



pepper
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ON A
BRUISED
ROAD

Loose Id

On a Bruised Road

Pepper Espinoza



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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Paranormal

Edwin Masters isn't a big gearhead, but he has spent his entire life lusting after one particular car—a 1962 Alfa Romeo Spider 2600. It's not the flashiest car, it's not the fastest car, and it's not the most collectible car, but he loves it. Edwin knows he'll pay any price for it. When he buys it, it changes the entire shape and meaning of his world, but not in the ways he might have predicted.

Cooper James, the young man who died behind the wheel forty-seven years earlier, haunts the Spider and he wants a life. He wants Edwin. So he reaches out, sucking Edwin into a deepening abyss by exploiting demons from a past Edwin can't break from.

Edwin resists, struggling against the phantom in favor an attractive, exciting young man who wants to be with him, Carson Heston. Carson holds the key to Edwin's salvation, but every time he gets close, Cooper terrorizes him. Edwin knows he'll be lost forever if he submits to Cooper's dark promise of release and relief, but that might be the only way to save Carson's life.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, dubious consent, ménage (m/m/m), voyeurism.*

Chapter One

The silver '62 Alfa Romeo glowed in the sun, its sleek body without flaw or fault, its curves begging Edwin to reach out and touch her. He circled it slowly, drinking in every inch. It had been built the year Edwin was born, and he'd always felt like he had a special connection to the car. He was five the first time he heard one, the first time he had felt the vibrations from the engine. To Edwin, it had felt alive, like a massive, growling beast. A beast that had lingered in his memory and imagination, haunting his dreams as he grew older.

No matter what Edwin had lost or gained, there was one thing that could never be shaken. His desire, lust even, for the 1962 Alfa Romeo Spider 2600.

Edwin knew there were better cars. There were faster cars. More reliable cars. More expensive cars. He knew there were better investments for his money. But he also knew he was forty-seven years old, and it was time to buy something he wanted. Something fun that wasn't destructive. For years during his addiction to prescription drugs, his impulse control had been nonexistent, but knowing how, and when, to indulge himself was part of his treatment. And now, after twenty years of being clean, it was time for something indulgent. Not something he needed. Not something practical.

"I want to hear it run," Edwin announced.

Keys caught the sun as they flew through the air, and Edwin closed his palm around them. Satisfaction surged through him. It wasn't the first time he'd clutched the keys of an Alfa Romeo Spider, but it was the first time he had a realistic chance of owning said keys.

"You can take it for a drive around the grounds," Roger said.

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere there's a road.”

Edwin slid behind the steering wheel, closing his eyes to absorb the ambience, the atmosphere, of the car. For a moment, everything felt perfect. The sun was high overhead, heating the leather, and the steering wheel was solid against his palms. The most solid thing in the world. Something inside of him surged, like fire erupting from a mountain. Sparks swirled in a whirlwind, spiraling through his core, engulfing his heart. It was akin to love, or maybe a junkie's rush of adrenaline. It was the sort of feeling that came cheap to a twenty-year-old boy—one that he could catch at any time because his body was healthy, his mind curious, and the world still more or less new. By the time a person hit thirty, that rush was harder to find. Now Edwin couldn't believe he was feeling it at all. He hadn't known he was still capable of that.

Suddenly, there were two worlds. One beyond the barrier of the car, where all the rules remained intact, all the expectations remained in place. And one within the confines of the Alfa Romeo, where a man could shed twenty years without warning. Quite simply, Edwin felt alive.

When he opened his eyes, he observed the other world through the Spider's windshield. He slid the key into the ignition, shivering as it locked into place. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the starter and turned the key. As the engine roared into life, he shivered again. Only this time it felt like a cube of ice against the back of his neck, or a large cloud passing over the sun. Everything did darken for a moment, and Edwin glanced out the window, straining to see if a cloud had floated inland from above the ocean. But there were no clouds. Everything was clear.

For the first time in years, everything was clear.

“Just take it for a short spin,” Roger encouraged.

Edwin put the car into gear, and the ice moved across his neck again. Nerves, Edwin decided. Excitement and anticipation and maybe a little bit of fear. What if it didn't run the way it should? What if it didn't run the way he

remembered? What if it didn't run at all, and the ad he had found on the Internet had been a lie—either out of ignorance or malice?

He eased his foot off the brake and lightly pressed the accelerator. The wheels rolled down the driveway, one hundred and forty-five horses under the hood waiting to be unleashed. The RPMs crawled slowly, until he had to shift into second gear. It was such a simple act. Ease from the accelerator, press the clutch, grip the stick, and slide it home. An action he had completed a million times in his life, but it was no less satisfying for that. Just like sex was no less satisfying despite the repetition of moves.

Edwin's doubts were gone by the time he made it to third gear. The steering wheel felt like it was made for his hands. As though the designers had taken the length of his fingers and the width of his palms into consideration before they drew the plans. His last car had been a convertible, but this was different. His convertible had mimicked the American dream, that great myth that shaped culture and commercials. The one that said a man with a car was a man with the entire world laid before him. Convertibles played into that myth because they let the wind whip through your hair. But it had been nothing more than shallow caricature.

The Alfa Romeo was the real thing. It was not an American car, but what did that matter? Every line reflected pure passion. Every rev of the engine was nothing except the sound of joy. In fact, that was all Alfa Romeos usually had going for them. Most serious gearheads and car collectors avoided them because they were usually nothing more than a mess wrapped in a headache. Edwin didn't care about that. He would turn heads when he drove the Spider down the street. People would notice him as he raced by.

Edwin circled the mansion once, unconcerned with the massive, ornate building. The estate sale would be starting in about an hour, and if he wanted to, he could take his thirty thousand dollars and buy a famous painting or rare books or whatever else it was that people were supposed to buy at massive liquidation sales. But none of that other stuff mattered to him. He could buy

paintings and books and furniture and the pieces of other people's lives elsewhere.

But he had never found a Romeo Spider like this one.

He had never found a piece of his own life sedately sitting in another man's garage.

Edwin could have owned the Alfa Romeo Spider far, far sooner. If his life had gone as planned, he might have owned one even fifteen years earlier. But things had not gone as planned. In fact, his entire life had gone so far off the rails, he never expected to find the track again. One mistake had snowballed into a darkness so deep, he wasn't sure he would ever see light again. He had painstakingly crawled back to his previous position, beginning with his job at the pharmacy and culminating, finally, in the purchase that had been eluding him for so long.

When he sat behind the wheel of the Spider, he could believe that it was possible to wrestle back lost time, claim it again, and give himself a second chance.

"How she handle?" Roger asked when Edwin returned to the garage.

"Like a dream."

"Good, good. I thought she would."

Edwin opened the door and made himself exit the car. "So, do I give the money to you or...?"

Roger laughed. "I'm just the grease monkey around here. I'm glad to see she's going to a good home, though."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw your smile when you got behind the wheel. You appreciate her for what she is."

Edwin cast an admiring glance over the Spider once again. "That I do."

"I don't know if they mentioned this in the listing, but I think it's only fair to tell you that she's been in an accident before."

Edwin frowned. That hadn't been mentioned. In fact, the listing had stressed that the Spider was in mint condition, as if it had just been shipped from the factory that morning. The hobby car of a millionaire, it never left sunny Southern California and had spent most of its existence as a mere showroom piece, not a vehicle that had really been used. In fact, it had under one thousand miles.

“What sort of accident?”

“A fender bender back in sixty-two. Must have been just three or four days after they bought the thing. But they smashed up the front part real good. Here. And here.” Roger pointed with an oil-stained finger to the bumper of the car. “They sent it right back to the factory to get it fixed.”

Edwin arched his brow. “The factory? In Italy?”

“Yep.”

“And it came back as good as new?”

The light faded a bit from Roger's weathered eyes, but he nodded. “Yeah. Good as new. Anyway, the old man wouldn't let anybody drive it after that. He took it to a few shows and hired it out to a few of those Hollywood types, but other than that, it's sat right here in this garage.”

Edwin shook his head. “It's a shame. This car shouldn't be kept locked up like this.”

“No, it shouldn't.” Roger nodded toward the large house. “You'll find Mr. Gifford up in the house. He's the one in charge of all this. I'm sure he'll take your money.”

Edwin turned to the door, but he paused before leaving the garage, looking over his shoulder to admire the car once again. It looked different in the garage's shadows, though Edwin couldn't put his finger on how. It looked like it was waiting for him. Like it didn't want to let him go.

“She'll still be here when you get back,” Roger said.

Edwin shook his head and laughed. "I guess I'm being a bit silly. I'll be right back for her."

He stepped into the sunlight, and the chill that had been resting on the back of his neck vanished. If he had been thirty years younger, he might have skipped up the winding cement path to the towering white house. But he wasn't that young anymore, so he settled for jogging in his eagerness to complete the transaction.

* * * * *

It was harder than Edwin imagined it would be to direct the Spider to the road. Not because it handled poorly—it handled like the dream it was. But as soon as he drove away from the safety of the garage, the reality of his purchase settled on his shoulders, and then farther south, sitting like a brick in his stomach.

Thirty thousand dollars.

The first year he had lived on his own, he had barely made a third of that. He didn't even clear thirty grand until after he was twenty-five. And he knew his twenty-five-year-old self would have never believed that paying cash for a classic car and then calmly driving it home was even possible. His twenty-seven-year-old self would have found something in powder form to invest in. His thirty-year-old-self would have thought it completely impractical and irresponsible. But now he had done it. His forty-seven-year-old self had actually handed the money over and was given the title. As simple as that. No muss. No fuss.

But now, he wasn't just driving his dream car onto the hectic road. He was driving an investment. He was driving a machine that was forty-seven years old, and though Roger had assured him it was in fine working order, Alfa Romeos weren't exactly known for their longevity. They were gorgeous pieces of art but far from indestructible.

With that in mind, Edwin avoided the freeway. He hated to take surface streets, tacking miles and at least an extra hour to his commute, but if something was going to happen, he'd rather it happen at a relatively sedate fifty miles per hour.

“God, you are a gorgeous machine, aren't you?” Edwin muttered, caressing the steering wheel with the tips of his fingers. Others wouldn't agree. Most car enthusiasts would scoff at Edwin's decision, pointing out that the fog lights were clumsily integrated, the design wasn't as sharp or as eye-catching as the Thunderbird from the same year, and that the driving was heavy at city speeds. But Edwin wasn't a car collector, and he wasn't looking to make a return on his money. Besides that, the interior leather seemed new, the paint job was factory, and the big, round meters on the dash delighted him. When he had more confidence in himself, he would take the car out on the freeway and really let her open up, showing the world just what she could do.

The fact was, Edwin Masters was already in love with his car, and no amount of reality could intrude on their affair.

Edwin guided the car down the winding road, descending from high in the hills above Los Angeles. He knew the curves were dangerous, and he tried to focus on the path ahead of him, but his attention kept wandering. He couldn't believe he had been so lucky, though a part of him understood luck had nothing to do with it. He had been hunting for that precise make, model, and year since his forty-fifth birthday, regularly checking newspapers, magazines, Internet listings, and garages. He had an entire network of collectors and mechanics throughout the Southland, all keeping an eye peeled for Edwin's car. Luck had nothing to do with finding the James family estate sale—that had been pure diligence.

Diligence that had finally paid off.

A new chill raced down his spine. A goose just walked over your grave, his grandmother would have said. It had been one of her favorite sayings, and she had seemed seriously offended every time he laughed. But the goose hypothesis

seemed just as likely as anything else, because he couldn't figure out the source of his chill. The roof was down, true, but the summer sun was already shining at full power, and the wind that blew past his head was as warm as the air rushing out of the oven. If it wasn't some goose in the distant future, it was probably just another thrill of excitement.

Except, it didn't go away. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and his scalp tingled. Goose bumps erupted over his arms, and the wind in his face felt unbelievably, impossibly hot. Edwin gradually realized the reason why—the back of his head felt unbelievably cold. His heart lifted to his throat, but Edwin laughed—a bit uneasily—and tried to suppress the initial response of panic. The wind was hot because it was blowing off the black asphalt, and the back of his head was cooler because he was still in the hills and they were blocking the sun.

Nothing to get upset over.

Even so, the chill moved south, spreading down his back until the base of his spine tingled like his scalp. Unnerved, he glanced into his rearview mirror. He didn't see the road, as expected.

He saw a pair of emerald green eyes beneath a fringe of blond lashes.

And then a quick glance forward revealed the rictus grin of a big SUV barreling toward him.

Chapter Two

"I'm fine. Really. I'm fine."

"Right," Blake said slowly, "and that's why you've been sitting here for the past fifteen minutes?"

"I'm fine."

"Then get out of the car."

Edwin stared at his hands. "I don't think I can."

"Why not?"

"I don't think I can pry my fingers off the wheel."

"Would you like me to help?"

Edwin shook his head. Blake was a big guy, and Edwin was a little afraid that his way of helping would include bodily lifting Edwin out of the Spider.

"Why don't you just try one hand?"

Edwin shook his head again.

"A finger?"

"You can go back inside. I'm fine."

Blake paused before saying, "No, I can't do that. Cathy is watching from the window, and she's worried about you. You look like shit, man."

Edwin wasn't surprised by his neighbor's assessment. He still wasn't sure that his heart was beating, and his blood felt cold. The adrenaline that had been pumping through his system lasted long enough to get him home, but now it had worn off, and his limbs were unresponsive. He glanced up, only for

a split second, but it was enough to catch his own reflection in the rearview mirror. He didn't look pale—he looked gray. The same color as the Spider.

“Maybe you'll feel better with a drink.”

“I will,” Edwin agreed quickly, hoping that would encourage Blake to leave the driveway and leave him in peace.

“Cathy! Bring out my bottle of scotch! The good one!”

“That's not...”

“You look like you need it. Can you at least tell me what happened?”

“I don't know.”

Blake went around the front of the car, pulled open the passenger door, and settled beside him. For a moment, Edwin wanted to protest. He didn't just want to protest. He wanted to physically force him out of the car, kicking and punching if he had to. But the desire passed. Mainly because he wasn't insane, and also because Blake would be able to restrain Edwin with one hand.

“How can you not know what happened?”

“I thought I saw something in my mirror.”

“What?”

Edwin blanched at the thought of the truth. “It must have been a bird or something. But it startled me. I jerked the wheel.”

“Into the other lane?”

“Yeah. Right in front of a big truck. I think my life flashed in front of my eyes, and then I was in my lane again, and the truck was blowing by, honking.”

“And you were fine?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

But Edwin wasn't fine, and he wasn't about to tell Blake why.

Cathy appeared, fluttering to her husband's side empty-handed. She fluttered everywhere she went, moving with a sort of nervous energy that reminded Edwin of the tweakers he saw at the drug rehabilitation center where

he volunteered. Or a hummingbird. She was also much smaller than her husband—almost comically so. Even so, she ran her household with an iron fist.

“Oh, this is such a gorgeous car!”

Edwin smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

“Do you mind if I climb in the back?”

“Yes!”

Cathy looked at him with wide, confused eyes. That same chill was spreading through him again.

“I mean, it's really a tight fit back there. I don't think you'd be very comfortable, but I'll take you for a drive.”

“Now? Maybe we can go out and get something to drink,” Cathy suggested.

“I don't know. Isn't it a bit early for a drink?”

“Nah, it's never too early. Besides, you need one,” Blake said. “We know this great little bar. They do a happy hour on Saturdays.”

“Oh, Cherry's?” Cathy beamed. “You'll love it. Come on, we're buying.”

Edwin studied their eager smiles for a moment before inclining his head in acquiescence. A drink would chase away the coolness under his skin. And this time, he couldn't hand wave it away as if it were a cloud, or a shadow. There were no clouds overhead, and he was not parked in the shade.

“Just give me a chance to get changed and cleaned up,” Edwin said.

“Yeah, no problem. Your color still looks a little off. We'll meet you back over here in about an hour. How does that sound?”

“Great.”

The only reason he was going was for the distraction. He didn't want to remember, to replay those fifteen seconds over and over as he sought an explanation. There had to be one. Just because he didn't understand it on a conscious level didn't mean there wasn't a completely logical explanation.

“Think you can get out of the car now?”

Edwin checked the rearview mirror again. It was still empty.

“Yeah. Yeah. I'm good now.”

Edwin pulled the key out of the ignition. He was being silly. He was lucky that Blake and Cathy had tried to talk to him instead of calling the happy men in white coats.

“I'm sure. I think I might have just had too much excitement for the day. We'll get a drink, and I'll take it easy... I know I'm not as young as I used to be.”

“I hope I'm still as spry when I'm your age.”

Edwin smiled good-naturedly, but he felt like it was frozen to his face. He wasn't that old. Not so old that Blake should call him spry. He was only forty-seven, for Christ's sake.

Which was nearly twenty-five years older than Blake.

He must have seemed ancient to the young couple.

“Well, work out every day and eat your vegetables,” Edwin said absently as he pushed open the door.

He fumbled with the keys when he reached the front door. They felt strange in his fingers, like they didn't fit properly. Like he didn't know how to hold a key that didn't fit in the Spider.

He barely remembered to shut the door before shuffling over to the couch. Once he collapsed on the plush cushions, he didn't want to move again. Not even to go back out to his car. But he didn't need to see his car to relive that moment over and over. Not the moment when he was staring at the wrong end of a huge truck, but the other moment.

The one right after that.

As a teenager, he had been fascinated by his best friend's Ouija board. They had played every night for weeks, and Ben had always claimed that he never, ever moved the planchette. Nobody moved the planchette, and yet, they

had received countless messages from beyond the grave. Later, Edwin understood how the whole process had worked. Demons weren't talking to them; they were moving the planchette with tiny, unconscious spasms of their muscles.

That's all that happened in the car.

An unconscious spasm. An automatic reaction. He'd had to act fast, and his instincts had taken over. That's why he'd jerked out of the way of the SUV. And that's how he'd known how to correct the swerve before going over the edge of the cliff.

Even though he didn't remember either action.

Edwin had been frozen. Worthless. The steering wheel had been yanked hard to the right, pulled back to the left, and straightened, all within the space of ten seconds. And Edwin didn't remember moving at all.

And the eyes. He couldn't forget the eyes. The color of spring. Those eyes had locked with his in the rearview mirror. Edwin didn't currently have any reason to doubt his own mind. He was sober, he ate well, he exercised, he got the appropriate amount of sleep every night. Dementia did not run in his family, and he had been given a clean bill of health at his last physical. Most importantly, he did not have a history of delusions or hallucinations. So how could he explain those green eyes, fringed by long, light lashes?

A drug flashback? Or a dream, perhaps. Momentarily nodding off would explain how he'd ended up on the wrong side of the road. He certainly had no better explanation for that particular mistake, because he had never made such a mistake in his life. But how could his body shut down and his mind drift away while navigating a dangerous road in a mint-condition sports car?

Nothing was making sense.

What if Blake had not been watering his lawn when Edwin had finally pulled into his driveway? As much as he didn't want to admit it, Edwin knew that he would probably still be sitting in the Spider, still frozen, still feeling

more than a little shell-shocked. Blake's very presence had been enough to center Edwin, and wasn't it a bitch that Blake was twenty-five years younger than him, married, and nothing more than his neighbor and acquaintance? Edwin wasn't particularly attracted to Blake, but at that moment, he wished Blake were sitting on the couch with him, holding him, soothing him with the gentle rhythm of his steady heartbeat.

It had been a long time since anybody had been there to do that.

There was nobody to call either. There had been, once. But once the all-night benders stopped, and the drugs disappeared, and the booze dried up, they had all wandered away. Edwin could admit that was probably for the best. But he could have died that afternoon. He could have flown off the cliff or been run over by a massive truck. He could have been nothing more than paste and crushed bones on the pavement. Who would have noticed? He didn't even know who would have planned his funeral.

He pushed himself off the couch, resolving to put the whole thing behind him. It had been ten seconds. It hadn't been some life-changing experience, worthy of constant thought. It was barely even worthy of memory. He just needed to set it behind him and focus on other things. Like work.

Edwin's office had been left in disarray the day before, and stepping into it now didn't offer him any sort of comfort. He had been too eager to get to the bank in time to purchase his cashier's check, and he hadn't taken the time to put his books back in place and make sure all his papers were in order. A clean home is a happy home, as his grandmother would say, and cleaning would at least keep him distracted.

The indoor/outdoor thermometer on his desk told him that it was already over ninety degrees outside, and it was barely lunchtime. It wouldn't have been much cooler than that in the hills. So why the ever-present chill?

Edwin shook his head. He wasn't going to think about this. He was going to clean, even though he typically took care of these chores on Sunday. And

when he was done, he would mow the lawn. After that, he might indulge himself a little and wash the Spider, then polish it until it damn near glowed.

As he gathered a stack of envelopes, he knocked a pen off his desk with the back of his hand. Edwin bent to pick it up, and cold fingertips traced over the exposed skin on his back. He straightened so quickly, he knocked his head into the corner of the desk. Wheeling around, he prepared to come face-to-face with...something. Perhaps the owner of the green eyes.

But the room was empty.

“Who's there?” As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt foolish. Of course, nobody was there. He lived alone, and the front door was locked.

Edwin winced and rubbed the back of his head. Pain radiated down his neck, and a bump was already beginning to form. A bird twittered outside the window, but otherwise, the only sound was his ragged breathing. He didn't think his system could tolerate another shock of adrenaline. Two in the space of two hours was quite enough.

There were no dark corners in his office. It was the smallest room in the house, and the wall was dominated by a huge picture window with the curtains pulled back. His desk sat against the north wall, while the other two featured floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, each level overflowing with texts, picture frames, plants, and miscellaneous knickknacks he had acquired over the years. The room fit him like his favorite pants fit him. When he wasn't at the pharmacy or one of the clinics, people who needed him could find him in his office.

Now his eyes darted from corner to corner, and he spun in a slow circle, holding the back of his head, his fingertips searching for sticky blood. The room was the same as it had always been, but something whispered to him. Told him the room wasn't right.

Edwin had felt fingertips. He knew the soft, casual caress of a lover. He knew that fingers, that real contact, didn't feel like the wind. Not that there was a wind blowing through his house. He kept the air conditioner on at a comfortable, reasonable seventy-six degrees.

He slipped out of the bright room into the dimmer hallway. The throbbing above his neck grew worse by the second, until he wore the pain like a helmet.

A nap. He'd feel better after a good nap. He could sleep away the stress and strangeness of the morning, until he had nothing left but the excitement and thrill of finally purchasing his car. A nap would give him a new view of the world.

* * * * *

Dream baby got me dreaming sweet dreams the whole day through.

The line played through Edwin's head on a constant loop. Over and over and over. It might not have bothered him so much if he could remember the rest of the lyrics, but those were the only words stuck in his mind. He also might not have minded too much if the song didn't make him feel so uneasy, but after about the hundredth reiteration, Roy Orbison was beginning to take on some very sinister qualities.

Roy Orbison wasn't actually there in his dream. But the song infused his mind, playing at louder and louder levels until all conversation—even the dream words that didn't make any sense—was completely lost, and every person who opened their mouths only added to the growing chorus. The last person who started singing was a young man with blond hair, green eyes, and a muscular yet trim body. Edwin had never seen him before, but in dream logic, he had known the younger man his entire life. Had even called him by name.

Cooper.

Dream baby got me dreaming...

They were at his prom, except the gym looked completely different. The decorations were out-of-date, and everybody wore ridiculously old-fashioned tuxedos and dresses. But he knew it was his prom because he recognized most of the faces, and he was wearing the dark blue tuxedo he had rented for the

night. Sally, his date, was on his arm—a girl he had never even kissed, but she still seemed to like him well enough.

Sweet dreams the whole day through.

A huge banner above the stage announced the theme—SWEET DREAMS—and the year—1980—and the band was his brother's band. Which was all wrong, because Stu would never, ever be caught dead playing at anybody's prom. Especially his loser younger brother's.

Dream baby got me dreaming...

“Can I have this dance?”

Cooper looked him directly in the eye, as though Edwin weren't already dancing with Sally. As though it was perfectly acceptable for two young men to lean into each other and sway with the plaintive song. Edwin understood him, despite the fact that his words were just more song lyrics. *The whole night through.* He reached out and took Cooper's hand. His fingers were icy but firm, and he pulled Edwin away from Sally like the girl didn't exist—didn't matter—at all. Maybe she didn't.

And just who the fuck was Cooper?

Edwin opened his mouth to ask as much and was horrified to discover he was doing his own rendition of “Sweet Dreams.” Cooper frowned, his beautiful green eyes creasing in confusion. Edwin tried again, desperate to form a question around the relentless lyrics, but he was trapped. Drowning in the music.

The music stopped, blessedly. Only to be replaced by a relentless beat. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. Dance. Two. Three. Cooper seemed to be vibrating in front of him, and Edwin gripped him, unwilling to be yanked away until he had his answer. *Who are you? Who are you? Dream baby. You got me dreaming sweet dreams.*

“Edwin!”

The sound of his own name pulled him from the dream. A quick glance at the clock told him an hour had passed.

“Edwin! Are you coming or what?” Blake called.

“Yeah, I...” If he was hesitant to go to the bar before, he wasn't now. He had never needed a drink more in his life.

* * * * *

“This doesn't feel like a normal car,” Cathy shouted into his ear, her voice lifted by a carefree smile.

“It's not like a normal car,” Blake helpfully informed her. “It's older.”

“It's not...” Edwin almost informed them that it was a perfectly normal car, except he would not have paid thirty grand for a perfectly normal car. “It's better than that.”

“How fast does it go? We should find an open stretch and really let her rip.”

Blake was only echoing Edwin's own thoughts and desires, but somehow, hearing it from Blake's mouth made him realize what a horrible idea it was. He didn't want to try to push it too hard, or too fast. Especially since Cathy would still feel the urge to shout, even if they were going eighty miles an hour down the freeway, and the wind would only whip the words right out of her mouth.

Blake provided the address for Cherry's. Edwin knew the neighborhood, though he had never been to the bar. Cathy clapped her hands with unmistakable excitement. Edwin frowned, wondering if most people reacted so positively to the thought of visiting a bar. Maybe Blake never took the girl anywhere. Maybe she needed a beer too. Did Cathy like beer? Or would she choose a more frou-frou drink? Would either of them care if he ordered a frou-frou drink instead of a beer? Something a little fruity, perhaps. Something that would disguise the kick, soften the blow...

Cherry's wasn't exactly a high-class joint, but it was already filling up with people eager to start their Saturday night off right. Students, mostly, though he

saw a few people who could only be described as working stiffs. As soon as Edwin parked, Cathy shimmied out of the backseat and beat them both to the front door.

“Is she some sort of boozehound?” Edwin asked under his breath.

“She likes to let her hair down once in a while,” Blake said. “Besides, she's usually the designated driver.”

“So this was all a ploy to make me take over those duties?”

“And probably make you buy a few rounds.” Blake touched the dashboard with, Edwin thought, an appropriate amount of reverence. “She's a sweet ride.”

Edwin looked around the parking lot, his stomach tightening at the thought of leaving the car unattended in a bar parking lot. Blake might have sensed that fear—or he already had a handle on Edwin's many anxiety issues. A result, perhaps, of the fact that Edwin had been particularly anxious that day.

“She'll be fine out here.”

“I hope you're right.”

“I've been coming here for a long time. It doesn't really attract the rowdy element.”

Blake held the door open, allowing Edwin to enter first. As soon as he stepped into the dark, cozy building, he froze. *Dream baby got me dreaming sweet dreams, the night time too.*

“What is this?” Edwin asked.

“What?”

“This. This song.”

Blake shrugged and gently shoved him out of the doorway. “Something by Roy Orbison, I think. I don't know. I don't listen to all this old music.”

“No. I mean, yeah, it's Roy Orbison. I haven't heard the song in a while.”

“Yeah, but it's a good one. Hey, Cathy, you didn't start without us, did you?”

“I got you both a beer.” She spun on her stool with what looked like a margarita in her hand. “I love happy hour.”

“I know you do,” Blake said affectionately, before downing half his beer. Edwin's eyes widened at the sight, concern winding ropes around his stomach. He had thought they would be going out for a relaxing drink—not a chug-a-thon.

“Oh, I found something for Edwin too,” Cathy announced, her voice carrying over the music. *How long must I dream?*

“I don't need anything,” Edwin said quickly.

“No, look.” To her credit, she didn't stand up and point, but there was no missing to whom she was referring. A man at the other end of the bar. Edwin was relieved to see that the man had black hair instead of blond, but he was too young, too pretty, and also, probably not gay. “Isn't he gorgeous?”

“He's amazing,” Edwin said mildly, hopefully she'd be happy with his agreement.

“You should go introduce yourself,” Cathy said.

“No, I don't think so.”

“But he really wants to meet you.”

Edwin closed his eyes. “Please, tell me that you didn't already talk to him.”

“I might have a little.”

“How did you even have time? You were only like a minute ahead of us.”

Cathy slapped his arm good-naturedly. “No, silly, I meant I mentioned you to him before. I know him.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but...”

“But nothing. We've been worried about you for a while, and Carson is a really nice guy.”

Edwin's frown deepened. "What did you say?"

"Carson's a nice guy."

"Oh, I thought you said Cooper."

"Why would I say Cooper?" Cathy asked, her head tilted at a perplexed angle.

