing, even if it was drug-induced.

Natalie the EMT leaned over and spoke in Michael's ear. "I cleaned the wound completely, secured it with butterflies, and wrapped it really well, Mr. Gilmore. Do you want to go to the hospital now?"

"No," Michael slurred against my throat.

She spoke to me next. "You must take him to a doctor in the morning. Emphasis on the must. You don't want to risk infection or any other complications. He should feel pretty good and sleep most of the night, but if he wakes up in pain, you can give him this." She gave me a half a pill in a zip-top plastic bag and left. Michael snored lightly into my jugular.

Eli sat down next to us on the curb. "Jeff's going to need some therapy, but I think he'll be okay." After Betsy shot at Michael, Jeff jumped her and tried to wrestle the gun away. Just like in the movies, as the cops stormed in, the gun went off, killing Betsy and leaving Jeff with her blood on his hands. I had so many things to say to Jeff, I didn't know where to begin, but Eli had put him in an ambulance to the hospital. He would need some looking after.

The pulsing of the lights on the emergency vehicles was enough to screen the loading of the body bag so I didn't really have to see it.

"I might need therapy too," I told Eli. "I just can't understand... I thought I knew Betsy. Really well. And I can't believe I couldn't see any signs, didn't feel anything amiss." I looked at him. "Is it my fault they're dead, Eli? No, don't answer. On one level, I know it's not. But on another level... Shit. Are there any good psychologists in this town?"

He patted my leg and said, "We'll get you fixed up, Dylan. You and Michael both."

Detectives Neilson, Montrose, and Brooks trudged up to us, looking exhausted but oddly satisfied. They were going to Neilson's house to sleep for a few hours and then start working on the reports and all the other paperwork that went along with getting the bad guy. Girl. Whatever. We shook hands all around—except for Michael—and they trudged off.

Eli took us home—to my house—and helped me get Michael situated in bed. After he left I locked everything up tight. I snuggled in next to Michael. He wriggled around until his head

rested on my shoulder.

“Dylan?” He spoke quietly, his eyes closed.

“Yeah?”

“Am I an ice cream guy?”

It took me a bit to realize what he was talking about. “No, Michael, you are not an ice cream guy.”

“Then what am I?”

I gave it some thought. “Well, I think you're maybe more like a Gordian cake.”

“What's that?” I could feel his smile against my skin.

“Mmm.” I kissed the top of his head. “It's a cake that has multiple layers, each one a different flavor, with icing in between each layer, all different too. The outside of the cake is coated with a simple white cream frosting, so it hides the amazingly complicated and colorful insides. It can last a long time, and you never get tired of the taste.”

“Oh, Dylan... That's”—he turned his face toward mine and placed a gentle kiss on my lips—“beautiful.”

I savored the taste of him before his head dropped back to my chest. “Yeah. All good things in one complete package.”

He yawned. “No need for any ice cream on the side.”

“Not at all.” I laughed a little, took a few deep breaths, and then sleep hit me, and I knew nothing.

Until the damn Valkyries rang. It was Quentin.

“Hey! I thought we were going fishing!”

Loose Id(R) Titles by Wren Boudreau

Ice Cream on the Side

Wren Boudreau

Wren Boudreau likes to think she's wild and bohemian, a charismatic character who sees magic everywhere. The reality is that Wren Boudreau is quite ordinary, an introvert who prefers nesting in the warm comfort of her home and going on great adventures in her head. In her youth, she played with Barbie dolls, learned to play piano, slept with stuffed animals, and had a "pixie" haircut. In her teens, Wren wrote stories about lost love, sang in the choir, learned how to use a blow dryer, and cried on New Year's Eve. She went to college, took a creative writing class, directed a play, spiked her hair, waited tables, worked at a publishing house, got married, had a baby. The baby grew up, Wren went back to school, became a teacher and grew her hair long. When she discovered m/m romance, she decided she wanted in on that. She has negligible social skills, does not always play well with others, and runs with scissors. She is still married to a wonderful man who isn't sure why she's writing gay romance but loves her anyway.