I love you, and I really want you. "No reason. I must have just been hearing things. This music is pretty loud in here, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's something wrong with your ears," Cathy suggested, not unkindly, as she sipped from her margarita. "You should go talk to him. He already knows your name, so you don't have to go through the awkward introductions."

"Fine. Fine. I'll go over and offer to buy him a drink," Edwin said with what he hoped was a pleasant smile. He wouldn't do any such thing. But he could escape the annoying conversation, and Cathy's not-at-all-cute buzz, by simply moving to Carson's end of the bar. That seemed like a relatively minor sacrifice to make. He hoped Blake and Cathy would get tired of drinking before too long, and he would get home in time to catch a rerun of *House*.

Edwin took his glass of beer and moved away. As he walked, the music finally stopped.

It's not the way you smile that touched my heart.

Edwin barely registered the new song, except to notice that it was not Roy Orbison. At that point, Edwin didn't need anything more.

"What's with the music in here today?"

"What?" Edwin looked up sharply at the question, then paused as he realized the source.

Up close, Carson was even more gorgeous than Edwin had given him credit for. He had high, sharp cheekbones, a perfectly bowed mouth, and thoughtful eyebrows. He also seemed impossibly young. Edwin automatically

did the math—he had probably got his pharmacy license the same year Carson was born.

“The music in here. It's all oldies.”

Edwin settled on the stool beside Carson and casually sipped from his beer, feeling anything *except* casual. Hopefully, the younger man wouldn't be able to sense his desperation. Because he suddenly very much wanted to share his drink with him. “Oh. They don't usually play oldies?”

Carson's lips twisted into a small smile. “Not this old.” He offered his hand. “You're Edwin, right?”

Edwin didn't hesitate to take it. Carson's fingers were rough, the skin hard but not unpleasant. “Yep. And you're Carson.”

“Yes, I am. I've heard about you.”

Edwin grimaced. “Yeah, I know. Cathy was working completely on her own with this one. I didn't—I mean, I don't send her out as some sort of dating agent or something.”

Carson laughed. The sound was, without exaggeration, the best thing Edwin had heard all day. Even better than the Alfa Romeo roaring to life beneath his touch. “I figured that was probably the case. She's nice, though.”

“She is. She just obviously has the need to put her nose in other people's business.”

“I'm glad she does.”

Edwin arched his brow. “Really?”

“Sure, it makes my life easier when she sends the hot guys to me, instead of making me sniff them out.”

Forty-seven years old, and Edwin felt himself blushing. Just a little bit. Just the tips of his ears turning red, but it was enough. He took a sip of his drink, hoping that'd help him keep his voice even. “So clearly, she's one of your agents.”

“Actually, we work together. She thinks she's being helpful.”

“You don't seem very surprised to see me.” Sweat was gathering on Edwin's glass and leaving a perfect ring of moisture on the bar. “I'm beginning to think this was a huge setup.” Not that Edwin minded.

“Not a huge setup. She called me and told me to meet you guys here.”

“It sounds like a setup.”

Carson frowned. “Uh-oh. You sound annoyed.”

Is it true what they say about you? They say you'll never, ever, never be true.

“No, no, I'm not annoyed. I mean, it's really nice to meet you. You seem like a nice guy.” And you're certainly easy on the eyes, Edwin thought.

“But?”

Edwin offered what he thought was a friendly smile, even as he gestured dismissively with his hand. “I don't usually go for ambush setups or blind dates or whatever this is.”

If Carson was offended by Edwin's attempted brush-off, he didn't show it. In fact, he smiled, and his blue eyes lit with an engaging twinkle. He was probably accustomed to charming his way through life. Edwin couldn't even remember being that young, and he was certain that he had never been quite that pretty.

“Can't it just be two guys having a drink? I wasn't exactly expecting a date or a hookup or anything.”

Edwin believed him. For one thing, why would anybody Carson's age be eager to date somebody Edwin's age? There was a very good chance that Cathy simply had not mentioned Edwin's age when she'd called her friend. For another thing, Carson wasn't the one turning into a giggling schoolgirl. To be fair, Edwin hadn't actually giggled yet, but he thought it probably wouldn't take much. “Yeah, two guys having a drink sounds good. But just one for me today.”

“Absolutely. My treat.”

“Two guys having a friendly drink usually pay their own tabs,” Edwin pointed out.

Carson studied him for a beat before nodding. “Fair enough. But let me get the second one, if you don't find my company too objectionable.”

“I think that's a sound compromise.”

“So...Cathy mentioned that you just got a new car.”

Edwin took a swallow of beer. It was a little difficult to concentrate when Carson trained his wide blue eyes on him. His full mouth sent Edwin's mind to totally inappropriate places. If he had met Carson under different circumstances, would he try to keep his distance? Or was he just being contrary because he didn't like surprises? He especially didn't like surprises on top of days that were already too long and too confusing. On the other hand, Carson was definitely what one would call a pleasant surprise.

“Yes. Well, it's new for me. It's actually an old car. A sixty-two Alfa Romeo Spider.”

Carson whistled appreciatively. “Nice.”

“You know about classic cars?”

Carson offered a small, shy, completely endearing smile. Edwin felt something twist in his chest. “No, actually. I don't really know anything about cars. But I've heard of Alfa Romeos, and *spider* sounds like a cool name.”

Edwin snorted. “Well, I appreciate your honesty.”

Come on home. Baby it's you. Baby...it's you.

“I just don't want you to think I'm something I'm not.”

“Honesty the best policy?” Edwin asked lightly.

“Always.”

The bar plunged into silence, as the music stopped, and everybody took a breath at the same time. Nobody moved. Edwin couldn't even hear his own heart beating. The first note of an old, familiar song startled everybody into motion again. *Wise men say only fools rush in.*

Carson sighed with exasperation. “Seriously, it's like somebody opened up my grandpa's record vault.”

“Maybe somebody who likes oldies pumped the jukebox with quarters,” Edwin said before taking another deep swallow of his beer. The explanation he offered was a perfectly reasonable one. Except he felt that chill again. It was like a sliver of ice working its way down his throat to settle in his stomach.

“Yeah, maybe. You all right?”

“What?”

“Are you feeling okay? You're kind of looking a little pale...and like you're a thousand miles away.”

Edwin took a deep breath. “I just had a really long, weird day.”

“You want to talk about it?”

Carson had honest eyes. Every emotion was evident in their blue depths, and now all Edwin saw was genuine concern. Like he really wanted to know what was wrong with Edwin, and maybe after Edwin was done explaining everything, he would do everything in his power to make the world a better place for him. That sort of concern—even the promise of that sort of concern—was more than a little intoxicating. And inviting. He could easily imagine just dumping everything at Carson's feet, even though he barely knew the man.

He could start with the search that had consumed untold years of his life. He would explain how he found the car, the exhilaration at starting it, the thrill of driving it. All of that might have made for a decent conversation, but the other stuff—the near-death experience, the dream, Roy Orbison, the green eyes—that was just a little too bizarre. Probably the drink with Carson would come to nothing, but why shoot himself in the foot by scaring the younger man away?

“No, I'm—no, not right now.” He swallowed and gestured at the jukebox. “Has it ever done this before?”

“No, not that I know of.” Carson licked his lips. “You going to let me buy you a drink?”

“Only one.” Edwin looked down the bar to where Cathy was beckoning for her second drink of the afternoon. “I’m going to have to haul our friends home.”

“You could make them take a cab. It wouldn’t be the first time the bartender had to pour these two into a taxi.”

“I didn’t realize they had secret lives as luses,” Edwin said, not unkindly.

“They liked to party in school. They haven’t had any reason to outgrow that. You know, they got slightly better jobs, but no kids or anything.”

“You don’t need to have kids to know when it’s time to grow up. Which...actually is a bit rich coming from me.”

“Why? Because you do have kids, or because you don’t?”

“Oh, no. No kids for me.”

“That’s good.” Carson frowned. “Unless you wanted to have kids, and then, you know, my sympathies.”

Edwin laughed. “No, I never really thought about it. But I did manage to grow up eventually, regardless.”

Carson tapped the rim of his mug against Edwin’s. “To growing up. Eventually.”

“Eventually,” Edwin echoed. “I’ll just keep an eye on them, then.”

Carson smiled. “And I’ll keep my eye on you.”

The promise shouldn’t have warmed Edwin through, but it did. Far more effectively than any alcohol.

Chapter Three

In hindsight, Edwin couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he surpassed Cathy and Blake in potables consumed. Carson just kept buying, and Edwin kept drinking and laughing at Carson's jokes. The oldies kept playing, one after another. A few times, he heard Roy Orbison's voice, but by then, the beer had clouded his brain to the point that he didn't even care. So what if somebody in the bar liked oldies and Roy Orbison? It was nothing to worry about.

He also couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he decided to pass over his car keys to Carson. He seemed like the trustworthy sort, and he was definitely more sober. Edwin shouldn't have let a kid get him drunk. But Carson was so good to get drunk with. He was funny. He was cute. He didn't mind paying for the drinks. And with each beer, Edwin forgot a little bit more. He forgot about his near-death experience. He forgot about mysterious green eyes. He forgot about Cathy's meddling. He even forgot about the car, until Carson asked for his keys.

"God, this is a nice car to drive," Carson said as soon as he pulled out of the parking lot. "I mean it. This is really nice."

"Yep, I love it."

"I'm going to have to get you drunk again, so I have another excuse to drive it."

"I might be up for that. Maybe. You're being careful, right?"

"Right," Carson confirmed.

"And you're not drunk, are you?"

"No, I stopped drinking hours ago."

"Hours?" Edwin looked around. "It's so dark."

"It's pretty late. We were in Cherry's for a while."

"God, I guess so. Do you know where I live?"

"You're Cathy's neighbor, right?"

"Yep."

Carson gave him a sideways glance. "Then I know exactly where you live."

"You're doing okay, right? You're driving okay?"

"I'm driving just fine."

Edwin nodded. "Good, I just wanted to be sure that you're driving okay. Since I ordinarily wouldn't let anybody drive my car."

"I'm not going to hurt your car," Carson promised. "Do I get a reward if I get you and your car home in one piece?"

"Sure. What do you want?"

"Anything I want?"

"Sure."

"I'll have to think about it."

Edwin ran loving fingers over the dashboard. "You don't know what you want?"

"Oh, I know what I want. Well, I'm pretty sure I know what I want. But I'm not sure if you're going to be up to it."

"Oh." Edwin waved his hand, dismissing the notion. "I'm up for anything. You'll see."

"I certainly hope so."

Edwin caressed the dashboard again. It felt good. Warm to the touch. Since he bought the car, he hadn't taken the time to appreciate it properly. This was the first time he had sat in the passenger seat. He had never seen the world from the passenger seat of his Spider. Of course, he was barely seeing it now. Everything was dark, and what wasn't dark was fuzzy. And he kept

getting distracted by Carson's profile. He had such a great nose. Not many people had truly great noses, but Carson undoubtedly did. To go along with his truly great mouth.

He also had really long legs. Too long to fit in the backseat? Edwin almost asked, but he hadn't completely lost control of his mouth. There was no reason to ask if Carson could fit in the backseat. They weren't a couple of teenagers with no space and no privacy of their own. They were both adults, and Edwin had a perfectly fine bed.

"Why didn't you buy a Mustang or a Cadillac or something?" Carson asked.

"Because I like this one. Drive carefully. This car has already been in one accident, and once is too many."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, back in sixty-two."

"Are you speaking as an eyewitness?" Carson teased.

"Hey, I may be old, but I'm not that old."

"Nah, I don't think you're old."

"I could be your father."

"But you're not, and never say those words again."

Edwin laughed, and Carson flashed him an amused smile. He had a good smile. Not too toothy—he didn't look like a shark or anything. Edwin was still mulling over that smile when Carson pulled into Edwin's driveway as if the place belonged to him.

"Oh. How are you going to get home?"

"I was hoping you'd drive me. Or I could catch a ride from Cathy."

"I'm pretty drunk. So is Cathy, for that matter."

"You won't be tomorrow."

"You're inviting yourself to stay the night?"

“You did say you'd reward me.”

“Come on in, then.”

As soon as he stepped out of the car, a startlingly cool breeze stopped him in his tracks. It lingered on his flushed skin, sharp enough to clear his mind as a shudder raced down his spine. The hair on his neck and his arms stood on end, and his stomach twisted itself into knots. He felt vaguely queasy, and he gulped for breath, trying to fight the urge to vomit the copious amount of alcohol he had consumed.

“You doing okay over there?” Carson asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. Come on.”

The farther Edwin got from the car, the better he felt. The chill disappeared first, and after that, his stomach settled. The fuzzy feeling around his head didn't go anywhere, though. If anything, it worsened as he approached Carson. Cathy had done a good job; he would give her credit for that.

“Do you want me to unlock the door?”

“No, no, I got it. Wait...” Edwin patted his pockets. “Where are my keys?”

“I still have them.”

“Oh, right. Then maybe you should unlock the door.”

“Yeah, maybe I should.”

Another blast of cold air greeted them when Carson pushed open the door, but this, Edwin knew, was just the air conditioner. He shut the door behind him, blocking the light from the street, and his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness.

“Here...” Carson's fingers closed around his, and Edwin didn't mind the pressure or the warmth. His skin was rough—what did he do for a living? Was he still in school? For the life of him, Edwin couldn't remember. Even if somebody put a gun to his head, he wouldn't be able to remember. Had they already kissed? Edwin didn't know, though it seemed unlikely. He would

definitely remember the taste and shape of Carson's perfect mouth. "Where's the bedroom?"

"Straight down the hall."

"You do this often?"

"What?"

"Let strange guys bring you home and put you into bed?"

"No, not at all. But it's been a strange weekend. Did I tell you that I almost died today?"

"No. It sounds awful, though."

"It was."

"What happened?"

"I wasn't paying attention, and I almost drove off the road. Cooper saved me, though."

"Who's Cooper?"

Edwin blinked. "What?"

"Who's Cooper?"

"Why are you asking about Cooper?"

"You just mentioned him."

"I don't...I don't know who you're talking about."

"Okay," Carson said slowly. "That's fine. Maybe he's just another guy who likes Spiders. I bet that's a pretty small community."

"Yeah. Not as many as there should be," Edwin said as they stepped into his bedroom.

"So...this is it?"

"This is it," Edwin confirmed. "I know, it's not much."

"It's perfect."

"Oh, good."

“Yeah...” Carson closed the space between them, eliminating the final inches that had separated the two of them. He was just about an inch taller than Edwin, and his blue eyes caught the silver and orange light from the window. Edwin's cock stirred. “Good.”

They moved at the same time, Edwin leaning forward as Carson tilted his head. Their mouths met, and he tasted beer, but it wasn't unpleasant. Carson's lips were firm and smooth, and when he parted them to invite a deeper caress, his breath was impossibly warm against Edwin's face. They were both tentative, feeling each other out, testing each other's boundaries. But Edwin didn't have any boundaries. A fact that Carson learned quickly.

Edwin locked his arms around Carson's solid body, and they stumbled toward the bed without breaking the kiss. There were too many clothes between them, but Edwin honestly didn't know what to do about that. His fingers weren't exactly cooperating, and Carson's kisses were more intoxicating than any of the alcohol had been. Especially since he still tasted of beer, and his skin smelled like spicy soap, and his body was perfect. Trim, light, hard in all the right places.

Carson pressed him to the bed, his hands working at the buttons on Edwin's shirt. A flare of panic almost made him push Carson away—he hadn't been to the gym in weeks. He had been slacking off and always had a thousand excuses to justify his decision not to work out. But he wasn't Carson's age anymore, and the older you got, the more your body became interested in betrayal. What if he looked flabby and fat? What if Carson took one look at him and lost his boner?

“Edwin?”

“Hmm?”

“Is there something wrong? You just sort of froze there for a second.”

“No, no, nothing wrong.”

He gripped the back of Carson's head and dragged his mouth down. He focused on his lips and ignored the doubts and insecurities trying to plague him. Carson made short work of the shirt, tearing it open without regard for the flying buttons. His hands were hot on his chest, fingers tangling in the short, springy—maybe a little gray—hair there. He scraped a nail over Edwin's nipple, and the skin hardened in response.

Carson shifted his attention to Edwin's pants, and the first brush of pressure against his hard cock made Edwin jerk his hips, bucking against Carson's hand. Carson swallowed each hungry sound from Edwin's throat, and Edwin thought he felt a smile on his mouth. Was he amused by how hungry Edwin was for the attention? Or did Edwin's eager response please him? Edwin hoped it was the latter. Either way, Carson wasn't stopping. He unzipped the fly, pushed his questing fingers past Edwin's boxers, and gripped his shaft with firm fingers.

At the first contact, heat enveloped Edwin. The pressure was exquisite and excruciating, almost immediately taking him to the very height of pleasure. He gasped in shock, his body going rigid beneath Carson's, unable to withstand the friction or the heat. He reached down, fumbling at Carson's fingers, as if trying to confirm that he was alone, touching Edwin without any further aid.

“Edwin?”

He opened and closed his mouth, trying to explain but unable to find the words. How could he possibly tell Carson that his hand was the very best thing he had ever felt in his life? Instead of an explanation, he only managed a strangled, desperate “More, please. More.”

Carson frowned but complied, pumping his wrist rapidly. Edwin rocked his hips, lifting halfway off the bed with each downward stroke. The heat increased, became unbearable, raged through his body, licked at his veins. He couldn't stand it, but he never wanted it to end. As soon as he had that thought, the pleasure exploded, shattering him, and his cock erupted in Carson's closed fist.

“Jesus,” Carson murmured.

“I'm sorry, that was...” Edwin shook his head. “I don't know what that was.”

“I...um...I think I should go.”

Edwin blinked. “What? No, you don't have to go.”

“I think I should.” Then, to Edwin's horror, he actually pushed himself off the bed and tucked his shirt into his pants.

“What? Look, I know I'm going to need a bit of time to recover, but in the meantime, I can...”

“No, it's not that, it's just... I mean, it's not you. You're great. You really are.”

“I'm great. That's why you're running out of here as fast you can?”

“I'm just... Do you have a roommate or a cat or something?”

“No,” Edwin said slowly.

“Maybe I'm more drunk than I thought.”

“Carson...”

“I'll call you sometime.”

“Yeah. Do that. I owe you a few drinks. Do you want me to call you a cab?”

“I'll just go over to Blake and Cathy's. I had fun tonight.”

“Right.”

Edwin waited until he heard the front door slam before falling back to his bed. Carson wasn't going to call again. What had he done that was so disturbing? Besides come like he hadn't had sex in twenty years? Or was that in the area of unforgivable sins?

Edwin covered his eyes with his arm, blocking his view of the room. The aftershocks of his orgasm still twitched through him, but Carson's abrupt and mysterious disappearance sapped any pleasure he might have had from the experience.

“Son of a bitch.”

* * * * *

As Edwin stepped out of his early-morning shower, he considered simply returning to bed. It was far too early to be up, especially for a Sunday morning. The ache in his head had dulled from the previous night's cacophony of pain to a more manageable throb—one he could almost ignore as he set about his morning routine. And the near car accident was already fading in his memory. He was confident that in a few short days, the terrifying incident would be downgraded to an interesting, albeit mildly frightening, event in his life. A funny story to tell about how he had almost crashed the car he had spent most of his life savings on.

Unfortunately, the disaster with Carson the night before would *not* be downgraded. It would not ever be anything except a disaster. A stupid, probably unavoidable, definitely regrettable disaster. There was no point in dwelling on it, though Edwin knew he would. Simply because he was just masochistic enough to beat himself up for it for days, if not weeks. When would he ever, *ever* find anybody as sexy and funny as Carson? Never. That was the misery of it.

Because I can't help falling in love with you.

Despite his churning stomach and the remnants of the hangover, Edwin decided to make himself breakfast. Because that was what he would normally do on a Sunday morning. He needed to indulge in a regular, normal routine. Maybe then he could convince himself that his regular, normal life would return. His eggs were scrambling nicely and his bacon was sizzling in the pan when the phone rang. Edwin did not like to be interrupted on his weekends, but he welcomed the distraction now.

“Edwin?”

He recognized Claire's voice immediately, but something in the way she said his name made his heart still in his chest.

"I'm here. What's wrong?"

"There's been a...a holdup here at the pharmacy."

His still heart turned into a ball of ice. "Was anybody hurt?"

"No. Scared a bit, but nobody was hurt."

"Okay. Have you called the police?"

"They're on their way."

"Good. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I know it's your day off. You don't have to come in. I think everything is under control here, it's just I thought I should call you."

"You were right to call me. I'll be there in about fifteen or twenty minutes. You just sit tight."

"I'm really sorry, Edwin. I didn't mean..."

"Hey, this isn't your fault," Edwin assured her as he turned off the burners and covered the pans with lids. "So don't think it is. Don't blame yourself."

"You're right. I know. I'm just...a bit shaken."

"That's understandable. You go wait for the cops and be sure to tell them everything that happened."

"I will."

Edwin was out of the house a mere minute after hanging up the phone. He jumped into the Alfa Romeo without a second thought to the earlier strange occurrences, his mind focused entirely on the young woman who had called and the hint of tears in her voice. He had hired Claire Reed straight out of school, convinced that she was the perfect addition to the pharmacy. She was beautiful, of course, but she was also brighter than any person had the right to be, and had a wicked sense of humor. If he had been interested in women, he probably would have angled for a date instead of offering her a job. Something told him that if he had invited her to dinner, she would have accepted.

Edwin parked directly outside the pharmacy, unmindful of the yellow paint that warned him it was a loading zone only. He was shocked to see that there was only one police cruiser on the street. His pharmacy wasn't big, and nobody had died or been hurt, but they had obviously been targeted by an addict. Didn't the theft of illegal narcotics warrant at least four officers? Or perhaps this sort of thing was too common in Los Angeles to get that worked up over.

Claire was waiting for him outside, and she hurried to his side as soon as she saw him.

"I know I said you didn't need to come here, but I'm really glad you did."

Edwin nodded. "What happened?"

"A young man came in this morning right after I unlocked the door. He had a gun, and he was very...high-strung. He kept waving it around and—" Her voice caught. "This is getting harder every time I have to talk about it."

Edwin put a comforting arm around her shoulders. It wasn't professional, but he still felt it was appropriate. He hoped that if anybody ever pulled a gun on him, somebody would be around afterward to offer him a hug.

"Then don't worry about it. You already gave your statement to the police?"

She nodded. "They said they don't need me around here anymore. I just want to go home."

"I'll take you home. Just let me find out what's going on and lock up the store first."

Claire nodded, allowing him to release her and move toward the small building that had been serving as the pharmacy in that neighborhood for the past forty years, despite the national chains that were springing up on every corner.

"Edwin Masters?" The officer who approached him seemed impossibly young. With a start, Edwin realized he had probably been in college when the

officer was born. She had serious brown eyes and black hair pulled back in a tight ponytail beneath her hat.

“Yes.”

“You're the manager here?”

“Yes.”

“And the owner is?”

“The owner is away in Europe right now.”

She nodded. “The suspect pulled a gun on Ms. Reed at approximately a quarter after three this afternoon. He demanded OxyContin and ended up stealing thirty pills, according to the inventory.”

“We have a security camera...”

“Yes. We've already got the tape. There's been a rash of robberies in the area. If it's the same guy, he's not shy about holding up even the larger stores.”

“Do you think you'll be able to find him?”

“I hope so, sir. We'll be in contact if we get any leads.”

“Do you need anything else here? I think it's best if I lock up and take Ms. Reed home.”

“No, we're done here.”

Thirty lost OxyContin pills was more than troubling, but if that was the price the pharmacy had to pay for Claire's safety, the loss was fine with Edwin. He would have given up his entire inventory to protect her safety. But one good thing might have come from the robbery. He had installed several security cameras, and unless the thief was wearing a mask, chances were good that at least one of them had captured his face. If he was the one responsible for the thefts in the area, hitting Edwin's pharmacy might have been his final big mistake.

Edwin resolved to do whatever he could to tighten security. If that meant keeping the narcotics in a more secure safe, putting bulletproof glass over the

counter, and hiring a security guard, he would do it. Claire didn't need to feel unsafe.

He glanced out the door to make sure she was still waiting for him, and stopped short when he realized she wasn't alone. She stood near the Alfa Romeo, her arms folded, her mouth pulled into an amused, if shy smile. The man responsible for that smile was tall, blond, and had a muscular yet slim build. Edwin knew that if he were close enough, he would see the young man had stunning green eyes. And he was leaning against the Spider like he owned it.

Momentarily forgetting about the additional security measures, Edwin rushed out of the small building. "Hey!"

Claire turned around, her smile fading. "Is there something wrong?"

"Who are you talking to?"

"Oh, he's..." She looked back to the car, her face twisted with confusion. "He's gone. Where did he go?"

Edwin blinked. He hadn't even noticed the young man disappear. He checked up and down the street, but there was no sign of him. He must have ducked into a narrow alley. Or into one of the many buildings lining the street. Edwin didn't know how that was possible, given the fact that he didn't see or hear the man run away, but there wasn't any other explanation.

"Did he tell you who he was?"

Claire frowned. "I think he said his name was Cooper. He was telling me he was sorry to hear about the robbery."

"Did you tell him about what happened?"

"No. No, I was just standing here, waiting for you, and he was just there. He asked me if I was all right, then introduced himself."

"As Cooper?"

"Yes."

Edwin turned around slowly, squinting against the sun to seek out the increasingly familiar form. But just like before, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Are we done here?” Claire asked, rubbing her arms absently.

“Yes. Just let me lock up. Go ahead and wait for me in the car.”

Edwin couldn't resist checking over his shoulder as he locked the pharmacy door, but Claire remained alone in the car, and the street remained quiet. The officers were in their car with the engine idling, and from the outside, the pharmacy looked perfectly normal. Like it hadn't been terrorized less than an hour earlier. Edwin was glad it looked normal, though he doubted anything would ever feel quite right again.

“This is the car you bought yesterday?” Claire asked, once Edwin returned and slid behind the steering wheel.

“Yes.”

“It's amazing. What is it again?”

“An Alfa Romeo.”

“So it's a sports car, right?”

“Yes.” Edwin started the engine and searched the street one final time for the blond man. “So, that guy you were talking to, did he say anything else?”

“Not really. We didn't get a chance to talk for long before you came out.”

“Oh. So you don't know anything else about him?”

“No,” Claire said slowly. “Why are you so worried about it? Do you think he has something to do with the robbery?”

“What? No, no. Nothing like that. I just thought he looked familiar. Like somebody I used to know.” Edwin took the car out of neutral and laughed lightly. “I guess it's just my old eyes play tricks on me.”

She laughed. “Your eyes aren't that old.”

“They're not that young either.”

“They still look pretty young to me.”

“You're too kind.”

Claire ran her fingers over the dashboard. It was almost a caress. “Look, I don't want to intrude... Oh. Never mind.”

“What?”

“No, it's stupid.”

“What is it?” Edwin pressed. “You've had a pretty bad day. I want to do whatever I can to help.”

“Well...I just don't want to be alone right now. I was wondering if maybe you could stay at my place?”

“You mean...hang around for the rest of the day?”

Claire sighed. “I knew it was a stupid idea. I'm a big girl. But...I don't want to be alone.”

“No, it's not stupid.” He offered her a reassuring smile. “I wouldn't want to be alone right now either. But I shouldn't stay too long.”

“I understand.” Claire took a deep breath. “Why did you choose this car?”

“Oh, that's sort of a dumb story.”

Claire smiled, revealing the line of her perfect white teeth. “I want to hear it.”

“Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. When I was quite small, I was standing near one when somebody started the engine. It was the loudest thing I ever heard in my life. I was fascinated. I never forgot that moment.”

“So you wanted something loud?”

“Well, the sound helps. But I grew to love the car for other reasons. Not the least of which is the fact that nobody else likes it. I feel like somebody's got to appreciate it.”

“That's what I like about you, you know. You like to support the underdog.”

Edwin shook his head. “I don't know what you mean.”

“You hired me, didn't you?”

“You were hardly the underdog.”

“Fresh out of school, no real experience, and nothing to prove to you that I could do the job. But you still took a chance on me and gave me the opportunity I needed.”

“One could argue that I'm the reason you had a gun pointed at your face.”

“Don't. I don't want to hear anybody arguing that. It's not your fault either, you know.”

“You're my responsibility, as my employee. I would never be able to forgive myself if anything ever happened to you.”

Claire leaned closer, her chest brushing against his arm. The car was so small, it could have been an accident, but Edwin didn't think it was.

“But nothing did happen to me. That's all that matters. And I have you here to remind me of that fact.”

Edwin glanced at the top of her head, noting the way her hair rested in blonde waves across her face and shoulder. She was soft. She smelled soft. Edwin knew being this close to a young, attractive woman was supposed to make all his blood rush south. That didn't happen.

“Don't talk that way. You shouldn't focus on that... Just focus on the fact that you walked away, unscathed.”

“Did I?” She shook her head slightly but didn't abandon his arm. “Now every time somebody comes in with a big coat or dark skin, I'm going to wonder... I don't want to treat people differently because of this.”

Edwin opened and closed his mouth, unsure of just what she needed to hear. It wasn't as though he wasn't paranoid in his own way—he was considering ways to turn their little neighborhood pharmacy into a fortress that would rival Fort Knox. He couldn't tell her that her fear wasn't valid. They had something that thousands of drug addicts wanted, and addiction was a

frightening thing. It'd push some people to doing things they would have never considered before. Including robbing young women at gunpoint.

Edwin pulled to a stop outside her building and put the car in park, but he didn't bother shutting off the engine. "We've just got to do the best we can to remember that we help dozens of people every day, and it was just one bad apple."

"You're right." Claire looked up at him with a wide gaze, her eyes the color of the ocean. "I want you to stay with me. You know. For the night too."

"I...I can't. I'm sorry."

Confusion marred her face. "What do you mean 'you can't'? Don't you want to?"

"Um...not really. No."

"No? How can you say no?"

"You're a great girl, Claire. And a wonderful employee. But...that's all I'm really interested in. You as my employee."

She stared at him, mouth hanging open, her cheeks flushed a splotchy red. "What the hell was all that about earlier?"

"Was all what about?"

"You starting with the jealous boyfriend act when I was talking to Cooper."

"Jealous boyfriend? That wasn't...that wasn't about being jealous."

"That's why you scared him away and demanded to know who he was?"

Edwin wished he could turn the clock back. Instead of drinking until he was totally shitfaced the day before, he would have simply excused himself to his home, enjoyed a quiet dinner, and then gone into work that morning even though it was his day off. He wouldn't have embarrassed himself with Carson, or developed a horrible headache. He would have been covering the shift when the thief came in, and he would have been the one traumatized and frighteningly close to death. He would have gone home after the police left and spent the rest of his Sunday washing and waxing his car to help take his mind

off the trauma. Or maybe the scumbag had only tried his luck at the pharmacy because Claire looked like an easy target. There was a very good chance that his decision to go out with Cathy and Blake the night before destroyed his life.

“I just thought I recognized him. I wanted to know who he was. That's all. There was no...jealous-boyfriend rage there.”

“And what about agreeing to come home with me?”

“I thought you needed somebody because you were scared.”

Claire snorted. “I grew up East LA. You think some dooper with a gun is going to be enough to frighten me?”

“But you were frightened.”

Now she rolled her eyes. “That was a cover... I was trying to be coy about this. Or at least discreet. Fuck it. I'm out of here.”

Claire pushed open the door and slid out of the car before anything else could be said. The slam of the car door put the final punctuation mark on the conversation. Work would be awkward on Monday. And if she tried to get back at him by telling everybody that he had been the aggressor...

Edwin's blood ran cold at the thought. He wouldn't have thought that Claire was capable of doing something to ruin his career, but earlier that day, he wouldn't have thought Claire capable of using a threat against her life as the stepping stone to getting Edwin into bed. He certainly wouldn't have expected her to act personally offended by the fact that he simply wasn't interested in what she was offering. Didn't she know he was gay? Or maybe he wasn't the only oblivious one working at the pharmacy.

Even if she were his type and he had been interested in her, Edwin would never sleep with a subordinate. It was just...tacky. He liked to be sure his partners were completely willing, and not just using him to get ahead.

As soon as Edwin put the car into gear, a small smile returned to his face. His half-over weekend had been the very definition of *insane*, but he still had his car. His beautiful, perfect, straightforward, simple car. He gripped the

wheel and felt a modicum of peace returning. Nothing else was making sense, but he understood the Alfa Romeo Spider. It was real and solid and right.

His peace was shattered when somebody behind him laughed and said, "I've got to say, I probably would have fucked her."

Chapter Four

Edwin jerked back like the stranger had punched him or pulled a knife on him. “Who the fuck are you?”

“You know who I am.”

Edwin blinked. “What?”

“I introduced myself to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your dream? The prom? Sorry about that, by the way, but I was trying to think of the last time I went on a date, and it happened to be the prom, so...”

“Who the fuck are you? What the fuck are you talking about?”

A passing car illuminated the other man's face, and his green eyes seemed to flash in the bright headlights. Green eyes beneath thick blond lashes.

“Okay, let's start over from the beginning here. My name is Cooper James.”

“Get out of my car.” Edwin was horrified to hear the tremor in his voice. The words were far from forceful.

“You're Edwin Masters, right?”

“Get out of my car.”

“Well, it's technically my car too. I think.”

“It's not your fucking car!”

Cooper blinked. “No need to shout. I mean, that's a hell of a way to talk to the guy who saved your life.”

“What?”

“The big truck yesterday? And the cliff? You notice how you're still breathing. It's because somebody was paying attention.”

Edwin shook his head. “No. No.”

“No, no? You can deny it all you want, that doesn't change the fact that I saved your life. Which I thought was damned nice of me. Gentlemanly, even. Speaking of being a gentleman, what just happened here?”

Hallucination brought on by stress? Could be. Even though he had the means to purchase the car, handing over a good chunk of your life savings for a car—even a beautiful car—was never an easy thing. But he didn't want to talk to his hallucination. Even if his mind had been kind to him and created the sort of a hallucination Greek gods would lust after. He put the car into gear and signaled before pulling away from the curb.

“You don't want to talk about it? That's fine. She's cute, though. And all vulnerable...though I wouldn't be totally surprised if the security footage doesn't turn up anything. Or if the cameras had mysteriously stopped working.”

Edwin's lips tightened. Apparently, his hallucination wasn't going to give people the benefit of the doubt. But he didn't want to be the sort of crazy man who spent all his time arguing with himself.

“Girls have changed since I was alive. Not a lot. But they didn't use to be quite so forward, you know what I mean?”

“Alive?”

“Yeah. Back in 1962.”

“What?”

“What are you talking about? You haven't figured out yet that I'm a ghost?”

“A what?”

“Ghost. Haunt. Spook. Specter. Phantom. The dearly departed. Getting a clue?”

“What?”

Cooper turned toward him. “Are you okay? You didn't hit your head too hard yesterday, did you? I mean, you understand what I'm telling you, right?”

“You're a ghost.”

“Yes.”

“Called Cooper James.”

“Yes.”

“And you're haunting my car?”

“Well, I'm haunting *my* car, but yeah, that's close enough.”

“I'm hallucinating ghosts. That's just great.”

“How could I be a hallucination? Your girl was talking to me earlier.”

“She was talking to somebody who I ended up hallucinating about later. That doesn't mean anything.”

“I saved your life yesterday. Remember that bit? I know you do, because I already mentioned it.”

“I jerked the car back to safety. Though I might have injured myself...” Edwin shook his head. “No, see, I'm not going to argue with myself over this.”

“You don't have to. I'm real. You're not hallucinating me or dreaming me or anything else. Look...your little boyfriend noticed me.”

“My little...” Edwin screwed his eyes shut. “Carson? Are you talking about Carson?”

“Yep. I didn't think he'd be able to feel me, because he doesn't own the car. But maybe just being in the car was enough.”

“You chased him away?” Edwin asked dully.

“I had to.”

“What? Who the fuck do you think you are? If you're even real, you have absolutely no fucking business chasing guys out of my room. Guys I like. A lot, I might add.”

“Don't overreact here. He was just going to get in our way and...”

“Get out. Get the fuck out of my car. Get out, get out, get out. And I'm going to make a doctor's appointment for first thing Monday morning.”

“If you think that'll make you feel better. That doesn't change anything. I know you felt me yesterday. I'm sorry about that, by the way. I didn't mean to scare you. But it's not easy.”

“What's not easy? Being a ghost?”

“Getting in contact with people. I haven't tried in years.”

“Why don't you get out of contact with me?”

Cooper tilted his head. “You know, that's not very nice. I thought that you would be different. At the very least, I thought you'd be somebody I could talk to. Or, you know, do more with.”

“You need to talk to somebody about being a ghost? I need to talk to somebody about seeing ghosts. Several somebodies. Several professionals.”

“Sure, I had to go and reveal myself to a skeptic. Whatever, man. I've got all kinds of time. A whole world of time. You go get your head tested out, and when you're done, I'll come back.”

“No, you won't. Because either I'll be sane and I won't have further hallucinations, or I'll start taking drugs to avoid hallucinations.”

“Come on. We could talk about the car. I know it better than anybody else.”

Edwin turned around to look at him directly. The younger man seemed solid, though there was no reason delusions couldn't be solid. He also seemed entirely sincere, but people who were having crazy visions always thought what they saw was real. His own hallucination would seem entirely sincere. Or maybe this was another dream? Maybe he had only dreamed that Claire went nuts on him and he found a ghost in his car.

“You're not dreaming. You chasing that girl away? Really happened.”

“The fact that you can read my mind doesn't convince me that you're real.”

“I can't read your mind. I just took a guess. The right one, apparently.”

“It's not the right guess. I just...” Edwin slammed his hand against the steering wheel. “Will you just leave me alone? I can't deal with this right now!”

He expected some sort of amused response. But he didn't get a response at all. He slid his gaze sideways, and the passenger seat was empty. As was the backseat in his rearview mirror.

“Cooper?”

Silence. Despite his outburst, and his deep desire to not be crazy, he felt mildly disappointed. A small part—a very small part—had sort of hoped that ghosts really did exist. But that was the part of him that still delighted in science-fiction movies, those crappy documentaries on the History Channel about haunted mansions, and the News of the Weird sections of the newspaper. In other words, the part of him that was still stunted, caught in arrested development.

The adult part of him knew that a Monday-morning doctor's appointment couldn't happen soon enough.

* * * * *

A vacation. Dr. Corbett had looked at him with serious eyes as he solemnly wrote out the prescription for a vacation and insisted that medically, there was nothing wrong with Edwin. Normally, Edwin would have been thrilled by the news. After the abuse he had put his body through, every clean bill of health was a special blessing. But this time, it only made him angry. A vacation? There was something clearly *wrong*. How could that be solved with a simple vacation?

It only took eight minutes of research to convince Edwin that he very much needed a vacation. After a full ten minutes, he was tempted to call his boss in Europe and simply inform the man that he needed a break and he'd be back in a week.

The details he had found online were straightforward and easily verified. Cooper Samson James had been born on the twelfth of August in 1944, the eldest child of Samson and Olive James. He had four younger siblings, born every two years. It seemed like you could set a clock to Olive James's uterus. While Olive tended to her brood, Samson James focused on quietly building up his empire, investing in anything that seemed to catch his interest. His haphazard style paid off, though, and by the time Cooper was sixteen, the whole family had moved into the mansion Edwin had seen the Saturday before.

All of that was interesting, if a little depressing. Samson had accomplished more by the time he was thirty-eight than Edwin had ever even attempted, and he was just shy of forty-eight. He didn't have a family to show for his years on Earth. He didn't have a particularly nice house. He didn't have anything, except a job he didn't hate, neighbors he tolerated, and a car that he loved but was too frightened to actually spend time in.

The most interesting information about Cooper Samson James was dated September 2, 1962. One month after Cooper's eighteenth birthday. The story Edwin read wasn't a surprising one, and it wasn't particularly unique. A night of drinking. A new birthday present that drove a little too fast. An overcorrection at unbelievable speeds. And an accident that was more than a minor dent in the bumper.

Cooper James had died almost instantly, his neck broken from the impact. The same month and year, though not the same day, that Edwin had been born. A picture of the young man accompanied the story, and he had the same handsome face, the same flop of hair, the same smiling eyes as the man Edwin saw in his car.

“Not possible,” Edwin muttered. “This is not possible.”

He glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to see Cooper standing in the room, with folded arms and a knowing smirk. But there was nothing.

Maybe he could sell the car. Or try to take it back and demand a refund of his money. After all, they had lied to him. They had never mentioned a serious

accident. They had never mentioned the death of a young man. They had never mentioned the chance of a ghost.

Not that he believed in ghosts. He had done a lot of research on Alfa Romeo Spiders before finding one to purchase. Cooper James's accident hadn't exactly been a secret. He might have come across the story once or twice, and it stuck in the back of his mind. Then, while he was under a good deal of stress and excitement, his memory recalled those details and a dream, or a hallucination, or something was born.

But that seemed almost as far-fetched as ghosts. Especially since Claire had had a conversation with his hallucination.

Edwin shut down his computer, no longer interested in seeing the picture of the dead boy who apparently—possibly—maybe haunted his car.

Half expecting some strange specter to jump out from behind every corner, and feeling wary of each shadow, he made his way from his office to the garage. He didn't need the pressure, and he was sure that his blood pressure was rising by the second. He flipped on the light above the car, watching to see if the new light illuminated the lanky body of the young man who was haunting more than his car. But the Alfa Romeo was empty.

As it should be.

Edwin's palm was clammy when he touched the handle, and despite how slick his palm felt, he yanked the car door open. A part of him was relieved to be that close to the car again. It wasn't right to keep such a beauty locked up out of sight. He wanted to drive it every day, for every errand. He wanted to feel its power beneath his fingers and under his feet and pulsing through him. He didn't want to be scared to do something as simple as open the door.

Holding his breath, he slid behind the wheel, waiting to feel that icy rush down his neck. The car was stuffy from being locked in the garage since the weekend, and the interior leather burned his skin everywhere he came in contact with it. Steeling his nerves, he looked at the rearview mirror. Empty. Nothing there.

Edwin released a shaky sigh and turned the ignition. He needed to get to work. He needed to figure out how he was going to deal with Claire. Not to mention deal with the thousands of things that required his attention every single day. He couldn't spend his time fucking around with hallucinations of dead boys, or plotting out a vacation, or researching tragedies that happened before he was born. Nor could he spend hours of his life moping over a guy who was probably long, long gone. He was ready to get back to his real life.

Chapter Five

Can I stay? Would it be a sin? 'Cause I can't help falling in love with you.

Edwin sipped from his plastic cup, but the red punch didn't taste like anything. It should have tasted like cherries or strawberries or some combination, but there was nothing. Not even the vague taste of minerals from the municipal water supply. But it felt good against his dry lips, so he kept drinking until there was nothing left.

White and blue lights swirled around the gym, moving in time with the slow rhythm of the song. Elvis didn't sound as good as Roy Orbison, though Edwin kept that opinion to himself. Most people disagreed. Especially since even he had to admit that Elvis's voice was full and beautiful on this record. He stood in the corner with his cup, watching the couples on the gym floor, swaying back and forth, barely moving at all. The girls looked like spun-sugar fantasies; the boys were solid, bred to support a nation on their broad shoulders.

They were at his prom, except the gym looked completely different. The decorations were out-of-date, and everybody wore ridiculously old-fashioned tuxedos and dresses. But he knew it was his prom, because he recognized most of the faces, and he was wearing the dark blue tuxedo he had rented for the night. Sally, his date, was on his arm—a girl he had never even kissed, but she still seemed to like him well enough. Except, when he looked over at her, she had turned into Carson.

A huge banner above the stage announced the theme—SWEET DREAMS—and the year—1980—and the band was his brother's band. Which was all

wrong, because Stu would never, ever be caught dead playing at anybody's prom. Especially his loser younger brother's.

Wise men say only fools rush in...

"Can I have this dance?"

He had expected the request to come from Carson, but the brunet had simply drifted away from him.

"God..." Edwin finally turned around. "You were so young."

"I don't feel like I'm that young."

"Is that because every eighteen-year-old feels like he already knows everything?"

Cooper smirked. "It's because I'm sixty-five."

"You don't look it."

"That's the upshot of dying. You get to keep your youthful good looks."

Edwin frowned. "Are you really here? I mean, are we really here together? How do you control my dreams?"

Cooper shrugged, a boyish gesture despite his sixty-five years. "I don't know."

"You don't know which part?"

"I don't know if we're really here together, or if I just planted the suggestion, or if you're just crazy. Or maybe we're both dreaming. I've never tried this trick before."

"Then how did you know it would work?"

"I hoped. I thought it would be easier to talk to you here."

Edwin looked around the room while Elvis continued to blast from cracking speakers. "I thought you just really, really liked your prom."

"No. If I knew the details about your prom, I would have chosen that."

"Oh, God. No, we don't have to go to my prom."

"Was it bad?"

“It was 1980, and our theme was 'Stairway to Heaven.'”

Cooper arched his fine brow. “How did that happen?”

“Small school, and there were more boys than girls. Then my date got sick and puked red punch all over my rented tux. But that's okay, because I hit her shoes on the return.”

“That's a lovely story.”

“I thought since you were invading my dreams, you could hear the puke stories.”

“Well, if it's all the same to you, I think I'll avoid the 'Stairway to Heaven' pukefest in the future.” He held out his hand, his head tilted toward the full gym floor. “Want to dance?”

“Here?”

“A prom's a good place for dancing. People usually expect that sort of thing.”

“Between two guys?”

“It's just your imagination, you know. It's not actually sixty-two.”

“You make a good point,” Edwin said. So good, in fact, that he didn't know if he could find a good reason to reject the offer. Cooper looked very sharp in his tuxedo—as sharp as one could look in a prom tuxedo—and he was waiting with a patient half smile. He waited for a surge of annoyance, but the Cooper of his dreams wasn't really annoying. Did that mean he wasn't the real Cooper? Did the dead Cooper even count as the real Cooper?

“You know, I think you think too much.”

“What?”

“We dance now. You can worry about all this later, when you wake up.”

Edwin smiled and stepped into Cooper's waiting arms. “Who gets to lead?”

“We'll just sway, like the rest of them. This is a school dance, after all.”

“Do you know how to dance?” Edwin asked, obediently resting his hand on Cooper's hip, the other arm going around Cooper's back.

“I know a few steps. But not many. It's hard to find somebody who'll practice dancing with a ghost.”

“What about other ghosts?” Edwin lifted his head. “There are other ghosts, I presume?”

“Sure. All kinds of ghosts.” Cooper's arm was tight around Edwin's back, and he rested his head on his shoulder with a soft sigh. His hair smelled of sunshine on leather. He was surprisingly warm. The material of his jacket grew damp beneath Edwin's hand, absorbing his sweat. “I mean, they're everywhere.”

“That's something, isn't it?”

The song started over again, Elvis crooning about wise men, but Edwin didn't really care. Maybe Cooper could only remember two or three songs from his youth. Or maybe Edwin just kept replaying the songs he knew came from 1962.

“Not really. People are ghosts for a reason, you know. They're all caught up in their own psychodramas and reliving their mistakes. They live in hells of their own making.”

Edwin frowned. “What about you?”

“No, I'm not in hell.”

“But you're not in paradise either.”

“You ever hear of an atheist ghost?”

“Not really, no.”

“Now you have. But I don't want to talk about that. I want to dance.”

“This isn't dancing. It's swaying.”

“Then I want to sway.”

“If you're going to haunt me, I think we need to discuss boundaries.”

“Do we need to stop dancing to discuss boundaries?”

Edwin shook his head. “No, not at all.”

In fact, he didn't want to stop dancing for any reason. They weren't in the gym anymore. They had drifted right out the door, leaving everybody in the stuffy room in favor of the fresh air and bright stars. Edwin didn't remember it happening, but he was dancing with a ghost, so shifting the location didn't seem outside the realm of possibility. The music continued from unseen speakers, and Edwin remembered that he used to like the song. His older sister had listened to the album constantly, playing it over and over and over and singing to him.

Cooper moved closer—soon, only their clothes separated their bodies. His body was solid, his muscles twitching beneath his thin shirt, his cock stirring against his thin trousers. Edwin responded by tightening his hold. He did love to dance. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so close to another man while fully clothed, but oddly, the restricting, old-fashioned tuxedos didn't lessen his pleasure.

“Are you scared of what's on the other side?” Edwin murmured.

“Wouldn't you be?”

“I am now.”

“That's something else we have in common, I guess.”

Edwin tried to ask him what he meant, but the words were lost in a familiar alarm. An alarm that frightened the stars away, silenced the music, and finally dissolved the world until the only solid thing was the mattress beneath him.

Edwin cracked an eye open, peering at his alarm clock suspiciously. It couldn't already be seven. There was no way that it was already seven. Behind him, an all-too-perky newscaster greeted her viewers with a chirpy announcement of the time—and a reminder that the weather and other top stories would be after the commercial break.

But that wasn't what caught his attention. There was somebody else in the room with him. "Cooper? What makes you think I want you bugging me?"

Cooper blinked. "What?"

"What makes you think I need a new ghost friend?"

"I didn't really have friendship in mind," Cooper admitted.

He was hovering over the bed now, as if to remind Edwin that yes, he was really talking to a ghost. For the first time, Edwin noticed that his clothes didn't look right. They looked like clothes you might have found forty-seven years ago. Maybe he couldn't change his clothes, despite the fact that he could convince two people that he was a living, normal person.

"What did you have in mind?"

"The orgasm wasn't a clue? Come on, you don't think your little boyfriend did that himself, do you? That was all me."

Edwin's jaw dropped. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not."

"No no no. No. No. Just forget about it. Put it out of your head right now."

Cooper folded his arms and dropped down to the mattress. Gradually, his body changed, but Edwin wasn't quite sure how. Not until he realized that he could no longer see the wall behind him.

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy it? It looked like you were having fun to me."

"I don't fuck ghosts."

"Yet. You don't fuck them, yet," Cooper corrected.

"Ever." Edwin shook his head. "That's just too weird for me."

"It's not that weird. Do you think just because I'm dead, I don't have needs? I'm basically going to be eighteen for eternity. I have needs all the time."

"Now you're just sounding whiny," Edwin pointed out. "And you can clearly interact with other people. Why don't you go pester one of them?"

"Maybe I want you."

"You can't have me," Edwin said flatly. "So leave me alone."

"I saved your life, you know. Twice."

"How do you figure twice?"

Cooper held up one finger. "When I pulled you away from the SUV."

"Are you counting not letting me go over the cliff?"

Cooper held up a second finger. "And the other night."

"The other night?"

"You think your little boy toy was sober? He was not. And if I hadn't been there, my car would have been fucked all over again."

"It's not your car," Edwin said automatically. "It's my car."

"Well, I'm haunting it. And I'm not going to stop anytime soon."

"Is that a threat?"

Cooper shrugged. "Look, I've been hanging around that car for nearly fifty years. You think that's been fun for me? My dad never let anybody take it out of the garage. I didn't even get a break after he died."

"So why didn't you leave the car? You're obviously not bound to it. You're in here, bugging me."

"You're pretty tightly wound, Edwin. Maybe you should go on a vacation, like your doctor says."

"You were there for that?"

"I am going to be here for everything. If you convince that Carson to come back, you better believe I'll be here when you're fucking him."

"It does sound like you're threatening me."

"I've got to keep myself entertained, Edwin. That's a weird name. Where did it come from?"

"I don't know."

"You never asked?"

"It never came up. Now I'd like to get ready for work."

"You want me to leave?"

"If you'd be so kind."

"What if I just fade out of sight?"

"I doubt I'd be able to do much about that."

"Would it kill you to be friendly?"

Edwin sighed. "Next time, don't scare away the hot guy who wants to fuck me, and maybe I'll consider being friendly to you."

"Look, if you just need to get fucked..."

"Get out. Go on. Get out of here."

Cooper responded with a pout that made something in Edwin's chest shift. He was not going to give in to a pouting ghost. And he didn't want to sit there arguing with a dead boy all morning. Especially since the dead boy probably had all sorts of time for pointless arguments, and Edwin still had to go to work. Exhausted. Which was not the most ideal way to face Claire.

"You should think about how handy it would be to have a ghost friend. That's all I'm saying."

"Handy?"

"I could go find out what Carson is up to."

For a moment, Edwin considered it. Really considered it. Cooper owed him that much, and it would be a great way to test Cooper's existence. But ultimately, he had to reject it. The last thing he wanted to do was get in the habit of spying on people. The fact that he even had to consider the moral implications of being haunted annoyed him.

"Go. Leave me alone."

"Could you imagine if it was that easy in the movies?"

"There wouldn't be a movie if it were that easy."

"Would it impress you if I were cooperative?"

“I don't know. Why don't you try it, and we'll see?”

“Fine. I'll catch you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, thanks for the warning.”

* * * * *

Carson tapped his fingers against the wheel in a nervous rhythm, matching the quick beating of his heart. As soon as he turned off the motor, hot air rushed to replace the cooler jets that had been streaming through the AC vents. Within seconds, sweat soaked the back of his neck and began to trickle down his shirt, but he still didn't open the door and step onto the street. He watched the people streaming by, moving back and forth on the sidewalk, running their errands with a single-minded tenacity. None of them looked up to enjoy the world around them. Most of them had earbuds buried in their ears, the long, thin cords dangling between their heads and their iPods. A few ducked into the pharmacy, their shadows swallowed by the building's cooler interior.

The pharmacy looked exactly like the sort of place Edwin would work. Carson didn't even know that little pharmacies like that still existed. When he needed a script filled, he just hit up the local shopping megacenters and then was on his way, happy to sacrifice customer service to get a few bucks off the cost of his medicine. But Carson knew Edwin could never work like that. He wouldn't want to be the nameless, practically faceless guy in a white smock, with no time to do anything except hand out little paper bags with a rushed, canned speech on the side effects of each pill. He'd want to take the appropriate amount of time with each customer. He probably remembered all their names too.

Not that Carson knew Edwin Masters well enough to make any claims on his attitude or work ethic. He barely knew Edwin at all, which was a fact Carson had regretted all weekend. Before he had even had the chance to use his spare key to let himself in at Cathy and Blake's, he wanted to turn around,

march right back into Edwin's bedroom, and finish what he had started. Except he couldn't think of a sane way to do that. He would have accepted an insane way if he could think of something graceful, at least. But he drew a blank. There was no graceful way to return to a man's bedroom after fleeing it in what could only be called fear.

Especially when he had every right to be afraid. Or at least a little weirded out.

With the benefit of hindsight, Carson understood that whatever had happened to him was nothing more than the result of an overactive, and slightly sloshed, imagination. He had been totally turned on by the way Edwin clung to him, and he had been just about ready to pop himself. In the back of his mind, he imagined an entire night of the two of them working each other into a frenzy, fucking, and then starting the process over again. Edwin would have probably insisted that he was too old for that sort of thing, but Carson dismissed that out of hand. Edwin was fit, and Carson could tell with a single glance that he took good care of himself. He was probably more than capable of conducting and enjoying an all-night marathon of fucking.

But before Carson even had the chance to suggest it, something had happened. Something that had every survival instinct shouting at him to run, run fast, and run far.

Carson had once dated a man who owned six cats. The cats themselves weren't deal breakers, though Carson believed anything beyond two cats was excessive, and Jim took good care of them. His apartment didn't even smell like it housed six cats. Jim had offered him one warning—the cats believed the bedroom belonged to them, and they weren't shy about jumping right on the bed. Even when Jim was entertaining guests, so to speak. Carson had insisted that wasn't a problem. And it hadn't been, until one vigorous session resulted in a trip to the emergency room.

There had been a horrible moment of sharp pain radiating from his balls. Pain like Carson had never experienced before. It was hot and overpowering,

flooding his lower stomach like lava. Carson had frozen, midthrust, his entire body going rigid. In the next second, he understood that there was a cat attached to his sac. Until the night with Edwin, that had been the most horrible, surprising, unbelievable thing that had ever happened to him while with another man.

Whatever he had felt in Edwin's bedroom hadn't been as painful as the cat incident. But there had been definite pressure on his balls, and the shape and weight of five distinct fingers. And that sensation had only increased, the delicate pressure increasing until Carson had wanted to wrench away. Of course, Edwin's hands had been well accounted for. And there had been nobody else in the room.

And he had been drunk.

It was possible that he had imagined everything. Or that his pants were too tight. Or that he was simply crazy. And it would be crazy to blow off Edwin and not even try for another date. *Try* being the operative word, since he had no real reason to think that any attempt on his part would actually lead to a second date. There weren't many guys in Los Angeles who Carson cared about impressing, but Edwin Masters was one. Carson had been out with a lot of different guys, but he had never met anybody quite like Edwin. And if nothing else, he owed the other man an apology. Edwin accepting his apology was just about the most Carson had any right to hope for. Though if he was very lucky, Edwin might accept his invitation to dinner, too.

No need to be nervous about this. Just go in and talk to him like a normal person. Then apologize to him. He's not royalty. He's a normal guy, like you.

With that thought firmly in mind, Carson finally opened the door and stepped into the sunshine. The air outside his boxy car was slightly cooler, and a small breeze whispered past his damp skin, sending a chill dancing down his spine. He combed his fingers through his hair, grimacing as he felt how wet it was. He had spent too much time in the car, and now he was a sweaty,

disgusting mess. He had time to run home for a quick shower and make it back to the pharmacy before work.

Stop looking for excuses and just go talk to him.

His legs felt like they weighed a hundred pounds, and they only grew heavier with each step. For the life of him, he couldn't think of the last time a guy had tied him up in so many knots. He had never been short of boyfriends and fuck buddies, but it had always felt like he was in complete control of the situations. In complete control of himself. He could take them or leave them. And he didn't mind being the aggressor. What had happened to that confidence? Something about Edwin made it dwindle to nothing. Which was annoying, but a little exhilarating too. Carson definitely wanted to spend more time with a man who could completely turn him inside out after a single night together.

He hadn't been looking for a lover or any sort of relationship when he'd met Edwin. And the only reason he had agreed to let himself get fixed up with Cathy's neighbor was to shut her up about it. Between working for Star Parties and trying to get his own restaurant off the ground, he didn't have the time or interest for anything more than no-strings-attached hookups.

But Edwin's smile had made him forget his hesitance.

Now, if only he could be sure Edwin would want to spend more time with him.

Knowing he would regret it more if he didn't try at all, Carson pushed the door open. Edwin was bent over some paperwork behind the counter, the only person in the small pharmacy—a fact that hugely relieved Carson. It would be easier to talk to him without an audience present. Plus, if he did crash and burn, he wouldn't need the additional humiliation of doing so in front of Edwin's coworkers.

“Can I help you?” Edwin greeted cordially. At first, Carson thought maybe Edwin didn't recognize him—they had both been drinking quite a bit—but then he realized that Edwin was smiling at him. And the smile had reached his eyes.

Buoyed by that, Carson took a step forward. “Yeah. Do you have something that stops the spread of idiocy?”

Edwin didn't even blink at the question. He had made constant references to his age on their first date, as if desperate to remind Carson that too many years separated them. Carson didn't pretend that Edwin didn't look his age—because he absolutely did. In an utterly distinguished, captivating way. He looked like a man who knew what he wanted and wouldn't have to resort to ridiculous games. Carson hoped that would play out in his favor.

“I don't know. Is that a rash?”

“More like warts. I thought you'd be the person to ask.” Carson grimaced slightly, realizing how awful the words sounded. Where did his brain go? Had it just deserted him to this impossible task? Hoping to salvage the situation, he added lamely, “Since you're a pharmacist.”

Somehow, Edwin managed to keep a straight face. “I guess it would help if I knew all the symptoms.”

“There are myriad symptoms,” Carson said with misery that was mostly genuine. “But I think the most troubling is the sudden and unexplained disappearances. I mean, one minute, I'm having a good time with a guy I like, and the next minute, I'm running away for no reason.” *With strangely aching balls*, but Carson decided he'd keep that part to himself.

“I'm not sure I have anything for that,” Edwin said, his voice light but his eyes somber.

Carson didn't know if Edwin was just teasing him. If so, it was kind of a mean thing to do, though Carson knew he totally deserved it. In fact, if Edwin let him off the hook with only a little bit of teasing, he would not complain. He decided to press forward. “What am I supposed to do? My rampant case of idiocy is in danger of ruining my life. Well, my love life, at any rate.”

“I might still be able to help. I'm not doctor, but I could observe your behavior a bit. Do you have any free time for that sort of observation?”

Carson's stomach did a weird sort of flip-flop, like Edwin had just unexpectedly turned the world upside down. It reminded him of the fair rides he used to go on when he was a kid—the ones that always made him want to puke. Not wanting to give anything away, Carson swallowed and answered evenly, “I actually have some spare time tonight. I don't think I'll need too much, though.”

“Why?”

“Because, apparently, my idiocy knows no bounds. I fully expect that you'll slap my face by eight o'clock and be on your way. Or send me on my way.”

Edwin frowned. “You know, I'm not really in the habit of slapping faces.”

“I'm afraid I'll inspire you.”

Edwin's frown disappeared. “You inspire me to do other things.”

Carson released a shaky breath. He felt a little light-headed as the air rushed from his lungs. To know that Edwin didn't hold a grudge against him was one thing—and about all he had realistically hoped for. But to get confirmation that Edwin still wanted him. Well, that practically changed the shame of his world. “What time do you close up here?”

“Seven.”

Carson thought quickly, blurting the invitation before he could lose his nerve or change his mind. “If you don't mind inviting me back to your place, I can make you dinner.”

“You don't have to make me dinner,” Edwin protested.

“I like to cook.” Carson tilted his head, a fresh wave of anxiety washing over him. Was he being too pushy? What was it about Edwin that made him doubt every single word? “Unless you want to go out somewhere? I mean, I don't want to demand that you let me into your kitchen if you don't want to.”

Edwin's lips twitched. Carson took note of it. He was becoming an avid collector of all of Edwin's smiles. “I don't mind letting you into my kitchen.”

Carson beamed. "Perfect. You like meat?"

"Depends on what you're offering."

Now Carson didn't just want to smile, he wanted to laugh. "In this case, I meant steak."

"Steak's great."

"Great. I mean...that's great. I'll see you tonight. Eight sharp."

Edwin nodded. "Eight sharp."

Carson wanted to stay and discuss the evening some more, but he knew Edwin needed to get back to work. Besides, he had his own work to do. He was going to cook the meal of his life. Not just of his life. It was going to be the meal of Edwin's life, too. One that he would reminisce over for years to come. One that, if nothing else, would be worth Edwin's forgiveness for his earlier blundering.

Chapter Six

Did ghosts sleep? They didn't eat or get cold. They didn't bake in the summer heat, and they didn't get dirty. They didn't shower, and except in rare cases, they couldn't interact with the world at all. Yet, despite forty-seven years of experience, Cooper could not answer a simple question. He just couldn't say if ghosts slept, and if they did, why they would need to. He never felt tired. Floating around all day didn't exactly exhaust a person. And exhaustion was a result of biology—and ghosts certainly did not have biological functions. Except, of course, in rare cases.

Even so, Cooper definitely felt there were times when he left the world. Times when he ceased to exist in any meaningful way. He didn't have a body to preserve his space in the world. He didn't dream. He didn't feel the passage of time, or the change of the seasons. If thinking created being, then Cooper didn't sleep. He died all over again.

And yet, he always found his way back to the car. Maybe heaven rejected him, having no particular use for a guy who never did anything bad, but never managed to do anything good, either. Maybe his constant return to the car was supposed to be some sort of hint. A clue to his mission. Far more likely, however, was that his original hypothesis was correct. There wasn't a God. There wasn't a Heaven. There wasn't a paradise to be found, or a Pandemonium to be cast into. There was only the Alfa Romeo Spider, the California sun, the whisper of the Pacific when it brushed against the sand, and the people who drifted in and out of his existence without pause, without stopping long enough to notice him.

Cooper was aware of other ghosts. The sheer number of spooks and specters that haunted the Hollywood Hills would horrify, though probably not shock, any God-fearing person. Some of them were like him—confused but whole. He did remember that his neck had been broken, but he didn't walk around with his head flopping back at an awkward angle. There were ghosts that lingered on that same stretch of road—the one that wound like a ribbon through the hills—and they were missing clothes, missing limbs, and worse, missing heads. As near as Cooper could tell, it was all very personal.

They each made their own hell. Like every other person, living or dead, on Earth.

Though he was aware of the other spirits, he never approached them. He was lonely, but only in an abstract sense. He could say, *I am*, and thus understand that he was on his own, but he never longed for another's company. He had his car and his radio and when he couldn't take it anymore, he closed his eyes and simply went *elsewhere*.

But all that changed when Edwin Masters slid behind the wheel in his car. For the first time in years, Cooper's curiosity was piqued. He wanted to know this man. He wanted to meet him. He wanted to touch his hand. He wanted to hear the sound of his voice.

The driving question of Cooper's existence shifted then. Instead of wondering if ghosts slept, he wondered if ghosts could reach out to the living world. And in the cocoon of his Alfa Romeo, it seemed like anything was possible. It hadn't occurred to him that Edwin might not be so excited to test the connection that undeniably existed between the two of them.

And Edwin didn't just stir curiosity. Since the night he'd died, Cooper hadn't felt anything like arousal. How could he? He didn't have a heart, he didn't have blood, he didn't have flesh. For all he knew, he didn't have a cock. But sitting in the backseat of the Spider, watching the way Edwin's smile changed, noticing the subtle color of his eyes, Cooper felt something different.

Cooper remembered what it was like to *need*.

That *need* only increased as he spent more time with Edwin. As near as he could tell, it was all physical. Or mystical. Or spiritual. Or fate. It certainly wasn't because Edwin was such a nice guy. It seemed like he could be a nice guy. He was very thoughtful. He took care. He liked his life to make sense, and Cooper couldn't blame him for that. If a ghost had introduced itself to him, he would have had the same reaction Edwin did. He would have denied it. He would have sought out a physical explanation. He would have doubted his own mind, his own senses, until he would have had no choice but to tear apart his world and try to rebuild it to make it make sense.

He could have done what the man asked and left him be. Cooper certainly didn't have any interest in haunting some hapless guy who just wanted to drive his beloved car, go to work, and live his life. But he wanted to connect with Edwin. And after forty-seven years of never connecting with anybody, the impulse was too new, too novel, too demanding to ignore.

Even if he was doing a shitty job of it.

Even if he never thought of himself as a queer. He had had a girlfriend, and she had been great. He certainly never had a problem with sex, and he couldn't think of any men who turned him on. Not any men that he had known personally. There were certain actors who made his stomach tighten. Edwin didn't look anything like Marlon Brando or Paul Newman, though. Not that Edwin didn't have his attractive qualities, but he wasn't quite leading-man material.

Cooper floated above the counter, indulging in his new favorite pastime. Edwin made regular mention of his age, but the man never took into account the fact that he looked amazing. Even the tiny gray hairs that curled at his temples and his nape only contributed to his distinguished look. And he had kind eyes. He treated everybody with a certain baseline of kindness. Cooper liked to think he had treated people the same when he was alive, but he had been eighteen. He assumed he hadn't been a particularly considerate kid, though he couldn't really remember.

His actual life had slipped into a dream state. He kept playing the same songs for Edwin because he couldn't remember anything other than the days and moments that edged the night of his death. And those moments only seemed real to him because of the radio. Elvis and Roy, and Buddy Holly, and the Big Bopper. But Edwin hadn't seemed particularly moved by the songs or by the prom. If Edwin had wanted anything Cooper could give, he would relinquish it without protest.

Cooper floated closer to the man in question, knowing he was giving himself away, but Edwin would probably ignore the chill. Even as it danced down his spine. The dream had been a good idea, even if it hadn't convinced Edwin of anything. He wasn't sure how he'd influenced Edwin's dreams. He didn't try to enter the man's mind. Perhaps it had been mere suggestion, like hypnotism? His girlfriend, Andrea, had a cousin who was a stage magician, and he had shown them a few tricks with hypnotism. Cooper remembered the event—he had no doubt it had happened—but he didn't know any of the details. Which meant he couldn't have used the same tricks on Edwin.

But he had been there, in Edwin's mind, hearing the music through Edwin's ears, seeing his own prom filtered through Edwin's expectations and experiences. And they had talked, like they were friends. For a moment, the *need* had been sated. But not for long. It had returned with the new morning, and though Cooper might have been perfectly happy stretched out in the backseat of his car, he found himself in the pharmacy instead. Watching Edwin go about his tasks with an ease that he didn't show in the rest of his life. He seemed more comfortable here than he did in his own home.

How had Edwin decided to become a pharmacist? He had good hands. He could have done something else with his life. He could have been a doctor. After careful consideration, Cooper decided he could have been a surgeon. His hands were dark, stained by the sun after long hours spent outside in the garden, but his skin was still taut. Unwrinkled. Unharmed by California's heat. Each nail was trimmed to a blunt edge and kept scrupulously clean. When did

Edwin find time to file and buff each nail? Or did he visit a manicurist every month? The hair on the backs of his hands and wrists created a spectrum. The strands were light and thin on his knuckles but darkened and grew thick by the time they reached his forearm.

His palms looked smooth. Cooper wished he could feel the texture, but he wasn't sure how to convince or trick Edwin into touching him. Especially in the car, since that was where Cooper would have the best chance of actually experiencing the touch. Outside of the confines of the vehicle, he could only have fleeting contact, if any at all. It was almost as if the car was a part of him. Like the car had died in the accident, and they couldn't bring it back to life by shipping it to Italy. The best they could do was hide the scars, obscure the damage, gloss over it.

Maybe his father had known that, and that was why he'd insisted on locking the car in the garage.

Cooper hadn't thought anybody would ever again touch the silver handle with reverence. He never thought he would see somebody slide behind the wheel and close his eyes with relief. That might have been the moment he had developed an affinity for Edwin. Not because the man loved the Alfa Romeo, but because Cooper's existence was mediated through the leather and the chrome.

Edwin's hair was an interplay of light and shadow. It feathered across his neck perfectly even. He wanted to run his fingertip over the edge to see if there was a single strand either too long or too short. He took a deep breath whenever Edwin passed him, but it never did any good. He could look, he could occasionally touch, but he could never lose himself in the layered scent of soap, aftershave, shampoo, detergent, sweat, and leather. That morning, he had stretched out on the bed and tried to imagine what sleep smelled like. It never occurred to him to worry about why he even wanted to consider such questions. Watching Edwin in the pharmacy inspired him to wonder how plastic and paper bags and money would flavor his skin.

Occasionally, when Edwin was angry, or when he was frightened or sleeping, the pulse in his throat throbbed so hard that Cooper could see it. The rapid tattoo fascinated him. He couldn't remember what it was like to feel his own heart beat. Had he ever touched fingers to his throat just to count each pulse? Had a lover ever kissed that spot on his throat? Had a lover ever kissed that spot on Edwin's throat? One should. One should feel the vibrancy of life through the thin membrane of skin, should taste the salt with the faint, sharp taste of soap, should experience the soft moan that would undoubtedly accompany the caress.

And once a lover finished kissing Edwin's throat, he should move to Edwin's smile. For Cooper, smiles were such rare things. His father had never smiled. The anger that had emanated from every cell precluded smiling. He'd scowled and he'd shouted, but he'd never smiled. His mother had stopped visiting so early, and her tears never had the chance to dry. They were still flowing somewhere, coating the road, bathing her face and chest. Sometimes he sensed her, but he could never reach her. Like she was hiding in her own agony, using it as a shield against him.

Roger, the only other person Cooper ever saw with any sort of regularity, rarely had reason to smile either. But Edwin had a mouth made for smiling. A full bottom lip that jutted out just enough to be called pouty, and a bowed upper lip that demanded a gentle kiss. When he smiled, it was a true reflection of his spirit. A true moment of warmth. He smiled the most when he was inside the car, though he had been free with his smiles when he was with Carson.

Cooper didn't need to ponder over whether or not ghosts got jealous. Cooper had felt an undeniable pang of envy the moment he had spotted Carson sitting at the edge of the bar the other night. It had been impossible to redirect Edwin's attention or stop him from going over to meet the other man, so he had done the only thing he could. He had started playing music. Music that Edwin had ignored.

Carson was far too young for Edwin. Though he looked older than Cooper, he didn't have the years of experience. Worse than that, though, was the fact that Carson was so richly alive. And he liked Edwin. Edwin probably thought that Carson wouldn't venture back into his life, but Cooper had seen the moment of recognition in the younger man's eyes. The moment when he'd realized that there was something about Edwin that couldn't be ignored—that wouldn't be ignored. If he didn't try again, then he was a fool. A ridiculous fool who didn't deserve the first chance he had with Edwin.

But if Carson was smart—or even half as smart as Cooper expected—then he would definitely be a problem. And Cooper couldn't make a nuisance out of himself. The more mischief he caused, the more Edwin would resent him. And he needed Edwin too much to allow himself to stay on the man's bad side. So that meant he would have no choice but to tolerate Carson.

Fortunately, he had something Carson did not have. Unfettered access to Edwin.

And the Alfa Romeo Spider.

It was the one place in Cooper's world where the boundaries between life and death were weak, in danger of being broken completely. He didn't fully understand that power, but he knew he had to use it. He needed to use everything at his disposal to sway Edwin. He was the first spark in a dull, colorless world. Cooper needed him. Any price was worth paying. Any tactic was worth trying. Until Edwin was his.

Carson returned to their lives much sooner than Cooper had anticipated. He thought the other man might be freaked out enough by a disembodied hand to avoid Edwin for at least a few days, but Carson didn't even wait until the end of Tuesday before showing his face. Cooper sat cross-legged on top of a shelf, watching Edwin check his inventory. The man kept careful records on every single item in the store. And as Cooper watched, he realized that Edwin never needed to count more than once. He wasn't the sort of man to lose his concentration, even when the quaint bell above the door jingled.

Edwin wiped his hands on his white smock, tucked the clipboard under his arm, and went to greet the customer with a polite, pleasant smile. Cooper did not understand Edwin's boss's obsession with a "neighborhood pharmacy," but Edwin definitely fulfilled his expected role with grace. Cooper wished he had a prescription to fill, just so he could be on the receiving end of Edwin's thoughtful explanations and reassuring tone of voice.

But it wasn't a customer who pulled Edwin from his inventory. Carson stood at the counter, still as boyishly handsome as he had been when Edwin met him. Cooper didn't have to wonder what Edwin could possibly see in Carson. Anybody with eyes knew the answer to that question. His eyes were a bright, wide-open blue. Like he wanted to take in the entire world. There were laugh lines around his eyes, acting as a sort of warning and a sort of promise—he didn't take the world or himself too seriously. Even if Edwin found Carson's personality lacking—and there was no evidence to believe he did—anybody would be flattered and pleased to receive attention from the younger man. Edwin would be no exception.

It would be very, very easy to scare Carson away again. He could easily pull a stunt that Edwin wouldn't even notice—one that would send Carson running. But if Carson fled again, Edwin would be very annoyed. And the more annoyed Edwin became, the harder Cooper's job got. He didn't want to waste weeks, months, or even years trying to reach Edwin. Carson was a distraction, but Edwin's interest in the younger man wasn't the end of the world. Carson was charming and good-looking and he had a sweet smile. That didn't preclude Edwin from having an interest in Cooper, though.

Especially since the two of them had something in common. A bond that Carson wasn't yet a part of.

Carson headed out the door with an undeniable jaunt in his step. Which only served to darken Cooper's mood. It was almost enough to make Cooper believe in God, just so he could have somebody to blame for his misfortune. He didn't believe Carson was an unmovable obstacle, but Carson certainly didn't

make things easier. And now he was going to be stuck with the other man for an entire night, and he was pretty sure that this time, Carson wouldn't run screaming if he got Edwin into bed again.

"I wish we could just talk," Cooper murmured.

Edwin gave no sign of hearing him. It took a huge amount of energy to reach through the veil between them, and Cooper had no idea where that energy came from or how to replenish it. He didn't consume any calories, and he had no body for metabolic functions. All he knew was that it was easier to reach out when they were both in the car. Now he could speak without an audience, hover without fear that Edwin would feel him and become annoyed.

"I don't think you can imagine waiting forty-seven years to speak to somebody. Forty-seven years of never hearing your own voice. I don't even know if I have anything to talk about. I could tell you what the world used to be like, before Kennedy was shot, before anybody had even heard of the Beatles. I could tell you what it's like to drive that Spider and know true, complete freedom."

Cooper sighed at the memory. Rushing down the hill at an impossible speed, the sun setting behind him, turning everything pink and gold, glinting dangerously off the silver hood.

"We could talk about what it's like being dead, though I think you already have too much of an obsession with that. And I don't want to talk about that, anyway. I feel like I already know everything about being dead. I want to remember what it's like to be alive."

He pushed himself off the counter and stood behind Edwin, allowing less than an inch to separate them. He skimmed his palm over the air above Edwin's shoulders and tilted his head, almost as if he had the means—the right—to kiss Edwin's neck.

Cooper lowered his hand, and it passed through Edwin's shoulder.

“You want to drive to see the ocean. I know you do. With the top down on the Spider, so you can feel the wind against your face. Is that why you never left California, Edwin? Is that why you wanted a convertible?”

Cooper paused, because it was polite to give Edwin a chance to answer. He hated that his very presence was enough to give Edwin chills, but he saw he the goose bumps on his neck, just below his hairline. He could never sneak up on Edwin, but the other man didn't seem aware of the signs. Or he knew the signs, and he ignored them. Because of course, Cooper didn't exist. He was almost beginning to believe that. He was a figment of Edwin's imagination, somehow given a will, somehow given a conscience.

“You undo me. You don't even know it. You count your pills and your money, and you make your phone calls. You'll sleep with Carson tonight, and you'll eat and take it all for granted. Because you don't know what it's like to forget such a thing.”

Edwin rubbed the back of his neck, like Cooper's words tickled him. A simple gesture that added to all the other simple gestures, compounding until they created the texture of Edwin's life. *I'm undone.*

Chapter Seven

Despite his best intentions, Edwin tended to use his kitchen to store the coffeepot, cereal, and his favorite sandwich fixings. He wasn't any great chef, and he didn't necessarily enjoy cooking, but he wasn't a complete ignoramus either. And he knew enough to feel a jolt of shame when Carson opened his fridge and arched his eyebrow.

"I guess it's a good thing I brought everything I thought I might need."

Edwin eyed the Trader Joe's bags at Carson's feet. "It looks like you brought everything you might need for the next week."

"I wanted to be sure you had a good meal."

"I thought we were just going to have steaks?"

"Yes, but not by themselves. You need a good appetizer, a side dish, a salad, and a decent dessert. Not to mention the wine."

Edwin folded his arms. "You're a foodie?"

"You could say that."

"You do this for a living?"

"People have paid me for my expertise, yes."

"You're too young to have expertise."

"You do realize I'm twenty-six?"

"You do realize that if I had a child when I was your age, he'd be old enough to drink now, right?"

Carson shook his head and began unloading his groceries. Edwin was right about the amount of food he had bought—easily enough to feed an entire

dinner party. He laid out the various packages in an orderly way. "I don't know why you do that."

"Do what?"

"Insist on marking your life by how old your hypothetical children would be."

"It's easy shorthand."

"Sure, if you do it once in a while. You seem to take it to extremes, though."

Edwin frowned. "I do not."

"You do."

"You've only known me for a little over seventy-two hours. How do you know I do anything to extremes?"

"Fair enough. See if you can get through this date without mentioning your age once."

Edwin shook his head with mock exasperation. "I can't believe you're already trying to change me. We're not in a relationship yet."

"Yet? So it's just a matter of time?"

"I guess that depends on one thing."

"What?"

Edwin grinned. "How good this dinner is. I can't get involved with anybody who overcooks the steak, after all. I've got to have standards."

"Hey, if I overcook your steak, I wouldn't even expect you to let me stay the night." Carson glanced over his shoulder. "You can have a seat. I've got everything under control, and you've probably been on your feet all day."

"Yeah, Tuesdays are the day I cover the pharmacy by myself." Edwin lowered himself to a chair with a soft sigh. The twinge in the small of his back didn't go anywhere, but at least his feet weren't shouting at him anymore. He needed to get out of his shoes.

Carson waggled his brows. "Why don't you go slip into something more comfortable?"

"Do you think sweats are sexy?"

"Depends on the sweats, actually."

"I'm fine. I think since you're going to be fully dressed for the evening, it won't kill me to be."

"I don't have to be fully dressed to cook." Carson frowned. "Though it's certainly a good idea to be. I never, ever want a repeat of the Bacon Incident."

"The Bacon Incident? Is that what it sounds like?"

"Yes and no."

Edwin waited for further explanation, but none was forthcoming. "Are you going to be coy?"

"I think embarrassing stories should wait. I mean, I'm trying to make up for my idiocy, not provide detailed examples."

"What if I offered to tell you something stupid I've done?"

"It's not the same."

"I won't hold it against you."

"Are your pans down here?" Carson dropped to his haunches and began going through the cupboard, searching for the perfect pan. Or maybe he was only trying to hide the faint blush coloring his cheeks. "You promise you won't hold it against me?"

"Of course."

"And you'll never mention it again?"

"Yes."

"Okay, my second year in college, I got a dorm assignment with a guy named Michael. He was a year ahead of me, and he was a giant. I mean, he could pick me up under his arm and carry me around. Which, turns out, was a good thing. Not fat, mind you. He played football, so he was like two hundred

and fifty pounds of solid muscle. And he loved to eat. He couldn't get enough food, no matter what. But he was working out for hours every day, and he could run a mile in under four minutes.”

“So, you two were basically the odd couple?”

“More or less. Though we did have something in common. He loved to suck cock, and I loved to let him. Now, this guy had a completely voracious appetite. He was literally never satisfied with anything. He would wake me up every morning with his mouth around my cock, and sometimes, he wouldn't even let me come until I thought I was going to chafe.”

Edwin blinked. “Wow. I never had any roommates like that.”

“I know. He was pretty great, as far as roommates go. Anyway, I didn't have any morning classes that year, which was good, because after he tried to suck my brains out through my cock, he'd look at me with the biggest, sweetest brown eyes you've ever seen, and ask me to make him breakfast.”

“Was he using you for your culinary expertise?”

Carson shook his head. “No, he wasn't like that. But I never even had the chance to tell him no. I probably would have done anything for him. He was that good at waking me up. Anyway, since we were only in a tiny dorm room, we had a little fridge and a hot plate. If we wanted to use a stove or the microwave we had to go in the common area. So, anyway, one morning Michael asked me for breakfast, and he had a full package of bacon in the fridge.”

“To make on the hot plate?”

“Yep. I'd done that before, so it wasn't a big deal. I rolled out of bed and didn't bother to put on any clothes. Especially since Michael would probably try to rip them off of me again by the time he finished eating. I don't really know what happened. I think some grease got on the plate itself. Before I knew it, our room was full of smoke, and the curtains were on fire. I didn't realize it at the time, but some of the grease had splattered on me, burning my stomach and...groin region.”

“Ouch. How did you not realize that at the time?”

“Because my home was on fire. The alarm was going off. People were already shouting in the hallway. I didn't even have the chance to grab my robe before Michael picked me up, flung me over his shoulder, and sprinted out of the room.”

Edwin's lips twitched, but he managed to keep the smile from forming. “Did you burn down the whole building?”

“No, the kid in the next room had the presence of mind to grab the fire extinguisher and put the fire out before everything was completely destroyed. Of course, I still had to explain why I was frying two pounds of bacon in the nude.”

“What...what about the burns?”

“I wasn't disfigured, if that's what you're asking.”

“I just wanted to be sure. What about Michael?”

“He wasn't disfigured either.”

“Did he get assigned to another room?”

“No, the official story was that he was asleep. There was some snickering, but...the only thing really hurt was my pride. And my groin didn't feel too great for a few weeks. But that's why I will never cook anything naked.”

Edwin nodded. “Makes sense. For the record, I would never ask you to fry me up two pounds of bacon. Naked or otherwise.”

“Will you ever wake me up with blowjobs?”

“I think that's not an unreasonable request. But I don't know if I could live up to Michael the Giant. I mean, I don't know if I ever went down on anybody until chafing occurred.”

“That's fine.” Carson filled a pan with water and set it on the back burner. “I never really enjoyed that part of things. You should go and change. I want you to be relaxed and happy when you eat my food, not all tense because you're still in your work clothes.”

“Do you insist?”

“I insist.”

Edwin pushed himself to his feet. “Would it be terribly rude of me if I wanted to shower?”

“Not at all. Besides, it makes me nervous when people watch me cook.”

“You don't look nervous.”

“I disguise it well.”

Edwin wanted to cross the room, put his arm around Carson's shoulders, and kiss the corner of his mouth. But if he started kissing Carson, he wasn't sure he would be able to stop. Which would ruin Carson's plans for the night. And Edwin was more than a little bit curious about Carson's much-discussed expertise—not to mention the fact that he was starving. His stomach felt like a giant hollow space in his midsection.

“I'll be back before you have the chance to miss me,” Edwin promised.

“Not possible.”

“Oh?”

Carson winked at him over his shoulder, which only emphasized the sparkle in his eye. “I'm going to miss you as soon as you leave.”

Edwin was utterly charmed. It usually took more than just a wink. And the night was still young. “Do you usually lay it on this thick?”

“Yeah, well, if I hadn't been such an idiot, I wouldn't have to lay it on so thick.” Now the sparkle was out of his eye. Edwin would do anything to see it return.

“What if I told you I barely remember anything from the other night?”

“Is that true?”

“I was awfully drunk.”

Carson looked up, his blue eyes hopeful yet smiling. It struck him that Carson was just as nervous as he was. They were both afraid of making a

wrong move, of saying something they couldn't take back. Of committing the heinous sin of being themselves. The thought was more than a small comfort to Edwin.

“So, in reality, this'll be like our first date?”

“You've got a clean slate.”

“I still might lay it on a bit thick. I usually get pretty nervous on first dates.”

“So far, you're the best first date I've had.” Edwin lingered, still desperate to feel the smooth texture of Carson's lips, but the younger man turned back to the stove with a shy smile, giving Edwin no choice but to make his exit.

He half expected Carson to surprise him and join him in the shower. It wasn't as though Carson was shy about what he wanted, and Edwin would have happily welcomed him under the hot spray. He closed his eyes as he soaped himself down, imagining the hands covered in lather belonged to Carson. He shuddered as his hand moved over his semierect cock—the image of Carson waking up with a mouth around his shaft had been more than a little enticing. He tried to hold on to that image, removing Big Michael from the picture and replacing the mouth with his own. Except that wasn't the only replacement.

Instead of Carson's Sinatra blue eyes, he saw Cooper's green depths, staring at him through long lashes, his perfect mouth half open as he gasped for breath.

Edwin's cock instantly softened, and he dropped the soap, losing interest in the shower. He couldn't seem get through an hour without thinking of Cooper. Sometimes he let his mind drift in Cooper's direction, and other times he just sneaked up on Edwin, catching him off guard. It had to be the dreams. Lingering in his mind. Making it difficult to concentrate.

And the chill. The familiar, funny chill. If he were inclined to believe Cooper did exist, if he gave a sense of life to the delusion, then he would have

to admit that Cooper had probably been with him at the pharmacy. Lingered behind his back, trying to touch him, whispering things in his ear. It had been nothing but the slightest rustle of wind. Like a fuzzy radio, down low, five rooms away.

“Are you here right now?” Edwin whispered, hoping the words would get lost under the water.

Cooper didn't respond.

“I think that you might be. I think that you're probably not ever far from me, and you're certainly not above watching me shower.”

There was still no response, and Edwin was glad nobody could hear him. It was one thing to be going insane but quite another to have witnesses for his descent into madness.

“Are you going to leave us alone tonight? Or are you even real? Am I going to be one of those crazy old men who spends all day yelling at people who aren't there?” As soon as he uttered the words, he shivered. They seemed far too prophetic. He was already nearly an old man, and Cooper could goad him into shouting without lifting a single ghostly finger.

“If you did insist on bothering me again, I could do without the prom. And without Roy Orbison. Have you ever been to the beach? I never puked on anybody at the beach.”

He almost wished Cooper would materialize right there in the water and respond to him. At least if he did, Edwin wouldn't exactly be talking to himself. Maybe the dream had just been a reaction to the stress, and Carson had run away the night before precisely because he suffered from idiocy.

“So, either you're not talking to me or you're not here. I don't know if I much like either option. Maybe I should go back to that doctor. Ask him what it means if you're upset when your delusions refuse to speak to you. I think it might say something about my self-esteem.”

But his self-esteem wasn't feeling too bad that evening. Carson was in his kitchen, whipping up a delicious meal, and later, if everything went as planned, Carson would be in his bed. It was difficult to linger on the reasons why he wasn't good enough to attract somebody like Carson, when somebody like Carson was flirting with him, charming him, and cooking for him. He decided to put Cooper the Friendly Ghost out of his head and focus on getting ready to return to the kitchen.

By the time he dressed and emerged from the bedroom, the most subtle, delicious aroma filled the house. Edwin couldn't pinpoint everything, but he definitely smelled caramelized onions, baking bread, and the tender steaks. He followed his nose to the kitchen, smiling when he found Carson bent over the oven, wearing oversize mitts and an apron that didn't belong to Edwin.

"Perfect timing," Carson announced. "I'm almost ready to serve all this."

"I'll set the table."

He pulled plates and silverware from the dishwasher, then got two wineglasses down from the cupboard. It was easy to move around the kitchen with Carson there. Natural. Like the two of them had been cooking around each other for years. Carson certainly seemed comfortable in the room. But then, maybe he was the type of guy who could easily make any space his own.

"Do you feel better?" Carson asked.

"I already felt pretty good."

"Do you feel better than pretty good?"

"Yeah, actually, I do. A hot shower always works wonders."

"So does hot food. You want to have a seat?"

"I can help you carry the food over to the table."

"No, I've got it. You just sit down."

Edwin had no choice but to comply. He sat in his regular chair, enjoying the sight of the second plate. It had been a very long time since anybody had joined him at his table. The last person who had regularly joined Edwin at the

kitchen table was Ryan—a guy he had stopped seeing over four years earlier. The occasional lovers and one-night stands after that were usually gone before breakfast or showed up sometime after dinner.

“First on the menu is a fresh spinach salad,” Carson announced, setting a bowl in front of him. “With cherry tomatoes, blue cheese, and a vinaigrette dressing.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“It's simple, but sometimes, simple is best.”

“You went to a lot of work.”

Carson settled in his chair and shrugged. “I enjoy cooking.”

“How long have you been a chef?”

“I left college after my second year to enroll in culinary school.”

Edwin took a bite of the crispy spinach. He couldn't remember the last time he had had such fresh vegetables. “Did that have anything to do with the Bacon Incident?”

Carson shook his head. “No, no, the two events were mostly unrelated. I had been toying with the notion of going to culinary school for a long time, but I didn't really have the courage. Then, when it came time to declare my major, I realized there wasn't a single department on the campus that interested me.”

“So, now you work in a restaurant?”

“No, I work in catering. This is the last night I'm going to have off in like a week, so I thought if I was going to try to make up for the other night, it needed to be now.”

“Is catering why you wanted to go to culinary school?”

“No. But I've got to pay the bills, right? Besides, it's not really such a bad job. Not great, but I think I'd rather do that than, say, short-order cooking.”

“You're young. You've still got a bright future ahead of you.”

Carson smiled. “I hope so.”

They fell into a compatible silence, Edwin enjoying his meal, and Carson clearly enjoying his pleasure. The salad gave way to a shrimp cocktail. The shrimp were cold, satisfying, and just a little sweet. The cocktail sauce was spicy with a bit of a kick, and after inquiring, Edwin learned that Carson had made the sauce himself. That was followed by rib eye steaks, cooked medium rare, and potatoes au gratin, with asparagus and the freshly baked rolls that Edwin had smelled earlier. Dessert was the only thing that Carson hadn't cooked—a perfect slice of New York-style cheesecake. All accompanied by a lovely bottle of cabernet sauvignon.

“This was the best meal I've ever had.”

“Ever?” Carson smiled. “You're too kind to me.”

“No, I think I need to praise the meal more and spend the rest of the night thanking you.”

“I didn't do this to be thanked profusely.”

“But that's what's going to happen anyway,” Edwin promised.

“We'll pick up where we left off before?”

“That was my plan. Wasn't it yours?”

“Did I go through all this trouble just to convince you to drag me back up to your bed? Of course not.”

Edwin arched his brow. “Really?”

“No, not really. The way to a man's bed is through his stomach, right?”

“That's not how the saying goes, but close enough. How many times have you tried this particular trick?”

“You're my first.”

Edwin stood and offered his hand. “Would you like a tour of the house, then?”

“What about this mess?”

“Leave it. I have more important things on my mind.”

Carson took his hand and smiled. It might have been more fair to say he was beaming. It added a fresh, bright light to his eyes, and Edwin felt the heat of that smile all the way to the center of his chest. It was hard to believe that they had only met a few days before. It felt like they had known each other for much longer. Or maybe Edwin just felt like they were destined to know each other for much longer.

Edwin yanked Carson out of the chair, pulling him close to his body. Their chests touched, and the heat from Carson's body went straight to his cock. "I think I'm going to start now." Edwin hooked his finger under Carson's chin, holding his face gently as he lowered his head. "Thank you for the lovely dinner," he murmured, just before their mouths came together.

Chapter Eight

The previous seventy-two hours turned to dust and blew away as soon as they kissed. Edwin focused everything on Carson, on the contact between their bodies, on the moments they were sharing. His tongue and teeth tingled. His scalp tingled. He tingled everywhere—except where Carson actually touched him. There, he burned.

He relied on his memory to guide them from the kitchen to the bedroom. He didn't want to lift his head for any reason, and it felt like Carson didn't want to let him. Their tongues wound around each other, their feet tangled, and Carson's long fingers curled in Edwin's hair, tugging at the strands. He tasted sweet—sweeter than the cheesecake they had just shared—and the smell of lemon drifted from his skin. Edwin's distracted brain tried to name the source of the lemon—soap, maybe—but ultimately all that mattered was that Carson followed him. Allowed himself to be led.

Edwin finally lifted his head when they reached the bedroom. Neither bothered to reach for the light; there was enough ambient light to allow Edwin to mark the details of Carson's body as he tugged his shirt off. His body was tight, the muscles well defined but not bulky. His body had clearly been forged in the hot kitchens where he made his living, and it was all too easy to imagine him hurrying from stove to stove, steam and smoke rising up around him as sweat beaded his brow and the heat colored his cheeks.

Edwin dropped to his knees, running his palms down Carson's strong thighs. The denim was warm to the touch, and the outline of Carson's cock beneath his jeans made Edwin's mouth water. He palmed the length, applying pressure until Carson shifted his weight, grinding against Edwin's hand. He

replaced his hand with his mouth, drawing his teeth over the thick material. Carson moaned and jerked his hips, grinding against Edwin's lips and pressing the tender skin against his teeth.

Despite the heat rushing through his veins, his fingers felt cold, his palms clammy. Carson's body filled his vision, but it was Cooper's half smile he saw in the back of his mind. His dream felt more like a solid memory, like he had really danced with Cooper at his prom, and that lingered with him, made his thoughts drift to Cooper's lanky frame, to the erection that had been pressed against his hip as they swayed together.

Edwin pulled at Carson's zipper, his tongue pushing past the rough material to sample Carson's skin. The younger man moaned—a breathy, hungry sound. A sound that wrapped itself around Edwin's stomach and gave it a good squeeze. He ached to hear it again. He ached for more than that. He wanted Carson to beg for him. He wanted Carson to shout and whimper. He wanted to hear everything in between, until there were no sounds left at all. He wanted to absorb them and echo them.

He pulled Carson's cock free of his boxers, letting it jut out in front of him. Edwin held him lightly and nuzzled the smooth skin with his lips before rubbing his cheek up and down the length. Carson's fingers flexed in his hair, a gentle reminder that he wanted—needed—more. But Edwin wasn't in any hurry to shift his focus. He liked the way the smooth skin felt against his cheek and skin. Liked the way the musky scent drifted to his nose. Liked the way the warm precum spread across the corner of his mouth.

“God, Edwin...what are you trying to do to me?”

There wasn't any really good answer to that question, so Edwin didn't even try to find one. Instead, he closed his lips around Carson's balls, sucking on the loose skin. Occasionally, he nibbled, but just enough to apply pressure, just enough for Carson to suck his breath in sharply. He dropped his jaw open, making room for the heavy weight of Carson's balls, and sucked both between his lips. Edwin couldn't remember the last time he had been on his knees,

sucking happily on another man's sac. He watched Carson from beneath his lashes, trying to gauge the pleasure flickering across his face. Fresh precum leaked from his cock, dampness catching against Edwin's jaw and neck.

“Please...please...Edwin... Fuck...I need your mouth.”

Edwin liked the way Carson said that. Like no other mouth in the world would do, could ever be acceptable. It made his own cock ache, the throbbing pleasure-pain spreading from his balls to his abdomen. He suspected that if Carson so much as touched his dick, he would explode. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but he did not need to prove to Carson that he had a hair trigger. Even if Carson was precisely the reason that he had a hair trigger. That information, while true, would not necessarily be flattering.

With a moan of hunger, he shifted his mouth from Carson's balls to his heavy erection. The salty precum was leaking freely now, coating Carson's crown. Edwin ran his lips over the tip, collecting each drop, coating his mouth with it. He flicked his tongue over the delicate skin, digging into the slit until Carson squirmed and whimpered. Edwin's throat tightened, and his stomach clenched. As much as he enjoyed prolonging the moment, moving beyond mere teasing to something closer to torture, he couldn't resist the taste, the smell, the pressure, for another second. With his own soft whimper, he parted his lips and swallowed Carson's length.

As soon as he felt the tip at the back of his throat, Edwin closed his eyes. And immediately saw Cooper.

He gripped the base of Carson's cock, holding him in place, and slowly slid up his shaft. Carson slid his hand through Edwin's hair, but for a moment, it was Cooper's hand. The skin on his cock was pulled tight, and for a moment it was Cooper's vein throbbing against his tongue, Cooper's crown pushing against his throat, demanding entrance, Cooper's soft moans filling his ears. Edwin resisted the imagery, opening his eyes so he could remind himself of Carson's high cheekbones, straight nose, and the hue of his eyes. But even that wasn't quite enough to keep Edwin focused.

“Just give in to it. Carson will never know the difference.”

Edwin didn't know if that voice really belonged to him, or if it was Cooper himself, whispering soft encouragement. Carson palmed the back of Edwin's head, gently pushing him forward, until he had no choice but to relax until his throat bulged with Carson's length.

“That's it. God, I love the way you look like this. Don't stop.”

Edwin didn't intend to stop, even if the words sent a riot of chills down his spine. He gripped Carson's hips and exhaled through his nose, fanning warm breath across heated skin. Drops of sweat rolled down his temple and the tip of his nose, and he made a soft gargling sound as he tried to adjust to Carson's width. The heat was unbelievable, even impossible.

“Do you want my cock, Edwin? Show me what you'd do to me. Pretend that's my dick down your throat.”

Edwin wanted to ignore the dark words, but they echoed inside his head, growing louder and louder. He silenced the echo by doing exactly that—pretending Carson's cock really belonged to Cooper. Pretending that he was turning himself over to a desire he didn't even understand. One that shouldn't even exist, because that sort of desire couldn't be felt for a delusion. Cooper was becoming real to him—or was already real—and now he was murmuring soft encouragement, moaning in his ear, almost drowning out Carson's whimpers of satisfaction.

“Not yet... I don't want to come yet...”

Edwin didn't care. He cupped Carson's balls and gave them a light squeeze, pulling until Carson's knees bent. He lavished attention on Carson's cock, swallowing it down his throat until he couldn't breathe, lapping the precum from the head, letting that and spit catch the skin and fall from the sides of his mouth, making the shaft slick. He stroked him with his free hand, creating hard friction.

“Please, Edwin. Please.”

“Do you like it when he begs? I’ll beg you, Edwin. I’ll beg for you, until you throw me on the bed and fuck me. Is that what you want? Is that why you wouldn’t fuck me last night?”

No no no. He wasn't going to let this happen. He wouldn't fuck Carson and think of another man if the other man in question was alive. If he was going to be with Carson, then he needed to push Cooper out of his mind. Otherwise, he should push Carson out of his bedroom and tell him to stop coming around.

It wasn't easy, but he blocked Cooper's questions in favor of Carson's moans. When green eyes drifted into his mind, he immediately turned them to blue. When the memory of the prom, of slow dancing with Cooper, threatened to overtake him, he decided to imagine what it would be like to dance with Carson. Carson, who was just a little bit taller and fit Edwin's frame just a little bit better. Carson, who would be just a little bit shy and a little bit pleased by the request. When he was sure that he could focus on the real, solid man with him, he tore his mouth from Carson's throbbing length and pushed himself to his feet. “Get on the bed.”

Carson didn't question him, didn't disagree. He stripped off his clothes and stretched out on the mattress, his body pliant and welcoming. Open to him. Edwin shrugged out of his T-shirt and paused as he realized Carson was watching every movement. The shadows mostly obscured his body, but he felt a twinge of fear—much stronger than he had felt before, when most of his shame and modesty had been diluted by alcohol. He half turned away, deeper into the shadows, while he tugged at his zipper.

“Hey,” Carson said softly. “I want to see you.”

“I know. I just... It's been a long time for me.”

“You're shy?”

“Not shy, so much as I don't want to send you running again.”

“Hey, I thought I already told you I was being an idiot. It didn't have anything to do with you.”

“You sure?”

“I'm positive. Please?”

Edwin turned around to see that Carson had pushed himself up on his elbows. Something about the slope of his shoulders, the casual way he draped himself on the bed, sent a strong rush of desire through Edwin. He wished he could carry himself with that sort of easy grace, that sort of casual indifference. But he couldn't. He was too intimately aware of every single physical flaw. Every bit of flab. Every scar. Every hair that was already gray. He didn't think of himself as a vain man, but he still spent far too much time every morning in front of the mirror.

“Come here.” Carson held out his hand, and Edwin took it gratefully, if only because the closer he was to Carson, the more he obstructed Carson's view. He sank against Carson's body, momentarily distracted and delighted by the way they fit together. He had meant to grab a condom and lube from the bathroom, but as soon as their chests touched and their legs entwined, he forgot all about that.

Carson cupped the side of his face and pulled him closer for a deep, slow kiss. It wasn't like any other kiss they had shared that night. The raw edge of hunger never left—it colored every touch and caress—but the speed had slowed considerably. Like Carson had just realized they had all night, and neither one of them needed to rush this. Carson's cock was trapped against Edwin's stomach, still slick from his mouth, and Edwin's own cock felt heavy. Their kiss deepened, grew, evolved until it felt like something more pure. Carson's tongue demanded entrance again and again, and his teeth scraped across Edwin's bottom lip more than once, but there was still a sweetness to it. A certain reassurance that Edwin didn't necessarily need, but he appreciated it anyway.

“Where are your condoms?” Carson murmured.

“The bathroom.”

Carson groaned.

"I know."

"I don't want to let you go." Each word felt like another kiss as his mouth moved against Edwin's lips.

"You could let me finish what I started," Edwin suggested.

"Turn around?"

Edwin nodded and pushed himself to his knees. Turning to face Carson's cock, he settled with his knees on either side of Carson's shoulders. Carson gripped his hips immediately, yanking back with pure hunger. Edwin barely had a chance to take a breath before Carson's mouth closed around his cock. He cried out and pushed down, naturally seeking more of the wet heat. He wanted to return the favor, but as long as Carson sucked on his length, all he could do was rest his head on Carson's thigh and moan. Carson responded by jerking his hips, each motion a silent plea to give him the attention he craved.

Edwin closed his lips around Carson's crown once again, sighing with pleasure at the now-familiar taste and texture. Carson rewarded him by working his index finger into Edwin's tight channel, curling the knuckle until he found the spot that nobody had touched in far too long. Edwin's scream was muffled by Carson's thick cock, and he pushed back, fucking himself on Carson's hand, swallowing as much of his length as he could.

If Cooper was still there, Edwin couldn't hear him. Carson overwhelmed every one of his senses. His whole body was suffused with the reality of Carson's taste and smell, his heat, his muffled moans. When Edwin closed his eyes, he saw Carson's flesh, flushed and sweaty, tasting of salt, tasting of life, tasting of desire and sex. They moved together, as though they were both controlled by a greater force. Each time Carson's fingertip brushed against his prostate, a wave of red-hot pleasure flowed over him, sizzling his nerve endings and frying his brain. He tried to hold himself away from the edge, using every bit of self-control he had at his disposal. Partially to stave off further embarrassment, partially because he did not want this to end. Ever. He wanted to hold this bliss close to him, clutched to his chest greedily.

A second finger worked its way into his ass, but the pressure seemed to increase a thousandfold. He hadn't been fucked in years, and his channel was tight, his flesh unaccustomed to the intrusion—not that he minded it. Far from it. Every inch, every additional bit of width, made Edwin ache for more. Carson would have to fuck him. And soon. Definitely before he left for the night.

Long ribbons of pleasure curled around his abdomen and then his chest, pulling tighter and tighter until every breath was a great effort and his body cried out for more. He swallowed Carson's length, pushing past the gag reflex to fill his throat completely, and pushed back against Carson's hand and mouth. Carson's fingers were buried in his ass, and his throat was flexing around Edwin's shaft.

His self-control slipped from beneath his fingers, and Edwin's eyes rolled into the back of his head as he silently burst. He only vaguely felt Carson swallow the blasts of cum, his throat working frantically, the muscles sliding up and down against his tender head. Before his cock could stop jerking, Carson exploded, filling Edwin's mouth with his salty fluid. He tried to swallow as much as he could, but he didn't have any real control over his body, or anything at all, and he felt some drip from the corner of his mouth and back down Carson's softening cock.

They gradually separated, moving apart in stages, until Edwin could safely roll off Carson's body. They lay side by side, staring at the ceiling and gasping for breath. Edwin's cock rested against his thigh, half-erect, and he could still taste the salty cum on the back of his tongue. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so satisfied.

"I'm glad I decided to come see you today," Carson murmured.

"Me too."

"You don't mind if I stay for a bit, do you?"

"You can stay as long as you like."

"Good. Because I don't think I can drive in my current state."

The corner of Edwin's mouth lifted. He understood. He couldn't quite move his legs. But he did have just enough energy to turn so his head rested on the pillow. He pulled Carson against him, his fingers tracing the hard lines and ridges of his body.

“So you don't have a night off for the next week?”

Carson sighed. “No. But maybe we could meet for lunch?”

“I'm going to be at the clinic tomorrow, but I can meet for lunch on Thursday.”

“Sounds good.” Carson covered his hand and squeezed his fingers. “What do you do at the clinic?”

“It's a detox center.”

“Do they need a pharmacist at the detox center?”

“Sometimes. But generally, they need somebody to talk to.” Edwin paused, shame darkening the edges of his satisfaction. He always hated this part—the honesty. It had been almost twenty years, but that didn't make the truth any easier to admit. It also didn't mean the truth was any less important. “Or at least somebody who can sit with them and understand what they're going through.”

Carson turned his head to meet Edwin's eyes. “You went through detox?”

“Yeah. Opiates. I nearly lost my license, my home, my family. But I got the wake-up call I needed before the drugs stole everything.”

“How long have you been clean?”

“It'll be twenty years at the end of the summer.”

“Wow. So...wait, you were drinking the other night. ”

“Yeah, I never had a drinking problem. Though I try to avoid drinking too much. I've been working on it, but...sometimes I have a problem knowing when I've had enough, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“So...is this going to send you running?”

“No, of course not. Why would it?”

“Some people don't want to try to get in relationships with addicts.”

“I thought you said you were clean?”

“I'm going to be an addict for the rest of my life.”

“But...you work with all those drugs. Doesn't the temptation drive you crazy?”

“Honestly? No. I don't stare longingly at the OxyContin or anything. It was a little hard at first, but I like my life now. I like it too much to throw everything away for something that isn't even real. Just because it feels like being hugged by God doesn't mean it's really him.”

Carson took Edwin's hand and brought it up to his mouth, then kissed each knuckle in turn. “Thanks for telling me. Because I do want to try to have a relationship with you.”

“Good,” Edwin murmured, tilting his head to claim Carson's mouth. They stayed attached, the kisses getting slower and sleepier until Edwin finally drifted asleep.

Chapter Nine

Edwin sat with his knees pulled against his chest, watching the green and gold water tease his bare toes. The damp sand beneath him didn't make for the most comfortable seat, but the full moon was the same golden color as the water, and the breeze dancing through his hair was cool and sweet.

"I want you to stay out of my mind," Edwin said, his gaze still fixed on his feet.

"I'm not in your mind."

"What do you call this?"

"A dream. You told me you'd rather be at the beach than the prom."

"What about earlier?"

"I wasn't in your mind then either." Cooper settled beside him, his legs sticking straight out in front of him, the water washing over his ankles. "I was just talking to you. It was more wishful thinking on my part than mind reading."

Edwin sighed. "I don't know why you won't just leave me alone. I mean, you've been dead for almost fifty years. Surely you've met other people to torment in all that time."

"No, not really. I've never met anybody like you."

"What's so special about me?"

"I don't know. But there's a connection between us." Cooper looked up, flashing him a quick smile. "Maybe it's because we both love the car."

"Why didn't you answer me when I tried to talk to you earlier?"

"I didn't want to scare you. You tend to get grumpy when you're startled."

“I suppose I should just be happy that you didn't find a way to scare Carson away.”

“I learned my lesson about that. Pissing you off doesn't actually help me, after all.”

“Help you with what?”

“I can't feel this water.”

“Of course you can't. It's a dream.”

“No, I mean...even when it's not a dream. I can't feel anything. I can't touch anything or taste anything or smell anything. Except the car. And you.”

Edwin frowned. He couldn't imagine that sort of existence. He especially couldn't imagine why anybody would choose that sort of existence—and didn't Cooper say he never went on to whatever came next, because he wasn't sure anything did? Maybe God did exist, and he was the vengeful sort. Who else could think of such an unending torment?

“So, you're lonely?”

“Yes.”

“I don't see why that gives you the right to invade my life.”

“What would you do in my shoes? Get you drunk first, like Carson did?”

“This isn't about him.”

“It's about what you think I should do.”

Edwin sighed. “I don't know. Fine. You have my attention now. What do you want with it?”

“What does anybody want when they're lonely?” Cooper hooked his pinkie over Edwin's. The contact was so slight, it could almost be ignored. Except for the fact that it made Edwin's skin crawl, like a thousand ants were marching from his hand to his throat. It wasn't entirely unpleasant, but it didn't feel great either.

“So it's all about sex, then?”

“Everything's always about sex. You think you have something more than that with Carson?”

“Yes. You don't know everything, Cooper.”

“Then why were you thinking about me?”

“I thought you said you weren't in my mind?”

“Do you deny it?”

Edwin studied Cooper from the corner of his eye. He was wearing a black T-shirt and blue jeans, and the tips of his hair waved in the breeze. He had the perfect face. Symmetrical, young, open. And now he was watching Edwin with expectant eyes, as though he was so confident of the answer, he didn't even need Edwin to utter the words. He felt a flare of resentment, strengthened by the fact that Cooper was right.

“You might have crossed my mind.”

“I think there was more to it than that.” Cooper released Edwin's finger and rested his hand on Edwin's shoulder. He pushed gently, guiding him back to the damp sand. Edwin didn't resist him. The stars rolled above him, half disguised by wisps of clouds. “You're curious about me.”

“You wouldn't be curious about an apparent ghost haunting you?”

“You're not curious about my ghostly attributes.” Cooper settled beside him, one leg draped over Edwin's, his erection pressed against Edwin's thigh. “Right?”

“Cooper...”

“Push me away.”

“If this wasn't a dream, I would.”

“How do you know it's a dream?”

“The water is the wrong color. The moon is the wrong color. And now there's a blanket under me,” Edwin pointed out. “It's a dream, so I need to worry about pushing you away.”

Cooper smiled. He almost looked beatific. If Cooper's cock hadn't been pressing against him, he would almost believe that the younger—or rather, older—man was an angel. He certainly looked the part, with his shaggy blond hair and his unblemished skin. The waves crashed into the beach, echoing in his head, moving through his blood, until the sound filled the world in a dull crescendo.

“Cooper...”

“I never kissed another man before, you know.”

“You were straight before you died?”

“I guess so.”

“Then what's with your fixation on me?”

“I told you. I can touch you. I can reach out to you. I love the way your hair looks in the sunlight. I want to smell you. I want to taste you.”

With each word he spoke, he moved closer and closer, until he blotted out the moon and the stars. Edwin only heard the waves and saw Cooper's lovely eyes, and even if he didn't understand a single word the ghost was saying, he understood everything.

“I know I can touch you in the car. That's when I knew you were different. I reached out to save you, and instead of my hand going through you, I touched you. You don't know how that feels, Edwin. I need to feel it again.”

“I can't just let you—”

“Yes, you can,” Cooper interrupted. “You can. Tomorrow. I promise, you won't regret it.” His hand slid down Edwin's body. Everywhere he touched, the clothes disappeared. Water lapped against his bare legs, licking his toes, but Edwin barely felt it. Cooper's hand was real; it was heavy on his stomach. His fingers were long, the tips caressing and teasing Edwin's taut skin.

“You're touching me now. I can feel you.”

“No. I can't feel you. This isn't real. It's a fantasy. A lie. I want something real, Edwin. After all these years, I need something real.”

“I don't know if any of this is real, anyway.”

“I'm real enough that you think about me. You fantasize about me. You talk to me. I'm just asking for one more thing, Edwin. One more simple little thing.”

Cooper's hand closed around Edwin's shaft. His palm was smooth and hot. Nothing like the chill that usually accompanied Cooper. He stroked his shaft once—a slow, easy motion. Edwin's abdomen tightened, and heat pooled in his groin. The waves crept higher and higher, until each swell tickled his thighs and hips. Gradually, Edwin realized the surge was not being controlled by the moon—Cooper controlled it. Cooper's breath, Cooper's hand, Cooper's desire. It controlled Edwin, too. He felt helpless. He tried to close his eyes, but when he did, he still saw Cooper's eyes.

“Do you like that? It feels nice, doesn't it?”

“It does,” Edwin breathed.

The water kept moving. Edwin was a little afraid it would carry them away, but he let go of that fear. Cooper wouldn't let anything happen to him—and it was a dream, anyway. Nothing but a dream. Cooper's fingers tightened around his shaft, and his wrist began to move. Up and down. Up and down. Cooper's palm skimmed over Edwin's head, smearing the precum, increasing the pressure against his swollen head. Pleasure suffused his body with each stroke, and his balls grew heavy.

“I'll do more than this in the car,” Cooper promised. “I'll use my mouth. I'll swallow you down until you've forgotten everything except my throat. You can fuck me. Or I can fuck you. I'd love to feel your body beneath mine. Like this.” He positioned himself so he was covering Edwin completely, trapping Edwin's cock between their bodies. His fingers were rough and tight, but it was the ridges of Cooper's stomach and the hard cold steel of his zipper that made Edwin's head spin. “Doesn't this feel good?”

“Yes,” Edwin moaned. “God, yes.”

The water overtook them and carried them out to the sea. He floated easily on the waves, bobbing with each swell of the warm water. Cooper was still solid above him. Rock solid. Pushing him closer and closer, fanning the flames beneath his skin until everything smoldered, everything ached. He cried out, but he couldn't find the strength to make a sound. He wanted to ask where the water was carrying them. He wanted to know how far they were drifting from land, but he knew Cooper wouldn't have an answer for that. Furthermore, Cooper wouldn't care. The answer was irrelevant. There was only one answer Cooper cared about.

“Yes,” Edwin repeated against his mouth. “Yes...yes...yes...”

The water picked them up, lifting them on top of a wave, pushing them higher and higher, closer to the moon.

“Good. It'll be good. I promise.”

The world they had constructed between the two of them shattered. It broke apart in uneven pieces, leaving Edwin alone, hanging in the darkness for an endless moment before he shattered with it.

* * * * *

Edwin woke up covered in his own cum, his cock limp against his thigh, his skin overheated and flushed. He immediately lifted his head, looking to see if Carson was still there, if he was still asleep. Carson was stretched across the mattress, his arm flung over his face, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Edwin pushed at the blanket tangled around his legs, trying to push it aside, but it clung to him like a lover. Like Cooper had clung to him. The more he kicked and struggled, the more trapped he felt. Carson sighed and rolled to his side, forcing Edwin to lie back and hold his breath. Long seconds passed, but Carson remained still. He didn't want the younger man to wake up and discover that Edwin had just shot all over himself in his sleep. Men who were

almost fifty did not have wet dreams. Especially if they had just had amazing sex with a man half their age.

But it wasn't just a wet dream. It was one of the best orgasms of his life. His nerves were still sparking from the rush of pleasure, and he felt more than a little out of breath.

With a sigh, he tried the bedding again. This time, he managed to extricate himself from the thin sheets and stumble into the bathroom without feeling like a clown. He washed himself quickly, eager to rinse away the reminder of his dream. Could he be held to things he said in his dreams? Or was it best to just put the whole thing out of his mind?

He looked through the door, his gaze tracing the outline of Carson's body. Maybe it was best to focus on the living, breathing, passionate, handsome man in his bed, and not the charming, addictive specter haunting his dreams.

Chapter Ten

The only thing remotely cheerful or hopeful about the Healing Life Rehabilitation Center was the name. The faded letters on the sign did a good job of disguising the name and purpose of the building, and cardboard had long replaced glass in at least two of the windows. The volunteers did a good job of keeping it free of graffiti and cleaning the sidewalk in front of the door, hosing it down at least once a day. The men and women who stumbled to the stoop did not always have control of their bodily functions. They also didn't have control over their impulses, so Edwin didn't drive the Alfa Romeo to the center.

He hoped that decision would have the additional benefit of giving him a break from Cooper. Of course, Cooper seemed to be venturing farther and farther from the Spider, so there was no guarantee the plan would work. But the last thing he needed to do was try to help drug addicts going through withdrawals while carrying on a conversation with his new invisible friend.

No matter the time of day or night, the center was always full. And it usually sounded like something akin to a zoo when he pushed open the door. There were tears and shouting, puking and groaning, gibberish and moaning. They tried to give each of the patients a certain amount of privacy and dignity, but that was more of a good-faith effort than anything they succeed at. Usually, they had more people than they had beds. And most of them were what Rachael, the center's chief administrator, drily referred to as repeat customers. Others just wanted a dry place to sleep for a few nights. Rachael tolerated them, usually, as long as they didn't try to smuggle in any dope.

Rachael greeted him with her steady smile, but there was an obvious gleam of relief in her eyes. “Where have you been, Doc?”

“Sorry. I slept through my alarm this morning.” He could still hear the alarm buzzing, echoing in his skull, as Carson moved below him, groaning and writhing and begging him not to stop. “You didn't miss me too much, did you?”

“I always miss you. There's coffee in the office, and your favorite patient is back.”

Edwin frowned. “Warren?”

“The one and only.”

“Damn it.”

“Are you surprised?”

“No, not really. I just...” Edwin let the words hang. There was no sense in explaining himself. Rachael knew exactly what he was going to say. She knew the disappointment, the lack of surprise, the heavy moment when everything seemed like a big pointless mess. There weren't many success stories. Usually, if somebody managed to stay clean, they never came back to the center. Not even for an update. But the ones who couldn't manage it—they showed up again and again.

“He's been asking for you.”

“Asking?”

“Screaming. He's at the end of the hall.”

Edwin nodded and turned on his heel. Now that he knew Warren was in the small building, he could hear the small man's high, distinct voice. Warren had been taking regular vacations at the Healing Life Rehabilitation Center for the past year, and each time he was sent out the door, his system clean of the oxycodone, he vowed he would never return. And Edwin believed him every time, too. Because Warren was very convincing. He had honest eyes. Even the time he lifted Edwin's wallet so he could go out and immediately get a fix, he was looking at Edwin with honest eyes.

“Oh, God, Doc... You here? Is that you?”

“It's me.” Edwin had once made the mistake of showing up in his white smock, thus earning the nickname “Doc” for life. Edwin didn't even think any of them at the center knew his name.

“I'm dying, Doc. This time, I really am. I really...really...am. You gotta help me.”

“You're not dying,” Edwin assured him patiently.

Not everybody went through withdrawals the same. Warren felt the lack of oxycodone all the way down to his marrow. He felt it in every joint. He felt it in his neck and behind his eyes. And he always cried to Edwin, begging him to make it stop. Begging him to give him a break. Edwin didn't know how Warren went through this process again and again. Why he hurt himself like this.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I never...I never... I shouldn't have... I'm sorry. God, just make it stop. I'm sorry.” His litany of apologies was cut off by a coughing fit that shook his whole body. He doubled over, half hanging off the narrow cot, his sandy blond hair covering his face as saliva, snot, and bile fell from his face. Edwin reached for the roll of paper towels on the floor and pulled off several squares, holding them at the ready.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

Warren sat up, his eyes watering, his cheeks an unusual and alarming shade of red. Edwin wiped the moisture from his face, but his nose didn't stop running. Warren flopped back on the cot, his body still shaking with the occasional cough. His ribs protruded from his gray T-shirt, and his jeans—what remained of his jeans—clung to too-narrow hips.

“Thanks.”

“What happened, Warren?”

For a moment, Edwin wasn't sure if Warren had even heard him. His sallow face was drawn tight, his eyes closed. It was impossible to tell Warren's age, but Edwin always put him in his late twenties. Maybe around the same

age that Edwin was when he'd finally checked into a rehabilitation center, holding on to his sanity by his fingernails. Warren never came in with any friends, and nobody ever came to pick him up. Edwin wasn't even sure where Warren lived—or if he had a home.

“I didn't want it.”

“I know.”

Warren shook his head. “I didn't...I didn't want it. I didn't. I never asked for it. I didn't. I swear, Doc.”

“You got to calm down, okay? Do you want some water?”

“Yes,” Warren croaked.

Edwin filled a plastic cup with cold water and slid his arm beneath Warren's shoulders, holding him up from the bed. Warren covered Edwin's hand with his bony fingers, guiding the cup to his mouth. He took a few shallow swallows, then turned his head away with a muttered thank-you.

“It was a mistake,” Warren whispered. “I was going to be clean. I was clean for three months, Doc, I promise.”

“I believe you.” The words came automatically. He didn't think it was beyond Warren's capability to be clean for three months, but addicts tended to have a very unstable relationship with the truth. Lying became second nature when the only thing you really cared about was where you're going to find your next fix.

“But then...I met Angela.”

“Who's Angela?”

“She's...” He doubled over his side, each dry cough ripping through him. Edwin's throat ached in sympathy. The sympathy pains would spread and sharpen the longer he stayed with Warren. Before long, his knees would hurt, the back of his neck would throb, and his eyes would tingle. “My wife.”

Edwin blinked. “You married her? When did you meet her?”

“Last month. She's so sweet... God...”

Edwin swallowed, knowing where this was going. "Is Angela a user too?"

"She..." Warren looked away, turning to face the wall. Sweat covered his flushed skin, and he whimpered as some fresh pain washed through him. "Yes."

"Warren..." Edwin bit back the urge to scold him. It wouldn't help the process of detoxing, and Warren probably wouldn't remember any of this in a few days. He never remembered to learn from his mistakes. Lecturing wouldn't do any good. "Where is she now?"

"Don't know."

"Did she give you the drugs?"

"Doc..." He turned to face Edwin with unfocused eyes. They were red—they made Edwin think of cherries floating in broken eggs. His irises were blown. Twin black voids stared back at Edwin. He could fall into those eyes and just keep falling. That was the danger of volunteering at the center. "She did."

He didn't need to ask for clarification. The details might be wrong, but Edwin would get the broad strokes right. Warren met a woman who was more desperate, more needy, than he was, and he couldn't resist the notion of saving her, even as she dragged him back down to the quagmire he wanted to escape.

"Warren, you have to avoid her."

"She's my wife."

"Is she trying to get clean?"

Warren curled up on himself, like Edwin had just kicked him. He tucked his head down, his long, stringy hair covering his face, his ribs sticking out even farther. "I don't want to talk anymore, Doc."

"Do you need another drink?"

"No. Are you...are you going to leave?"

"No, I won't leave," Edwin promised. Many of his days at the center were spent this way. Sitting at the side of a bed, watching somebody fight their own body, every cell in their being crying out for a fix. Just a little one. Just enough

to get them through the worst of it. Warren knew better than to ask for that, but that didn't mean the raw hunger wasn't written all over his face.

Edwin empathized with what Warren was going through, but his situation had been quite a bit better. He hadn't crawled off to a free rehabilitation center in the inner city, aching for a fix, crying from the pain, begging for a break and a bed. He had been out of pharmacy school for two years at that point, and he had a good job at a state hospital. He could afford to check into a nice clinic. Not as nice as the ones the celebrities used, but one that kept him like a prisoner for twenty-one days. Even though he had wanted to be there, had checked himself in, he'd fought it. Every single day. Fought it like Warren was fighting it now.

"You know you can do this," Edwin said softly. He took Warren's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. He only wanted Warren to know he was there.

"I can't...I can't keep...Doc, I can't..."

"You can do it, Warren. After this, you can stay clean. You get a job. You help Angela get clean. You can do it."

Warren smiled. Or he tried to smile. Several of his teeth were missing, and the rest were crooked and stained a deep yellow. And rotting. Occasionally, Edwin considered dragging Warren to the dentist. He'd even pay for the work out of his own pocket. But it wouldn't do any good to invest thousands of dollars into a person who was his own worst enemy.

"Think...you...think it'll be...that easy?"

"It's not easy to stay clean, Warren. I know it's not."

"You've been...clean for a long time."

"I'm always going to be an addict. I'm always going to be tempted. Every single day."

"But you make it."

“I make it,” Edwin confirmed. “You want to get clean, Warren. I know you do. You wouldn't be here otherwise. You wouldn't be going through this again if you didn't want it.”

“I don't know.”

Edwin sighed and refilled the cup of water. Warren looked at him gratefully as the cup returned to his lips. His fingers shook where he touched Edwin's hand. A tremor ran through Edwin. His fingers were cold now. Ice-cold. Like the conversation had sapped the heat directly from his body.

A soft knock on the door drew Edwin's attention, but Warren's eyes didn't even flutter. He gently pulled the water away and straightened. Rachael stood on the other side, her heavy brows drawn into a deep frown. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Warren whimpered in protest as Edwin stood, but he didn't have the strength to pull Edwin back. Rachael's gaze flickered to the emaciated man, and her eyes shuttered with sympathy. She was the only paid employee of the center. She ran it almost single-handedly, corralling volunteers, badgering the city for funds, badgering doctors for their support and their time, and reaching out to the people who needed an angel. She was a champion for people like Warren. Edwin was proud to know her. Prouder still that she counted him as a friend.

“We need to talk.”

“What's going on?”

She stepped to the side, allowing him a view of the front counter. A tall woman stood there, her brown hair long, to her hips, and ratty. She had broad shoulders, almost like a man's, but her face could have been beautiful. If it weren't as pale and drawn as Warren's. She kept turning her head back and forth, like a bird, and her attention didn't linger on any one thing. Despite the

nervous darting of her eyes, she looked like she intended to stand her ground. Like she had a fight, and she wasn't the type of girl to walk away from a fight.

"She's here for Warren," Rachael said softly.

"Angela?"

"She says she wants to take him home."

"If he sees her, he'll probably go home with her."

Rachael's lips thinned. "We can't keep him here against his will. If he wants to go home, we have to let him go home."

"He *doesn't* want to go home. He wants to stay here. He wants to get clean."

"She told me that she'd help him. That he's her husband, and she doesn't want him spending a night somewhere without her."

"Then she can check in too," Edwin whispered. "She's the reason that Warren is back here."

"Warren's the reason that Warren is back here."

"You want to just send him packing with her? You've seen him. You've seen him in there. If we send him home now...we're going to lose him."

"Edwin...we're probably going to lose him anyway."

"I'm going to talk to her."

Rachael didn't protest, but he could sense her disapproval. Still, if she didn't want him to be involved, she wouldn't have pulled him away from Warren. Angela squared her shoulders as Edwin approached, and her eyes finally settled on his face. Despite the way her skin hung from her face, her eyes sparked with life.

"I want my husband," Angela declared.

"I know. And you can see him."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe the day after."

Angela's eyes narrowed. "I want my husband *now*."

"I know. But he's very, very ill. He needs us to help him through the worst of it and..."

A scream floated down the hall, and Angela stiffened. "What are you doing to him in there? What the fuck are you doing to my husband? You're hurting him."

"I'm not hurting him," Edwin assured her, keeping his voice low. "I'm not hurting him. His body is going through withdrawals right now. The addiction wants to be fed."

"He's not addicted to drugs. He doesn't shoot up."

"No, he doesn't, but there are other types..."

"I want my husband. Warren!"

Warren cried out again. She made a step toward the door, and Edwin automatically reached out to catch her arm. "Please, ma'am..."

"Don't! Get your hands off me!"

Edwin immediately released her but moved to block her path to the corridor. "Ma'am, Warren is very sick right now, and he needs your help. He needs your support right now."

"I want to see my husband," Angela repeated, her voice dropping in register. Rachael stood off to the side, her arms crossed. Edwin could just step aside. He could just give the woman what she wanted. But he couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't just fighting for Warren's body. There was something more at stake. Something that Edwin wasn't willing to lose yet.

"Come back in the morning."

"Didn't you hear me?" Angela demanded. "Do you not speak fucking English? Are you deaf? I want my husband now. He came here without telling me. He can't just check in to a place like this without telling me."

"He should have told you," Edwin agreed, "but he can check in without your approval or permission."

“What is he doing here?” For the first time, her voice cracked. “What is he doing here? I don't understand what he's doing here.”

Edwin took a hesitant step toward her. “You didn't know he's addicted to drugs?”

She shook her head miserably.

“I know this is scary,” Edwin said gently. “He should have told you the truth. But he can't go home right now.”

“What about his job? What if he loses his job?”

“He's going to lose a lot more if he doesn't get clean.”

“I don't understand what's happening.”

Edwin took her elbow again. This time, she didn't shake him off. “I can explain it to you. If you come with me.”

“You can use the office,” Rachael said. “I'll keep an eye on Warren.”

“Come on,” Edwin said, leading her to the narrow door. Rachael's office wasn't much bigger than a utility closet, but it would be easier to talk to Angela if she wasn't subjected to her husband's cries of pain. “There's fresh coffee in here too.”

“Can I see him?”

“After we talk. I need to explain everything. I can tell you how to help him.”

“Can I help him?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think we both can.”

The door clicked shut behind them, and the fight seemed to drain from Angela's body. She didn't look defeated, but she did look tired. Exhausted. Even if she hadn't known about Warren's addiction, she must have felt it, as her husband grew more distant, as the funds began to dwindle, as the lying increased. A reasonable person would avoid getting involved. This wasn't just about addiction. This was about a relationship that Edwin couldn't understand, couldn't touch. But he couldn't walk away from them either.

Not when they were both asking him for help. Taking a deep breath, he perched on the edge of the desk and asked Angela what she knew about oxycodone.

* * * * *

Edwin didn't bother to turn on the lights before collapsing on the couch. He didn't have the energy to lift his arms. He briefly considered preparing a meal, but even if he felt like standing again, he wasn't sure what he had in the fridge. All of his favorite delivery places were already closed. Every time he focused on the digital clock above the television, his eyes blurred, and he had to blink the fuzziness away. Thirteen minutes after midnight. It was a new record. Sixteen hours at the center, alternating between Angela and Warren, trying to be the emotional support for both of them. Edwin didn't quite remember everything completely, but the dry, itchy skin on his face told him that he had cried at least once during the experience.

His phone vibrated against his thigh. At first, Edwin's tired mind refused to register it as the ringing phone. It paused, and then began vibrating again. Three brief pulses before another pause. Edwin fumbled it free of his pocket and smiled at the lit screen. A message from Carson. *Missing you. Can I come by tonight?*

Edwin considered the message for a moment before responding. *I just got home. Too late for you?*

He didn't expect a response. The text message had been time stamped two hours earlier, but his phone vibrated within a minute. *Not too late. I'll be there soon.*

I'll leave the back door unlocked.

As soon as he hit Send, ten-pound weights attached themselves to his eyelids. He battled the urge to drop his head back and sleep. He wanted to see Carson. He wanted to curl against the man's chest, speak in murmured half sentences about his day, and then fall asleep, warm and contented. He didn't

need Carson to feed him. He didn't need Carson to fuck him. He just needed a sympathetic ear that didn't mind muddled half sentences.

"Hey..."

Edwin rolled his head toward the sound, but he didn't see Cooper's familiar form. "What are you doing here?"

"Talking to you. You look like you've had a hard day."

"You mean, you don't know? You weren't following me all day?"

"I was. But I didn't want to distract you. Or cause more problems."

"That was thoughtful of you," Edwin murmured.

"Why do you do it?"

"Do what? Go to the center?"

"Yeah."

"If you were with me, you know why I was there."

"I know why you volunteer once a week. I know why you were wiping the snot from Warren's face. But I don't know why you were there for sixteen hours. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. They both needed me. This is the worst of it. If Warren can get through the next couple of days, he might just see the light at the end of tunnel."

"No, he won't."

"You don't know anything about it. Or him."

"How many times have you seen Warren at the center?" Cooper's voice floated over him.

"It doesn't matter."

"Three? Four? More?"

"Four."

"You think it'll stick this time?"

Edwin released a shuddering breath. "What do you want from me? Do you want me to apologize for wasting my time with scum? You want me to condemn him because he's not perfect? He's doing the best he can."

"That's not what I meant," Cooper said, sounding appropriately chagrined.

"What, then?"

"You really do think it'll stick, don't you?"

"I hope it will."

Warmth settled around his shoulders. There wasn't any weight. He couldn't rest his head on Cooper's chest, but the warmth was undeniable. It melted through him, moving down his body like a slow, meandering snake. It forced the tension from his neck and increased the weight on his eyelids.

"I know you do. I can make you feel better."

"Can you help Warren? Can you go keep an eye on him tonight?"

"No...I'm sorry." And he really sounded like he was sorry. Like he would fly to do Edwin's bidding, if he could. "But I can keep an eye on you."

"I don't need anybody to keep an eye on me."

"I don't agree. Wouldn't it be great to come home to somebody who has already made dinner? Somebody who could massage your feet and your back? Somebody who is proud of you?"

"Are you suggesting yourself for that role?" Edwin asked, his question more curious than dismissive.

"I might be."

"You're a ghost. Could you even stay solid long enough to make dinner?"

"No...but maybe I can do other things."

Edwin didn't need to ask what Cooper meant by other things. His cock twitched, and the warmth that had been around his shoulders moved lower. His groin began to tingle, but the excitement didn't wind him up. If anything, it

made his muscles loose, like Cooper planned to pour him from the couch to the floor.

“Just close your eyes for a moment,” Cooper whispered.

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“Carson's coming.”

“I know. I'll make sure you don't fall asleep. Just close your eyes.”

No further encouragement was necessary. The clock blurred in front of him, becoming meaningless, and then the small squares of light disappeared completely. For a moment, everything was black. Endless. Deeper than any night. Edwin had never been so exhausted. His hands were not attached to his arms. His head wasn't attached to his body. Everything floated. Sounds were amplified—a car on the street seemed like it was only inches from his ears—before silence fell over everything.

The black gradually lightened, turning to a deep royal blue, and then a much-more-pleasant purple. The color of ripe grapes.

“Can you see me?”

Edwin tried to shake his head. He couldn't see anything. He knew he wasn't dreaming, but at the same time, he was certain that he wasn't awake.

He was high.

The thought made his heart skip into a rapid beat, and his temples throbbed with fear. He struggled against the purple, against the encroaching blackness, against the voice dripping around him.

“Edwin...Edwin...calm down. Please. It's just me. I didn't mean to scare you.”

The words had the desired effect. Edwin relaxed, letting the fear go. Even if he was high, what difference did it make? He couldn't do anything about it. He just had to ride it out.

“Come with me tomorrow,” Cooper whispered. “Take the car to work. Let me touch you.”

“Cooper...”

“Does this feel good?”

“Yes.”

“I can make it better, Edwin. Better than this. Better than anything you ever felt.”

Edwin laughed a little. The words made sense. He understood what they meant separately. But when Cooper spoke, they blended and bled and turned purple and drifted backward into the widening void.

“I think I could make you happy.”

Edwin sighed. “How?”

“I can make it so you don't feel any pain...you never get old...you never get tired...you can just be happy.”

“Is that what it's like to be dead?”

“To be a ghost.”

“Same thing,” Edwin said, the laughter still in his voice. “And lonely.”

“No...no...it won't be lonely. Not with the two of us together.” Soft lips touched his. Edwin relaxed further beneath the contact. “Sleep now, and I'll show you.”

“I can't. Carson's coming.” Carson would be there, alive and vibrant. Somebody who could get old and tired but would be grateful for each moment before he did so. Carson with warm, solid fingers. Carson with a deep, lovely smile.

“The back door is open, isn't it?” The question was asked in the most logical tone Edwin had ever heard. How could something so logical be refuted? His door was always open for Carson. He wasn't leaving the other man. Not even a little bit. Not when Carson would always be welcome. Always be wanted.

"I can't...I can't miss him." Were his eyes open or closed? There was a sweet smell drifting around him. It wasn't unlike honey. He could imagine it, like smoke, flowing through his nostrils and into his brain. Not smoke. Fog. Yellow fog.

"Don't you think he'll wake you up when he gets here?"

"I think so."

"Don't you trust him?" Cooper murmured. "Don't you think he wants to see you?"

"I...do."

"Are you sure? Because if you don't trust him, you should stay awake."

"I do..."

"Prove it. Go to sleep now. Show me."

Edwin let go of the world, pushing himself backward from the edge and tumbling down into sleep. Into Cooper's arms.

* * * * *

Carson gently closed the back door behind him and strained his ears, trying to catch any hint of Edwin's location. Even after his eyes adjusted to the dark, he had a hard time making out the geography of the room. "Edwin?"

No response. Carson couldn't really be surprised by that, though. It was already nearly one. Edwin had probably had a long day, and he no doubt needed to be awake in only five or six hours. He should go home, but all day long, he had thought about Edwin. The low timbre of Edwin's voice, and the color of his eyes, and the way he laughed, and the way his mouth felt as it moved down Carson's body. Not that he expected the two of them to have sex. He just couldn't stomach the thought of waiting until the end of the week to see Edwin.

He moved through the spotless kitchen—when had Edwin taken the time to clean it?—and felt his way into the living room. The large bay window allowed silver and golden rays into the room, casting light over Edwin's

sleeping form. It might have been a trick of said light, but Edwin looked like years had slid off his face. Not just a few either. He looked a full twenty years younger.

Carson narrowed his eyes and moved closer, trying to see through the shadows. He stood above the couch, studying Edwin's face. No matter how close he stood, no matter from what angle he looked, he saw the same thing. The same young face, the same sharp features. Carson's cock twitched, but he willed his arousal away. He wasn't going to attack Edwin in his sleep, after all.

“Edwin?”

He didn't respond.

Carson bent until his mouth was almost touching Edwin's bowed lips. “Edwin?”

He didn't even twitch.

Carson kissed him, letting Edwin's breath fan across his face, before straightening. The man had collapsed on the couch without even removing his shoes. His shirt was damp, clinging to his arms and chest, and there were dark spots along his pants, as if stained with something. Carson didn't want to wake him up, but he didn't want to leave him to sleep on the couch in his dirty clothes either.

“Edwin? Can you hear me at all?”

Edwin's eyes fluttered behind his lids. Instead of waking, he seemed to be falling deeper into sleep. Carson knelt at his feet and untied one shoe, then the other. It had been years since he'd last undressed a sleeping boyfriend. And the circumstances involving that had been far less pleasant. Tommy had been covered in beer and vomit, passed out on the floor, his hair sticking to his sweating forehead. Now that he thought about it, Edwin smelled vaguely of vomit. And it probably wasn't his own.

Carson tugged the shoes from his feet, then peeled off his socks. Edwin had nice toes. It was a little weird to think so, because most people would

never characterize toes as *nice*, but in Edwin's case, it was true. They weren't hairy or knobby. The nails were neatly trimmed. Carson couldn't be sure, but it looked like Edwin indulged in the occasional pedicure. He moved from Edwin's feet to his belt, unhooking the buckle. He moved slowly, though he doubted he would disturb Edwin at all.

It almost seemed like he had been drugged.

The thought brought Carson up short, a chill rolling down his spine. He didn't have a problem with the fact that Edwin had once been an addict. Especially since Edwin had insisted he was living completely clean. But the thought of Edwin—straitlaced, clean-cut, conscientious, funny Edwin—fucked up on drugs made Carson more than a little sick. It didn't seem right. It seemed like a weakness that Edwin couldn't—shouldn't—have.

After he removed the belt, Carson set to work on the long line of buttons down Edwin's shirt. They popped free easily, Edwin never stirring. Not even when Carson gently pulled him forward to push the shirt down his shoulders. As he discarded the clothing, he detected a small smile on Edwin's face. Was the man awake now? Or was he just having sweet dreams? Could he be dreaming of Carson?

"Come on," Carson murmured, taking Edwin's arms to pull him closer. He managed to get Edwin to his feet, but even then, the man didn't open his eyes. He just leaned heavily against Carson's shoulder—like somebody drugged. Like somebody unconscious. "Let's get you to bed."

Edwin mumbled something that didn't even have the shape of language, but Carson chose to take the sounds as an acknowledgment. He was just relieved Edwin didn't live in a two-story home. He didn't think he could drag some one hundred and fifty pounds of deadweight up a flight of stairs. But he made it to Edwin's bed and had enough strength left to lower him to the mattress.

"Lie down," Edwin mumbled.

"You awake now?"

“Lie down,” Edwin repeated, blindly reaching for him. His fingers snagged in Carson's pants, but he didn't have the coordination to pull Carson to the bed.

“I will. Let me get undressed first, okay?”

Edwin smiled sleepily. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Carson murmured, toeing off his shoes.

He made short work of his pants and shirt, eager to crawl into bed with Edwin and curl around his body. Edwin seemed just as eager to have Carson beside him, and he immediately turned into Carson's body, resting his head on his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“For what?” Carson asked softly.

“Falling asleep... Tried to wait.”

Carson kissed the top of his head. “It's okay. You don't mind if I stay?”

“No. Want you to.”

“Good. I like your bed. I don't want to go anywhere.”

“Did you undress me?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Make you breakfast in the morning.”

Carson kissed him again. He couldn't help it. He liked the way Edwin's hair smelled, the way it tickled his nose. He closed his eyes, trying to remember the last time he'd felt content to hold somebody else and listen to them fall asleep.

“Don't worry about that. I'll make you something.”

“Thank you.”

“You're always welcome, Edwin.”

Edwin didn't speak again. Carson didn't even know if he had heard him, but that was all right. He'd make sure to tell Edwin again the next day. In the

meantime, he counted each one of Edwin's breaths, timing how many seconds passed between each inhale and exhale. Carson willed himself into the same rhythm, his eyes drooping.

Shadows played against the wall, disappearing each time a car passed by and bright, artificial light momentarily filled the room. Once, when that light faded away, Carson thought he saw something. It might have just been a shadow. It probably was just a shadow of the tree outside the window. But Carson thought he saw a man's figure silhouetted against the wall, facing the bed. Watching them.

Carson blinked, but the figure didn't disappear. He could see the wall on the other side, but at the same time, he saw the clear details of clothes. A jacket, a T-shirt, jeans. He couldn't pinpoint shades. The figure was all blue. Or maybe it was all silver, created out of nothing more than moonbeams. Carson didn't blink again. He didn't look away. His eyes burned. His logical mind told him it had to be shadows. Or a dream. But his ancient reptilian brain recoiled in horror. There was no logical explanation. There was only something frightening, something dangerous, something horrible standing at the foot of the bed. Watching them.

The longer Carson stared back, the more details filtered through the growing fog of fear. The man didn't look right. His head was back and to the side, at an unnatural angle. It triggered a new sort of terror. One that crawled up his chest and lodged itself in his throat. He wanted to scream, but the terror blocked his breath. His arms tightened around Edwin automatically, but he wasn't sure if he was trying to protect the sleeping man, or use him as some sort of shield.

The figure moved. Carson couldn't define the difference. It wasn't closer. It wasn't farther away. But it had definitely moved. The knowledge somehow dislodged the lump in his throat, but the screams didn't escape. Instead, the Lord's Prayer tumbled from him. Carson couldn't remember the last time he

had uttered the Lord's Prayer, but now the words came to his lips as easily as his own name.

The man, if he was a man, seemed unimpressed. And it moved again. God, why wouldn't it stop moving? Why wouldn't it go away? Why could he see the shadows on and through it? Every heartbeat brought him closer to Edwin, who hadn't moved or twitched at all. Carson's arms ached, his muscles tense and screaming in protest, but he only tightened his hold. Hell itself could open up and reach for Edwin—Carson wouldn't let him go.

“Mine.”

The word was like the rustle of dead brown leaves, the dry whisper of a tree scratching against the window. The buzzing of flies over rotting fruit.

“No.” Carson didn't know where he found the energy for the denial, but he repeated it. “No. He's not.”

The thing grinned. Bile burned Carson's chest as his stomach did a slow flip-flop. But he didn't look away. Sweat dotted his brow and his neck, and his legs tingled with the need to run, but he wouldn't give the creature the satisfaction of his fear.

“Yes,” the grin said with mocking self-assurance.

The thing disappeared, fading back into the shadows. Another car passed, blinding Carson. He blinked rapidly, and when his vision cleared, the room was completely empty. He sighed with relief, but the sigh turned to a strangled sob. He curled up on the bed, pulling Edwin closer. Light couldn't even pass between their two bodies. Tears made his face feel hot and tight, but he didn't care. Even if he wanted to flee to the safety of his own bed, he wasn't going to leave Edwin to that thing.

He couldn't abandon Edwin to the dark.

Chapter Eleven

Edwin stared at the invoice for five solid minutes, but the words refused to make any sort of sense. He couldn't even tell if it was an invoice he needed to sign or if it was an invoice he needed to file. He tossed it aside with disgust and reached for his coffee cup. Though he didn't think he could consume enough caffeine to clear the fog from his brain, he planned to try. He didn't know what other choice he had.

Edwin didn't remember sleeping, though he must have. Carson told him over breakfast that when he'd shown up, Edwin had been unconscious on the couch and completely unresponsive. Edwin didn't remember his dreams either. The images in his head might have been dreams. They might have been memories. Every time he tried to concentrate on one, it skittered away from him, slippery and fast. Even the hours he had spent at the rehab center the day before were foggy and just out of his reach.

He sipped the cooling dregs at the bottom of his cup and reached for the coffeepot. In a few hours, he'd go down the block to the corner store and buy a couple of liters of Coke. The sugar on top of the caffeine might give him the energy he needed to get through the day.

A soft knock on his office door drew his attention from his empty cup and indiscernible paperwork. "Come in."

Claire opened the door, peeking her head around the corner. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course." Edwin stood as she entered, fear overwhelming his exhaustion. He hadn't even had the chance to speak to Claire since the

break-in and the unfortunate scene at her apartment. If she quit, he wouldn't blame her, but he didn't want her to go. "Have a seat."

Claire sat on the edge of the chair, her skirt pulled over her knees, her hands folded tightly in her lap. "I wanted to talk to you...about what happened."

"We don't have to..."

"I want to," Claire said with a small, nervous smile. "I've been thinking about this all week. I mean, thinking about how I should apologize. I think the best way is to just come out and say it. I'm sorry."

"Claire, you don't have to apologize. I mean..."

"Sir—"

"Don't call me that, please."

"Edwin...with all due respect...I'd like it if you accepted my apology."

Edwin smiled. "I accept your apology."

"Thank you. I don't really know what came over me. I mean, I was really scared, but I didn't want to be some big baby about it, you know? And I thought...well, I thought that you liked me. When you turned me down, I guess I was just...really embarrassed. It's different for a girl, you know? When you put yourself out there like that."

"No, I understand. I don't hold it against you. In fact, I was a little bit scared you were coming in to quit."

"Scared?"

"Yeah. I don't want you to go anywhere."

"So, we're friends again?"

Edwin inclined his head. "Of course we're friends again."

"Good. Then as your friend, I think it's my duty to tell you that you look like shit."

He grimaced. "You think so?"

“Haven't you been sleeping lately?”

“Apparently I have been. But yesterday was a really long day. I didn't even get home from the center until almost midnight.”

Claire frowned and leaned forward. “Why? What happened?”

“I've told you about Warren before, right? He's back. With his wife.”

“Is she a user too?”

“I don't know. Warren insists she is. That she's the reason he's had his relapse. She insists she's never done anything like that, and she doesn't even understand why Warren came to the center.”

“The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.”

“Probably. Even if she doesn't use drugs herself, I don't understand how she couldn't see what was happening under her own nose. She should have noticed the changes in his behavior, at least.”

“Sometimes people turn a blind eye to what they don't want to see. It's easy enough to justify out-of-character behavior. He's tired because he's stressed at work. He's out more because he's spending time with friends. You know the drill.”

“Yeah, I know the drill.”

“I better go open up out there. Thanks.”

Edwin smiled as she left, pleased that his work life was at least back to normal. And at least they both agreed on where they stood now. She wouldn't misread him in the future, and he would be careful of how he treated her—perhaps not getting too personal or familiar. They couldn't be friends, but they could be friendly. Edwin needed to remember that distinction.

He shifted his attention back to the stack of invoices. He had felt good while speaking to Claire, but now the thick, pea-soup fog was creeping back, blocking his mind, making his eyes heavy. He still had five hours before his scheduled lunch hour. His planned date with Carson. The thought of meeting Carson made him smile. Even though they'd shared breakfast that morning,

Edwin already missed him. He already planned to stay up late that night, in case Carson wanted to drop by and see him again. Only this time, Edwin wouldn't sleep through the entire visit.

Edwin leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, promising himself that he was only resting. He wasn't going to take an impromptu nap in the middle of his office in the middle of the morning. Just because he was almost fifty didn't mean he needed to have a midmorning nap after first breakfast.

Within moments of closing his eyes, Edwin realized his mistake. He wasn't asleep. He knew he wasn't asleep. But he was standing on a beach. The beach he now thought of as Cooper's. And the moon was high and fat overhead. It was so big that, for a moment, Edwin thought he could climb up its face and sit comfortably on top, dangling his feet over the edge. Edwin smiled at the thought and reached up, as if he really could capture the moon and turn it into his own sofa.

"I've missed you."

Edwin spun around, smiling at Cooper's familiar silhouette. "You just saw me a few hours ago."

"That was a few hours too long." Cooper approached, his eyes twinkling. "Haven't you missed me?"

"Did we really spend all night here?"

"Most of the night. At one point, we took a trip up."

"Up?"

Cooper pointed to the stars. "Up."

"I need to get back to work. I can't be here with you all day."

"Why not?" Cooper wrapped an arm around Edwin and pulled him close. Faint music began to play, as if from a great distance. The Beatles. Maybe it came from the moon. Edwin began to sway with Cooper. "Aren't you happy here?"

"I am. But I have to work. I really do, Cooper."

Cooper's hand moved lower to cup Edwin's ass. He pulled him closer, and Edwin sighed, resting his head on Cooper's shoulder. He heard Claire roll back the cage in front of the door and the bell above the door dinged an early greeting. Edwin looked up, as if he could peer into the darkness and see Claire greeting their first customer. The door dinged again. Two customers. A third one would make a queue. He needed to be there to help.

"Edwin." Cooper's voice was deep. And much more real than the high tone of the bell. Edwin looked back to Cooper's green eyes and then lowered his head to Cooper's shoulder once more.

"We shouldn't meet during the day is all I'm saying."

"We should meet anytime we feel the need to see each other. You were missing me. I could tell."

Edwin's lips quirked. "How could you tell? I was doing paperwork and speaking to my employee."

"While you were thinking of me," Cooper said smoothly. They continued to sway, moving in a tight circle on the sand. The water occasionally licked at his ankles. Edwin didn't mind. He was used to the warm water by now.

"You're an egomaniac."

"I'm a what?"

"Egomaniac. You think I'm thinking about you all the time. Can you read my mind?"

"What if I can? Don't you like being with somebody who can anticipate every need? Somebody who can give you exactly what you need when you need it? Exactly what you want?"

"We're not together," Edwin protested softly.

"We're not?"

"I'm with Carson. If I'm with anybody at all. It's hard to tell sometimes."

"I can show you how good we are together."

“I thought that's what these dreams were about. Aren't we dancing together so you can show me how good we are together?”

“It can be better,” Cooper whispered in his ear. “Skin against skin. Flesh against flesh. Let me show you.”

“How?”

“The car. I touched you in the car. Remember?”

Edwin laughed, a little nervously. “Remember? I don't think I'll ever forget. It shaved about ten years from my life.”

“You just need to agree to meet me in the car.”

“I can't while I'm at work, Cooper.”

“Then at lunch.”

“I can't.”

Cooper held his chin and forced him to look up. Before Edwin could say a word, Cooper claimed his mouth. Edwin immediately relaxed under the kiss, a sweet warmth flowing through his body, spreading to the very tips of his fingers. And then out of his fingers. Edwin was convinced that if he held his hand up, he'd see a golden glow spreading from his nails. There was no reason to think otherwise. Anything was possible in this world with Cooper.

The kiss didn't end. It just continued, going on and on. Edwin didn't wonder why his lungs never burned. He didn't need air. He needed Cooper's clever mouth, his slow, seductive tongue, his sweet breath. He held the back of Cooper's head, fingering the strands, pulling him closer, searching more of his mouth. His knees felt weak. He wanted to sink to his knees and drag Cooper down with him. His stomach tightened, his throat tightened, and his cock twitched.

“Meet me, Edwin,” Cooper breathed. “Meet me, *please*.”

Nobody had ever sounded so desperate for him. Cooper had never sounded this desperate before. But after the previous night, and the night

before that, Edwin didn't blame him. As far as he knew, their meetings might have felt good, but they didn't satisfy Cooper. Not like Edwin was satisfied.

“Okay.”

Cooper smiled. Overhead, the moon glowed brighter and brighter, until it was shining with the power of the sun. “At lunch?”

“Lunch,” Edwin confirmed.

“I'll be in the backseat.”

“So will...”

* * * * *

“Edwin? Edwin? Wake up. Please. Edwin.”

“What?” Edwin's eyes fluttered open to meet Claire's concerned brown ones. “What? Was I asleep?”

“Yeah. I knocked on the door, but you didn't respond. I wouldn't have come in, but I was worried...”

“It's fine. I guess...I guess I was more tired than I thought,” Edwin muttered.

“Are you sure that you're okay?” She pressed the back of her hand to his brow. “You're burning up. And I've never seen anybody...sleep like that.”

“I'm fine,” Edwin insisted, gently pushing away from her. He stood, hoping his legs wouldn't betray him. “Are there any customers?”

“No. It's been a slow morning.”

“It's been a... What time is it?”

“Just after ten.”

Edwin's eyes widened. “I've been asleep in here for the past three hours?”

“I guess so.”

“I'm sorry. God. I don't know what happened to me. Why don't you go take a break? I'll cover the counter, okay?”

"I don't know." Claire narrowed her eyes and leaned forward, studying his face. "I really think maybe you should go home. Or visit your doctor. You really don't look good."

"I'm fine," Edwin repeated, shrugging on his smock. "Why don't you run out and get us some coffee? I've finished off my pot, and I think I just need some more caffeine."

"I can do that," Claire said, but she was still watching him closely. Edwin had the feeling that she would spend the rest of the day watching him closely, like a child might watch a new and interesting insect.

"Do you need to keep staring at me?"

"No...it's just..." Claire took a deep breath and shook her head. "I'll go get your coffee. Do you want a bagel or anything?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you, Claire. Actually, give me a minute before you leave."

"No problem. I'll just wait at the counter until you come out."

Edwin nodded and half walked, half stumbled to the small, windowless bathroom. He slammed the door behind him and reached for the light chain overhead. His fingers groped unsuccessfully for several seconds before finally closing around the end of the chain. He tugged and almost recoiled at the sight that greeted him in the mirror. It was his face, his eyes, his hair, his mouth. Everything looked the same, but his color was high, his eyes were shining feverishly, and sweat covered his brow.

He bent over the sink and splashed cold water on his face, hoping that would help. But when he glanced in the mirror again, his eyes were still too bright. No wonder Claire had been so concerned. If she came into the pharmacy looking like this, Edwin would insist she turn around and march herself back to her bed. He bent once more, ducking his mouth under the faucet to take a deep drink. Water dripped from his mouth when he lifted his

head. As he moved to wipe it away, he realized he wasn't standing in the bathroom alone.

Adrenaline instantly dumped into his system, and his heart rate soared. He struggled to catch his breath, and he didn't dare look over his shoulder. He didn't want to look over his shoulder. He stared at the outline in the mirror, knowing what it was—who it was—but still too terrified to even breathe. The shadow didn't look right.

The head was at the wrong angle.

Edwin blinked. When he looked again, there was nobody in the mirror except him. Edwin tore the door open, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. Gasping for breath, he fumbled his way out of the office. As soon as Claire saw him, her eyes widened.

“Edwin...”

“Just go. Just go. I'll be fine.”

“I don't...”

“I'll be fine.” He had said the words so many times, they were already losing meaning. What did it mean to be fine? Did it mean the dreams would stop? Or did it mean the dreams were only beginning? He remembered his promise to Cooper with a shiver. But was it of pleasure or disgust? How could he possibly consider meeting Cooper in his present state?

Edwin touched his lips absently. He knew Cooper hadn't really been kissing him, but he could still feel the imprint of Cooper's lips on his mouth. The dreams were so amazing. It would be better when they were both flesh and blood. They were both physically capable of more. Of real touches. Of slow kisses. Edwin wanted to pull Cooper against him and maybe even slide into Cooper's tight body.

Edwin shook his head. What was he thinking? He'd meet Cooper at lunch because he had agreed to and he had no reason not to keep his word. But he wasn't going to make the meeting into anything more than it was. He wasn't

going to get caught up in thinking it would be some sort of mythical meeting. He wasn't going to have any expectations at all. No reality—even in the Alfa Romeo—could touch the dreams he had been having, anyway.

But what if reality could match his dreams? Edwin sighed at the thought. He supposed if being with Cooper in the car was better than in his dreams, he was in real danger of never leaving the car.

The chime above the door pulled him from those thoughts. He happily greeted the regular customer and turned his attention to his job. Cooper, and thoughts of Cooper, could wait until later.

Chapter Twelve

Lunch came sooner than he expected. He helped a few customers, reassured Claire that he really wasn't ill, and completed at least one stack of insurance forms. By the time he looked at the clock again, it was just after one, and Claire was busy in the back, completing that morning's scripts.

"I'm taking my lunch," Edwin announced, his words even and normal.

Claire only sent him one vaguely worried look before she nodded and turned back to her work. He took a deep breath. His chest burned. Nerves. He was nervous to get in his car. He half expected Cooper to be sitting in the backseat, clearly visible through the window. But he wasn't there. The car looked normal, and Edwin felt more than a little silly when his fingers shook as he reached for the handle. There was nothing to be nervous about. There was no reason for his stomach to be fluttering like a whole cloud of moths.

Edwin put the car in gear. He didn't have the time to drive all the way back to his house. Especially in the midday traffic. But he knew of a parking garage not far from the pharmacy. The bottom level was usually empty and dark. It was also stifling in the summer heat. A part of him couldn't believe that he was seeking out a quiet, dark place where nobody would disturb him and his...what? His ghost? His phantom lover? That seemed really corny. But Edwin didn't know if there was a better phrase for it. Because after that afternoon, they *would* be lovers. If Cooper really existed. If everything he said was true. If all the sweet words he'd whispered in Edwin's dreams were rooted in truth, then by the end of the afternoon, they would be lovers.

His cock throbbed against his thigh. If his need weren't so acute, the pain not so accurate, he wouldn't be doing this. But his body knew what it wanted.

Knew what it craved. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Cooper, heard his promises, felt the pressure of his touch. But all of that was nothing more than a fantasy. His dreams weren't satisfying him anymore. When he had agreed to Cooper's pleas, he had absolutely meant it.

Edwin squinted against the sudden darkness once he hit the parking garage. The top floor was full of cars from the surrounding buildings, as he had suspected, but he just followed the yellow arrows. They led him deeper and deeper in the darkness. He wound his way down the levels, ignoring the empty parking slots. The lights flickered weakly overhead, casting long shadows rather than providing any real illumination. That was just as well. The parking structure was old, and the walls were stained, marred, discolored, and broken in places.

Finally, after what felt like several long minutes, Edwin reached the very bottom of the structure. The heat crept into the car, choking him. He quickly rolled down the window, but it didn't offer any relief. He rolled forward, bypassing several open slots, and other cars that may have been completely abandoned. The bottom level wasn't popular during the day because there was no elevator, and most people didn't like the thought of climbing five flights of stairs in their work clothes unless they absolutely had to.

Edwin chose a quiet corner and came to a stop. After a moment of consideration, he turned off the engine and rolled up the window. The click of the cooling engine echoed off the walls and low ceiling. Edwin swallowed, trying to ease his dry throat, but it didn't help.

The soft touch on his elbow almost made him scream.

"You're a bit jumpy," Cooper murmured.

"I'm wound up pretty tight. And nervous."

"About what? About being with me?"

“About all of it,” Edwin admitted, unable to look over his shoulder to Cooper's very real green eyes. He stared straight ahead, noting each tiny detail of the old concrete wall.

Cooper's fingers began to move, sliding up and down Edwin's arm. Each time he reached Edwin's shoulder, Edwin inhaled. Each time Cooper's fingers touched his wrist, he exhaled. “You don't need to be nervous about anything.”

“No?”

“No. It seems like you already know what you're doing. And you know I know what I'm doing.”

“Do you?”

“I'd like to think so. Nobody knows you like I do, Edwin. Nobody else ever will.”

“How will it feel? I mean, are you going to be cold?”

Cooper touched the side of Edwin's neck. “Do I feel cold?”

Edwin exhaled slowly. “No. No, you feel good.”

“This'll be easier if you join me in the backseat.”

There was no doubt of that. Edwin wasn't sure if two grown men could fit in the backseat comfortably. On the other hand, he wasn't sure how a grown man could meet a ghost for a nooner, so he supposed he had larger problems than the size of the Spider's backseat.

“Maybe if you join me in the front,” Edwin suggested.

“I can do that. Slide over.”

Edwin worked his way to the passenger side and took a deep breath. His erection pressed against his pants, straining for something warm and soft. He blinked, and Cooper was beside him, his shirt already missing. Edwin couldn't breathe. He couldn't even think. Cooper was gorgeous. Edwin never doubted that. But the young man who haunted his dreams seemed like a mere photocopy of this perfect being in front of him. His eyes were so vibrant, and

the color of his hair was so pure that it almost glowed. Edwin wished they were still in the sunshine. It almost felt like they were trapped in the dark.

“Do you like what you see?” Cooper asked.

“I do.”

“Show me,” Cooper encouraged.

Was it that easy? A voice deep inside warned him against reaching out. *He's a ghost. He's dead. This is unnatural.* But for a dead man, he was amazingly solid. Edwin touched his throat, waiting for a pulse that didn't come, then dragged his fingers down Cooper's chest. He was warm. His stomach twitched when Edwin touched it.

“You feel so...real. Is it the car?”

Cooper shook his head. “It's you. That's what I've been trying to tell you.”

“It's me,” Edwin murmured with more than a touch of wonder.

Without warning, he pulled Cooper onto his lap, settling him there so Edwin could reach every part of his body without effort. Sighing, Cooper dropped his head back, exposing the column of his throat. Edwin trailed his hands up and down Cooper's body, touching every inch he could, mapping his body, memorizing it. His skin was perfect. Smooth and pale, not unlike porcelain. His nipples were the size of quarters, and the perfect shape for Edwin's mouth. Cooper looped his long arms around Edwin's neck and shifted against his lap, rocking back and forth, grinding against Edwin's erection.

“Edwin...” Cooper's moan was almost better than the pressure against his groin. “Oh, God. Please don't stop. I never...”

His moans enchanted Edwin, like the most delicate music. He pressed his other hand against Cooper's back and drew him toward his mouth. The first flick of his tongue over the tip of Cooper's nipple had him crying out, the sound echoing in the enclosed space. Edwin closed his eyes with satisfaction, lapping at the nipple again and again, until it hardened to a firm point. At that point,

Edwin merely shifted his attention to the other nipple. Cooper tasted unlike anybody else Edwin had ever been with. Sweet and salty at the same time.

Once Edwin was certain Cooper wouldn't lean away from him, he began to move his hand along Cooper's back. He counted each knob of his spine from Cooper's neck to his ass and then moved to his ribs. In Edwin's experience, there was always a golden spot or two around the ribs—one that would tickle and feel good at the same time. But it only took seconds for Edwin to realize that every inch of Cooper's body made him tight with pleasure. He shuddered. He moaned. He yelped and shouted. Edwin didn't even know if he was making any noise himself. His ears echoed Cooper, each sound doubling on itself, growing and consuming more of him.

Edwin lifted his head, and Cooper claimed his mouth. He froze for a moment, surprised by the pressure, by the hard edge of Cooper's teeth. Their tongues entwined, and Edwin lost track of everything that wasn't Cooper's mouth. He wanted to kiss Cooper until they were both breathless, but he wanted more than that. He wanted to consume Cooper. He wanted his skin and his hair and his tongue. He wanted the two of them to be joined, and judging by the way Cooper clawed at him, Edwin wasn't alone. He would bear the marks of Cooper's nails, and his mouth would be swollen and bruised. Edwin knew he'd be lucky if that was the only physical evidence of their coupling.

“Need you. Need you. Edwin. Please.”

Edwin suspected Cooper didn't even know what he was begging for. More contact. Always more contact. They scrambled for each other, and the clothes were impossible barriers. Edwin let Cooper tear at the material. He was beyond caring about the state of his clothing. When Cooper finally worked the buttons free, he slammed his mouth to Edwin's again, and they were locked together, bare chest against bare chest.

Edwin only realized in a distant way that he didn't feel Cooper's chest move. There was no expansion for breath. No vibration of his heartbeat.

“Tell me, Edwin,” Cooper moaned against his mouth. “Tell me, please.”

Edwin's mind stopped for a moment. Tell him what? What more did Cooper need from him? An echo of his own feelings? A promise? A declaration? Or did Cooper just want to know what was going through him? His brain could generate the questions, but no matter what he did, he couldn't latch onto the answers.

“I want you,” Edwin finally blurted. “I want to fuck you. But I didn't bring anything.”

“You don't need anything when you're with me,” Cooper assured him. “But I need to get out of these pants.”

They both pushed and clawed at the jeans he wore. How had they become solid with him? Or were they merely an illusion? Edwin had to accept that this whole thing could be a dream; that he was still sitting in his office, drooling all over his invoices while his coffee went cold. Illusion or not, they both struggled with the pants until they were hooked around Cooper's knees, and Edwin could finally cup his ass with both hands.

“Don't you think it might hurt?”

“You won't hurt me,” Cooper murmured. Edwin didn't know how that could be true, but he believed it. The longer Cooper rocked on his lap, the more inclined Edwin was to believe him. Believe everything that came out of his mouth, no matter what he said. It made him more inclined to give Cooper anything he wanted, no matter what he asked for. Need crawled through him, overtook every nerve ending and every cell.

The first time Edwin had tried to quit opiates, he'd only succeeded for six hours. That's how long it took for the cravings to reach their peak. The point where Edwin couldn't ignore them, because the cravings were him. He was the cravings. Nothing existed in the world except that hunger. He wanted to claw his way out of his own skin, wanted to shove so many pills down his throat that he knew he wouldn't wake up again, but that didn't matter. Not as long as he got what he needed.

“Cooper. Now. Now.”

Cooper nodded frantically, lifting himself off Edwin's lap so he could tug at the zipper. His hot hand wrapped around Edwin's erection, and their mouths met again. Now when Edwin closed his eyes, he still saw Cooper's face. He still saw the car. Except everything took on a distant, dreamlike quality. The details were less vivid. The distances made less sense. But Cooper still consumed his mouth, still filled his vision. There was no darkness. Only the light glow from Cooper's perfect, taut skin.

Cooper positioned himself over Edwin's cock, his firm fingers guiding Edwin's crown to his clenched ass. He moved, as if to lower himself, but Cooper caught his hip, stopping him. “Are you sure? I mean...do you know what's going to happen?”

Cooper blinked. “Nothing's going to happen.”

“But everything...everything is so...” Something was going to happen. Something had to happen. So much already had. Edwin didn't know how to express his fear. He was going to be undone. He was going to fly apart. His body wouldn't be able to handle it. His mind would break. He already knew he couldn't handle perfection. Cooper would be perfection.

Cooper caught Edwin's chin, and their gazes clashed. Cooper's eyes were twin rings of green fire. “Nothing is going to happen. I promise you.”

Edwin nodded. “Okay. Okay.”

“Do you want me?”

“I've never wanted anything more,” Edwin vowed, unsure if he was telling the truth.

“Good...good...” Cooper slid his mouth from Edwin's lips to his jaw and then his throat. He nipped gently at the skin, and a shower of sparks rained down over Edwin. When he closed his eyes, he actually saw the sparks. Each one falling on his skin, burning him, overpowering him, burrowing deeper and deeper into his flesh. “You ready?”

“I am,” Edwin promised, his breath caught in his throat.

Cooper lowered himself slowly, letting Edwin's cock pierce his clenched hole. He expected Cooper to stop or at least to resist him. But once he started, there was no stopping. There was no hesitation. There was only red-hot heat, tight flesh, and Edwin's thrumming heart. Cooper didn't make a sound. For a moment, it was easy to remember that Cooper was only a phantom. Despite the heat, despite the intense pressure, it was almost possible to forget that Cooper was even there.

“How does that...how does that feel?” Cooper finally murmured.

“Perfect.”

“Really?”

“Really. Don't stop moving.”

“Tell me again,” Cooper murmured.

“Perfect. It's perfect. You're perfect. Don't stop moving.”

“I won't.”

The air shimmered around them, dancing in the heat they generated. Edwin gripped him so hard, his fingers hurt and the tendons in his forearms pressed against his skin. Every time Cooper flexed around Edwin's shaft, the world wavered and threatened to go black. Somehow, he held on to his control, held on to the solid objects. His car. The seat. The dashboard. Cooper didn't overwhelm everything, but when Edwin blinked, he thought he saw Cooper's body bleeding into the leather, slipping through the window, seeping into Edwin's own flesh.

Edwin didn't quite know who controlled the rhythm. Cooper might have been in charge. He was moving, rocking against Edwin's body, sliding up and down Edwin's shaft. But at the same time, it felt like Cooper wasn't moving at all. It felt like they were in the ocean again, cradled by the waves, pushed and pulled by the moon and the natural flow of the water. Edwin wanted more friction, more pressure, but he couldn't force Cooper to move faster. He was in

thick tar. The car seat was thick tar. And Cooper was molasses, flowing over him freely while he struggled to move.

With every breath, Edwin begged him not to stop. Begged him to never stop. Cooper never said a word, but he didn't need to. Edwin heard all his thoughts. Heard each promise that this didn't have to end.

Edwin gripped the back of Cooper's head and brought their mouths together again. Their tongues slid against each other slowly as their bodies gained speed. Edwin felt himself rushing to his climax, and he sought out Cooper's erection with his free hand. He didn't want to get there by himself. He wanted Cooper to feel all the pleasure he was giving Edwin. He wanted Cooper to understand.

“Oh...God...oh...God...God...” Cooper straightened, his head dropping back, his spine arching. Cum erupted from him, coating Edwin's hand, strands catching Edwin's stomach and shirt. The sudden warm liquid was the last thing Edwin needed. He shouted Cooper's name and shouted it again, and again, as his cock jerked and pulsed inside Cooper's body.

Edwin wrapped his arms around Cooper, his eyes immediately feeling heavy. He didn't exactly feel tired. But then, he hadn't exactly felt tired that morning, and he'd still managed to sleep for over two hours.

“Thank you,” Cooper murmured.

“Was it worth it?”

“It was worth it.” Cooper kissed Edwin's neck beneath his ear. “God, it was worth the wait.”

“Good. That's a lot of pressure, you know. After forty-seven years of waiting.”

“You lived up to it.”

“I need to get back to work.”

Cooper caressed the side of his face. “Not yet. Can't we stay here like this? Just a bit longer.”

“Just a bit longer,” Edwin agreed. “But I can't leave Claire on her own.”

“I know. You won't leave her. I'll make sure you get back in time.” Cooper's words were muffled against Edwin's neck, and his mouth moved on Edwin's skin, soothing him. With Cooper's promise echoing in his ears, Edwin closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Carson picked at his sandwich without energy. Every morsel he put in his mouth tasted like dust. His stomach churned, trying to reject the offering, but Carson kept shoveling the crumbs against his tongue, hoping to wake up his appetite. Another sandwich waited on the plate beside him. Paper-thin roast beef, thick tomatoes, and sweet red onions on thick ciabatta bread. He had taken the order from Edwin that morning over breakfast, excited to prepare yet another meal for Edwin.

Maybe he's tired of you already.

Carson shook his head and pushed the thought out of his mind. Edwin wasn't tired of him. Edwin certainly hadn't seemed tired of him that morning. He was probably just tied up at work. That was why he hadn't tried to call Carson. And that was why he didn't answer his cell when Carson called him. He couldn't get all crazy every time Edwin didn't call him. They were just seeing each other. Casually.

Even the logic of that failed to keep Carson's disappointment at bay. Especially since as soon as he left the restaurant, he would be going to his second job to cook for two hundred and fifty people. From there, he would have no choice but to go home. He couldn't go to Edwin's again. Not with...

“It was just a dream,” Carson muttered.

“What was just a dream?” Cathy asked, pulling up the chair next to him and plopping down.

“Nothing.”

“Whose sandwich is this?”

Carson shook his head. "Nobody's."

"You regularly sit around with an extra sandwich?"

"No." Carson pushed his own food away. He couldn't trick himself into having an appetite, and Cathy probably would have so many questions that he wouldn't have a chance to eat. "I made it for Edwin."

She perked up at the mention of her neighbor. "Is he going to meet you here?"

"He was."

Cathy blinked. "He stood you up?"

"He's probably just busy at work."

"He didn't even call you to let you know what was going on?" She shook her head. "That doesn't sound like Edwin."

"Well, he hasn't called. I'm trying not to think too much about it."

"You're brooding."

Carson pushed her away lightly. "I'm not brooding. I just... I'm really surprised that he stood me up. I mean, we had breakfast today and he seemed really excited about lunch. Or maybe that was just my imagination. I don't know anymore."

"Edwin has been a little...strange the past week. Since he got the car."

"It sounds like he's had a bit of an abnormal week."

"Yeah." Cathy shrugged. "I guess so. Still, it's pretty rude to just not show up. We should drive over to the pharmacy right now and demand to know what the hell is going on."

"No no no. I'm not going to be that guy. We've barely been on two dates. We've only really spent one night together. I don't have the right to march down to his place of business and demand what's going on. Besides"—Carson checked his watch—"my lunch ends in ten minutes."

"So, I can eat this?"

“Go for it.”

“I love your sandwiches. It's not right that you can make such delicious sandwiches. I think this is why we're such good friends.”

“Because I give you food?” Carson asked, smiling in spite of himself.

“The best food I've ever eaten.” She took a big bite and smiled broadly. “This is also why I haven't quit working here.”

“You don't have to work here to get my food,” Carson pointed out. “I can come over and cook for you.”

“You'd still come over to my house?”

“Why would I stop?”

“The risk of running into Edwin, for one.”

“It's not like that. We're going to see each other again. I think. I don't know.” Carson dropped his head to the table. “I don't know what to think.”

“Wow, you really like him, don't you?”

Carson nodded, feeling more than a little miserable.

“Look, when I first started seeing Blake, he stood me up once. I felt horrible. I mean, what was wrong with me? Was I too fat? Was I too skinny? Did he hate my hair? Did he hate me? Did he think I was boring? How could I stand to show my face around him again?” She gently hit Carson's arm. “You know what it was? His car broke down, and he spent the whole afternoon at the garage.”

“Thanks for the pep talk. It's crazy, you know. How much I like him. And now I'm starting to wonder if maybe he's actually *making* me crazy.”

“Why do you say that? It's not so crazy to be disappointed over a missed date.”

“No, it's not that.” Carson took a deep breath, but he didn't lift his head. It was easier to talk about this if he couldn't see her. If she couldn't see his face. He knew what he was about to say was totally insane. He wouldn't have mentioned to anybody else, but he and Cathy had been friends for a long time.

She had a good heart, and she wouldn't dismiss him completely. Even if he did sound a little nutty.

“What is it?”

“Do you believe in...ghosts? Or demons?”

“What?”

Carson turned to face her, resting his cheek on the cool table. “Do you believe in ghosts or demons or anything like that?”

“Well...they don't seem very likely, do they?”

“No. Not very likely at all.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

Carson had been asking himself the same question for the past twelve hours. He hadn't slept at all after his strange encounter with...whatever the fuck that thing was. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the horrible shape, heard the horrible voice. He had considered telling Edwin about it, but they were both rushed that morning, and what could he possibly say anyway? He had a bad dream that scared him? Edwin wasn't his mommy.

But that hadn't been a dream.

“Something...I saw something last night. At Edwin's.”

Carson waited for Cathy to laugh at him, but she leaned forward with a worried frown between her eyes. “What?”

“You gotta promise not to laugh at me.”

“I'm not going to laugh.”

“And don't tell me it was just a bad dream. Please. Especially since I haven't slept in like forty-eight hours.”

“I won't tell you it's a dream,” Cathy promised.

Carson briefly described the vision he had the night before. He left out the mind-numbing fear—he thought that was probably implied in the story—and he left out the part where the thing claimed some sort of dominance over

Edwin. He watched Cathy carefully, waiting for her look of disgust, or her uneasy laughter, or any other sign that might mean she thought he was a nutter.

“I think... I think I saw something too,” Cathy said softly.

“What?”

“Right after Edwin got his new car, he had it out in his driveway. I can see his driveway from the kitchen window, you know? Well, I wasn't really paying attention to the car, but I thought I something move. When I looked up...I really...I know how this sounds...but I really thought I saw a young man standing in the car.”

Carson straightened and shook his head. “I don't know what you mean. In the car?”

“He was standing. His feet were on the driveway. His head was above the roof. It was like... I thought it was just some sort of optical illusion. I looked away. When I looked back, he was still standing right there.”

“How do you know...? I mean, how do you know you really saw him?”

“A few hours later, Blake went outside.”

“Blake saw him?”

“Blake had a conversation with him. He said his name was Cooper.”

“Did you tell Blake what you saw?”

Cathy shook her head. “Are you kidding? He already thinks I'm crazy. I don't need to give him more reason. But...I *saw* it, Carson. As clear as I'm seeing you now.”

“Do you think...? This is nuts. If we told anybody about this, they'd think we're whackadoos.”

“But we're not whackadoos.”

“Ghosts don't exist.”

Cathy licked her lips. "I'm off at three today. I could start doing some investigating."

"Like we're the fucking Scooby gang? Are you going to be Daphne or Velma?"

"I'll be Daphne. You be Velma."

Carson snorted. "Okay, that sounds fair enough. So, Daphne, where are you going to start investigating?"

"The car, I think. Since that's when I first saw him. And that's when Edwin started acting all weird. I'll see what he told Blake and then go from there."

"What are you going to investigate? You're going to try to prove there's a ghost haunting the car?"

"Do you have any better idea?" Cathy asked.

Carson didn't, despite mulling the problem all fucking day long. At least Cathy was trying to be proactive, instead of sulking over a half-eaten sandwich.

"I might even go have a little talk with Mr. Edwin Masters," Cathy announced.

"You're not going to yell at him about this, are you?"

"No, no yelling. I'm just going to ask him a few questions about his car. He loves to talk about his car. Maybe he can tell us more about this Cooper...thing. Whatever he is."

Cathy's casual words almost made him wince. He didn't want to live in a world where ghosts haunted his lovers. Or his lovers' cars. He had never thought about the possibility of ghosts, and the possibility unsettled him. It made him question everything. How did ghosts fit into the standard conception of heaven and hell? Did God let these spirits roam the earth? Or were they Satan's work? Or did it have nothing to do with God and the devil, and Carson had to accept that ghosts just *were*. Did everybody linger on Earth after they died? Was he going to be a ghost one day?

And what did the ghost want with Edwin? Why claim him? Did Edwin know that the ghost was there? That this Cooper—if it was Cooper—was hovering around his bed, waiting for him, reaching for him? If Edwin did know, or suspect, Carson didn't blame him for never mentioning it. If Carson thought some ghost was stalking him, he probably wouldn't drop it in a casual conversation with some guy he had just started dating. Not unless he wanted to send said guy running in the opposite direction.

“What if we're both crazy?” Carson asked.

“Some sort of shared insanity?”

“Right.”

Cathy tilted her head thoughtfully. “I think that's possible. Maybe there's something in the air or the water to give us both delusions. But...why would we both have delusions focused on Edwin? That's kind of a big coincidence.”

“We both know Edwin, though. Maybe your delusion was focused on his car because it was something new. And mine was...a nightmare because I'm anxious about this new relationship. Maybe I'm nervous about the fact that it *feels* like an actual relationship.”

“Sure. That's possible. But I'm still going to do some research. Might as well eliminate it as impossible.”

“You know you owe me, right?”

“For what?”

“Getting me pulled into this. I was quite happy before I met Edwin and got caught up in this drama.”

“But you'd be happier *with* Edwin. Don't tell me I'm wrong. The second I met him, I knew he was the one for you.”

“Ghosts and all?”

“Everybody brings a bit of baggage to a relationship,” Cathy pointed out.

“Hey!” Johnny shouted, catching their attention. “Lunch is over, you two.”

Cathy grimaced. "Promise me that when you get your restaurant opened, you'll have a place for me."

"You're my hostess."

"I can't wait."

"Yeah." Carson gathered up the plates and cast one last look out to the street. No matter how much he wished otherwise, Edwin wasn't there. Nobody on the sidewalk even looked like Edwin. Carson sighed and turned away. He had too much on his mind to worry about his absent date.

Except Carson didn't think about anything else for the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter Thirteen

Carson checked his messages as soon as he clocked out at the restaurant, but there were no missed calls from Edwin. No voice mails. No text messages. No e-mails either. He didn't expect Edwin to completely prostrate himself in apology, but he did at least deserve a courtesy call. Something—perhaps what remained of his pride—told him to put the phone away and go to work. He needed to be at the kitchen no later than six to help complete the meals. But something else—perhaps his stupid heart—told him to at least make contact with Edwin. Leave a casual voice mail. Another casual voice mail, since he'd already left one at lunch. Of course, his cell phone could be dead, and he didn't close the pharmacy until six, so wouldn't it be reasonable just to check in?

The decision would make him at least a half hour late, if not more, due to the Los Angeles traffic. But Carson didn't want to wait until that night to find out what had happened to Edwin. Or worse, wait until days later because neither of them could quite catch the other. And what if something serious had happened? What if there was an emergency and Edwin needed him? As far as Carson knew, Edwin didn't really have any family in the area, and Blake and Cathy were his closest friends. If something did happen to him, he might be all alone. That thought was enough to spur Carson to turn his car in the direction of the pharmacy.

He managed to find a spot right outside the building. The meter still had time on it, but that's where his good luck ended. Even from outside, he could tell that the small pharmacy was packed, full of people stopping to pick up their medications on their way home from work. He didn't want to disturb Edwin while he was busy, but how much of a disturbance could he cause if he

just poked his head in the door to make sure that Edwin was there and in one piece? He wouldn't even approach the counter to talk. This would be a simple recon mission.

Pleased with his plan, Carson pulled open the door and stopped in his tracks. The line of people stretched literally from one side of the store to the other. He had seen shorter lines at the DMV. Behind the counter, a single girl scurried back and forth, her face creased in a heavy frown as she fumbled to help the customers. Most of them were older, and Carson could tell that they were getting tired from the long wait.

Carson fought his way up to the counter, amid shouted protests that there were no cuts. The woman behind the counter barely paid him a second glance as she explained the guidelines for the medication she was passing over. The man she was talking to looked bored, like he had heard it all a thousand times before and nothing ever changed. Carson wondered if he went through life with that expression, or if he just saved it for the nice, pretty pharmacist trying to help him.

The bored man paid and turned from the counter. Carson caught the young woman's eye then and smiled. "Is Edwin here?" he asked, before she could turn away.

Her frown deepened. "Do you think it would be such a madhouse if he were?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He left at lunch. I haven't heard anything since."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No. He didn't look well, though. He might have gone home."

"Without telling you?"

She shrugged. "I told him he needed some rest. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Carson asked.

"Do you have a degree in pharmacy?"

“No, but I know how to work a cash register. I can speed up the process a little bit.”

She studied him with a careful eye. “How do you know Edwin?”

“I’m...a good friend of his.”

“Good enough for me.” She flipped the counter open and swept her arm, inviting him to the other side. “My name is Claire. If we can get these guys out of here by six, that’d be great.”

“And if we can’t?”

“If we can’t, I’ll be working a twelve- or thirteen-hour shift.”

If they didn’t, then Carson would be even later and probably lose his job completely. He couldn’t afford that. Not if he ever wanted to afford the various licenses and fees he needed to pay to open up the restaurant in his lifetime. But Claire was already looking at him with such grateful eyes that he knew he couldn’t walk away from her. Even to save his own skin.

Between the two of them, they worked out an effective system. Carson took the scripts and the money and kept the line moving. He offered to pass out the fulfilled prescriptions, but Claire declined, reminding him that he would still have to give all the pertinent information and warnings. Since he didn’t know any of those, they both agreed it would be best for him to stay on the till. Every time the bell above the door chimed, they both looked up expectantly, hoping for Edwin’s familiar form.

“Did you call him at home?” Carson asked, once the line finally began to thin.

“Yes. A few times this afternoon.”

“And nothing?”

“Nope. This isn’t like him, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I keep trying to tell myself that he was probably sick and he just needed to go home and sleep but...”

“But he's not sick.”

Claire narrowed her eyes. “How do you know that?”

“We had breakfast this morning. He was fine.”

“He fell asleep in his office today. I couldn't get him to wake up for anything. It seemed like he would have slept through a fire alarm.”

Carson frowned. “He fell asleep in his office?”

“Yeah. He came in early to do some paperwork. He was going to work the ten-to-six shift, but he got here before I opened the place up. And then he fell asleep. But it was like”—she looked up from the pills she had been counting—“it was more like he was in a coma, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“You saw him like that before?”

“Yes. Last night. He told me I could come by, and when I got to his house, he was already asleep. But nothing I did would wake him up. No matter how hard I tried.”

“That's so weird.” Claire slid the pills into the waiting bottle. “I wonder what's wrong with him. He just went to the doctor and walked away with a clean bill of health. At least, that's what he told me. I suppose he could have been lying about it. Could you drive by his house and see if he's okay?”

“I don't have time, but I can call his neighbor. Wait a second.”

Cathy picked up on the second ring and agreed without question to walk across the yard to Edwin's front door. Carson waited, listening as she rang the bell, then knocked, then rang the bell again. He heard rustling and imagined Cathy circling the house, peeking through windows to catch a glimpse of the man in question. Within five minutes of calling her, Cathy assured him that Edwin was not home.

“Now what are we going to do?” Claire asked, her voice tinged with worry. “What if he fell asleep behind the wheel of that car of his? Or he was in an accident? Or got mugged?”

Carson held up his hand. "I think it's too early to start worrying."

"I don't. Edwin has never, ever disappeared like this. This place is his baby. He loves it. Even if he were the sort of guy to screw his coworkers over, he's not the sort to leave the pharmacy in a lurch."

Carson checked his watch. He had ten minutes to travel eight miles across the city. "What do you think we should do?"

"Is it too soon to call the police?"

"Probably. But not the hospitals."

"There are a lot in the area. We can split up the numbers."

Carson agreed, digging the phone book out from under the counter while Claire locked the front door and turned off the neon OPEN sign. They decided to call hospitals within a ten-mile radius, Carson starting from the top of the list, and Claire going from the bottom. Not a single hospital had any record of an Edwin Masters being brought in. By the time Carson hung up the phone, he had a lump in his throat. When Claire looked up, he saw his own fear mirrored in her eyes.

"Now what?" Claire asked.

"He's an adult..." Carson tried, but he didn't want to finish the sentence. Yes, Edwin was an adult. Yes, adults had the right to disappear on occasion. But Edwin also had responsibilities, and adults didn't have the right to abandon their responsibilities without a single word. "I guess now we go looking for him."

"Looking for him? He could be anywhere."

"I don't know what else to do. I could just try to go to work and hope that he shows up tonight, but—"

"That doesn't seem like the right thing to do," Claire finished.

"Right. We could start around the area. I'll call Cathy and make sure she keeps an eye out for him at home."

“Maybe I should stay here, in case he comes back. I'll call you if he shows.”

Carson checked his watch. “Are you sure? I know it's getting late and...”

“If you're going to hunt under every rock in Los Angeles, then I guess I can handle staying here for a few more hours.”

“You know, it's probably nothing. He could have just decided to spend the afternoon at the beach. He'll be back in an hour, full of apologies.”

“Yeah, I want to believe that too. Do you want to add my number to your phone?”

They exchanged numbers, and Carson took the time to call Cathy again. He stood at the window, watching the block, wondering where he should start and hoping Edwin would arrive to make the whole question a moot one. If Edwin rounded the corner in that moment, Carson would forgive everything. He wouldn't even question Edwin. He'd never bring up the lost afternoon again. If he had to choose between being curious and this sick rock of dread in his stomach, he'd choose curiosity every time.

“What's your plan?” Claire asked.

“I don't know.” He pushed the door open and waved with his phone. “I'll be in touch.”

As soon as he stepped into the fading sunshine, despair washed over him. What was he going to do? Wander around for a few miles, shouting Edwin's name? Should he knock on every door on the block and ask if a man matching Edwin's description had shown up that day? Should he flag down a cop and describe Edwin's Alfa Romeo? Or should he just give up because he had his own problems? Edwin wasn't even his boyfriend. He didn't need to put his job at risk to wander around Los Angeles all night.

But what if he's hurt? What if he's hurt and I can't find him?

“Come on, Edwin,” Carson muttered. “Give me a clue. Something. Anything. I'm not picky.”

A woman passing by looked at him oddly, but he ignored her. He had the feeling that he was going to elicit more than one strange look before the end of the night. But that seemed like a minor price to pay. It would be much worse to do nothing out of fear of looking like a fool—or losing his job.

He hesitated for a moment longer, unsure if he should go right or left, if he should walk or take his car. He ultimately went left, deciding to stop in each place of business on the block to ask if anybody had seen Edwin. Nobody had. At least, nobody who would agree to speak to him. Once he circled the block, he crossed the street and knocked on every door.

What are you going to do? Knock on every door in Los Angeles?

He supposed he would try, if that's what he had to do. As the minutes ticked by and the disappointments mounted, he began to suspect that knocking on random doors was not the best way to find what he was looking for. Nobody had seen a man matching Edwin's descriptions. Nobody had seen the car. Carson couldn't even be surprised. It was natural to ignore everything except what you absolutely had to see, especially in Los Angeles. Or maybe it was only natural to do that in Los Angeles.

Carson circled back to his car. The meter had expired, but by some stroke of luck, there was not a ticket waving at him from his windshield. Carson suspected that would be his only stroke of luck for the evening. The sun was low behind the buildings, and an unseasonable breeze swept down the streets, raising the hair on the back of his arms and neck. His phone began to ring, but it wasn't Claire's number, Cathy's number, or Edwin's number, so he ignored it. What could he tell his boss anyway? That he was searching for a man who may not want to be found? A man he had only known for a week?

He was tempted to call Cathy or Claire for any news, but that would just be courting disappointment. If Edwin showed up, they would call him.

Carson climbed into his car and started the engine, resolving to troll the parking lots. Every second, he felt Edwin slipping further away. The weight of his own hopelessness began to drag him down. Finding Edwin in a parking lot

wasn't just far-fetched. It was a fool's errand. But he still rolled through every lot he came across, moving up and down the blocks, searching for that Alfa Romeo Spider, glinting in the low summer sunshine.

He didn't bypass the parking garages either. If there was an attendant stationed at the entry or the exit, he paused to speak to them, providing Edwin's description, and wishing he had a photograph. Between conversations, while he was driving, he held the phone in his hand, his eyes darting to the display again and again. He didn't want to risk missing a call, even though the volume was turned up all the way, and the vibration function was on.

Finally, Carson heard the magic words he had been hoping for. Four simple, wonderful words creating a single, magical phrase. "Yeah, I saw him."

Carson's heart leaped to his throat. "When?"

"I just got on my shift, so a bit after one."

"Have you seen him leave the garage?"

"Nope. But most of the people who park here stay for a few hours. They've got business in the next building over."

Carson smiled. "Thanks. Thank you. I appreciate it."

"No problem."

"I'm just going to drive through and see if his car is still here."

"Be back in twenty minutes, and I won't charge you."

"That's very kind of you."

The attendant leaned out his window and tapped the sign. "Nah, it's just policy."

"Well, thanks anyway." Carson eased off the brake and rolled into the dark garage. Most of it had already emptied out, but it would probably be full again within the hour as people ventured out to run their errands and eat their dinners. He checked his phone and found the signal was nonexistent. The lights were dim, making it difficult to pick out the various colors, but that was fine. Carson already had the shape of the Spider imprinted in his memory.

He crawled through the top level and then down to the second level. No car even remotely resembled the one he was searching for. The digital clock on his dashboard turned over to seven o'clock. He was officially an hour late to work, and ninety minutes into his search. If he didn't find Edwin here, should he just give up?

He circled the third level. The cars and trucks thinned out, several spaces between each one. His heart was still lodged in his throat, his pulse pounding in his ears, and his hands were slick on the steering wheel. He rolled down his window, but the temperature in the garage was several degrees higher than outside, and the air was thick with the heavy smell of exhaust and oil. The garage was also silent, except for the sound of his own engine and the occasional echo of a slamming door somewhere above or below him.

By the time he reached the fourth level, his heart had sunk from his throat. It felt like it might sink all the way to the bottom of his feet, weighted by stones of frustration. The fifth floor looked like it would be similarly disappointed, but there was a shadow at the end far wall. A shadow that could only be a car.

"Please, please, please," Carson whispered, inching closer. "Oh God."

He parked beside the silver Spider, straining in the dim light to see any hint of Edwin. He scrambled with his seat belt and then his door, annoyed by the way they blocked him from his escape. As soon as he reached the Spider, he reached for the handle, but the door was locked. He pressed his face to the window, cupping his eyes to block the light.

Edwin was sprawled across the front seat, his mouth hanging open, his skin a sickly white. Carson pounded on the window and shouted his name, but Edwin didn't stir. Carson pounded harder, until his fist began to ache and the pain traveled up his arm, but he might as well have been shouting at a stone. With a growl of frustration, he ran over to the driver's side and tried again. The door was locked there too, and the window just as impenetrable.

"Edwin! Wake up! Please, wake up! Please..." *Don't be dead.*

He looked around for something, anything, heavy enough to break the window, but there was nothing. Did he have something in his trunk? The tire iron might do. It briefly occurred to him that Edwin would be furious if Carson shattered a window, but he didn't see what choice he had. He couldn't just leave Edwin in the hot car. If he wasn't already ill from heat stroke or dehydration, he would be soon. Or worse.

God, it could very well be *worse* now.

He shuffled through his trunk, rifling past all the boxes of kitchen equipment to find the tire iron. It felt hot in his hands, burning his palm, but he didn't drop it. He barely noticed it. He rushed back to the driver's side and shouted for Edwin's attention again. At that point, he noticed that Edwin's pants were unzipped, his limp cock resting against his thigh.

“Edwin!”

Carson slammed the tire iron through the window. At first, it didn't even crack. He kept hitting and hitting until his arms were sore and his shoulders screamed in protest. Even that didn't stop him. He wasn't going to stop unless his arms fell off, and even then, he would just try to use his feet, or even his head. Finally, without warning, the glass exploded, shattering outward. Carson ducked, shutting his eyes, but he wasn't fast enough to miss the flying shards. They sliced into his face, and then the arm he put up to defend himself. A cut above his eye began to gush blood, turning the world red. More glass crunched beneath his feet, embedding itself in the thick soles of his shoes.

Edwin didn't even flinch.

Carson ignored the blood flowing down his face and arm. He unlocked the door and yanked it open, relieved to see none of the glass had rained over Edwin's exposed face. He immediately put his fingers to Edwin's throat. He felt a pulse, but it was thready and weak. He ran his hands up and down Edwin's chest, feeling for any injuries, but there was nothing amiss. Nothing except the fact that Edwin was unconscious.

“We got to get you to the hospital, Edwin. Gotta get to a hospital. Come on.”

He hooked his hands under Edwin's arms and pulled him across the seat. His back strained and his tired arms were already beginning to feel like rubber. Drops of blood fell from Carson's body and stained Edwin's skin and clothes. Carson wished he would flinch. He wished Edwin would do anything in response to the blood.

“You're really scaring me here,” Carson muttered, dragging Edwin over to his car. “What are you doing down here? What the hell is going on?”

No answer was forthcoming. Carson opened the back door and managed to get Edwin into the backseat. He slumped over immediately. Carson tucked his cock back into his pants and zipped his pants, then pulled the safety belt across Edwin's chest. “It's going to be okay. It is. We'll get to the hospital and...everything's going to be okay.”

Despite his promise, Carson didn't slide behind the wheel. Not yet. He needed to check Edwin's car first. He snatched the keys from the ignition and then searched the seats, the floors, and the glove box. Even as he felt around for the pill bottle, he couldn't quite admit to himself that he was looking for dope. But the doctors would no doubt want to know if Edwin had ingested anything, and Carson needed to be thorough.

He didn't find a pill bottle. He didn't find anything in the pristine car. He should have only felt relief, but there was a twinge of disappointment. He didn't want Edwin to relapse and overdose on dope, but he wanted—needed—an explanation for this shit. He needed to tell the doctors something. He needed to tell Claire something. None of this made any fucking sense.

“It's going to be okay,” Carson repeated over and over as he started his car. The engine sounded too loud in the garage, and blood still flowed freely down his face. He wiped it away from his eye, but it didn't help. Panic rose in his chest, but he pushed it back down. Head wounds bled a lot. That didn't

mean he was going to die. He might not even need stitches. And Edwin was probably just dehydrated. A night in the hospital, and he'd be as good as new.

Carson glanced in his rearview mirror as he pulled away, catching a glimpse of the Spider. It sat quietly, like an animal resting. There was nothing remarkable about it at all. In the dim light, it looked dull and old. Like something you'd see in somebody's yard, resting on cinder blocks with a broken windshield. Sudden revulsion overtook him. It tasted like bile. It burned the back of his throat. If he never saw that fucking car again, he would be happy. In fact, he hoped the police towed it away and impounded it. He hoped a bunch of punks lifted it and sold it for parts. He hoped that when Edwin woke up, he didn't even ask about the fucking car.

Chapter Fourteen

“Why am I in the hospital?” Edwin muttered, his tongue dry and swollen against his lips.

“You're awake.” Cold fingers curled around his, and he looked down, surprised to see an IV in his hand. “I was scared you weren't going to wake up tonight.”

“You were scared...?” Edwin closed his eyes and opened them again. The IV was still in his hand. “Why? What happened to me? Was I in an accident?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Well, we don't know what happened, exactly.”

“But it wasn't an accident?”

“No. What is the last thing you remember?”

Edwin closed his eyes. “Going to sleep.”

“You mean, going to sleep last night?”

“No. Going to sleep in the car.” The cold fingers touched him again. Edwin looked up, finally meeting Carson's concerned blue eyes. A deep gash above his left eye had been stitched closed, and his arm was wrapped in a bandage. “Were you in an accident?”

“Not really. Why did you go to sleep in the car?”

Because the ghost promised he would wake me up didn't seem like the right response. Edwin didn't want to be transferred to the psych ward. He just wanted to go home, to his own bed, without the IV in his hand. He didn't mind the hospital robe, but they probably wouldn't let him take it home.

“When can I leave?”

“The doctors said you were pretty dehydrated. Also...you were unconscious, even though there didn't seem to be any trauma to the head. They want to keep you overnight, but you can probably leave tomorrow morning.”

Edwin frowned. “I want to leave now.”

“It's probably not safe to leave now.” Carson played with the edge of the bandage on his arm. “I think you should stay for the rest of the night. You were trapped in that car for six hours with temperatures above one hundred degrees. You were really, really lucky that I found you.”

“I didn't realize...heat stroke?”

“Heat exhaustion. A little bit longer and it might have become heat stroke. Edwin...what were you doing down there?”

Edwin looked away. He didn't want to lie to Carson. But he didn't know how he could possibly tell the truth either. He stared at the ceiling, hoping an answer would manifest itself. Something easy and straightforward, yet witty. Maybe something they could laugh about, even as Carson accepted it as perfectly legitimate.

“Were you meeting somebody there?” Carson asked softly.

“No, I—”

“Your pants were undone,” he continued, as though Edwin never interrupted. “And your shirt was stained. Did he slip you something? If you think he did, we should tell your doctor.”

“Carson...I don't know what to tell you.”

“The truth. If you think I'm entitled to it.”

“What happened to your eye?”

Carson touched the cut above his brow. “Glass. The doors were locked, so I had to break a window. It wouldn't even crack, and then it just exploded outward. Like somebody from the inside was knocking it out. I'm lucky all I got was a few cuts.”

Not *somebody* hitting the glass from the inside. Cooper. Cooper had done this, had tried to hurt Carson. Edwin didn't need any other information to know he was right about that. But why would Cooper do something like that? Was he upset because Carson was doing something to hurt the Spider?

That wasn't the question that Edwin needed to be asking, and he knew it. But he wasn't prepared to articulate the real question of the day.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

"Thanks. But I'll feel better if you tell me the truth."

"The truth is...complicated."

Carson leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "I've got time for complicated. I'm not going anywhere tonight."

"Do the doctors want you to stay for observation?"

"No."

"Oh." Edwin took a deep breath. "I don't even know where to start. If I tell you...even if I told you a half-truth, you'd still have good reason to think I'm completely insane."

"You never know unless you try."

"No, I know. This is really crazy. I'm not even sure I believe it..."

"Does it have something to do with Cooper?"

Hearing that name on Carson's lips turned his blood to ice water. Sweat gathered at his temples and the back of his neck. "What do you know about him?"

"I know that he owned the Spider before you did. I know that he died when he was eighteen in a bad car accident."

"How did you find that out?"

"Cathy did. She agreed to research the car a little this afternoon. Because we've both seen him, Edwin. Cathy saw him in the car, and I...I saw him last night. Watching us in bed. It was...horrible."

Edwin took a deep breath. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I don't know. I believe Cathy when she tells me she saw something. And I know I saw something. I don't know if it was a ghost or not, but I do know I saw something."

"I didn't believe in ghosts at first. Even after Cooper started talking to me. I knew it had to be a hallucination. I even went to the doctor to see if there was something wrong with me. He told me it was stress." Edwin closed his eyes and immediately saw Cooper's familiar face. Where was he? Had he stayed with the car? Or was he in the hospital room right at that moment? Hovering over the bed and listening to the entire conversation? Edwin's stomach churned. Of course he was. There was no safe place to explain everything. No way to talk to Carson without also talking to Cooper. "But it wasn't stress. Remember the night we met? How the jukebox kept playing all those oldies? That was Cooper. Trying to get my attention."

"Why did he want your attention?"

"He's lonely. He feels like we have a special connection."

"Do you?"

"I don't know."

"Edwin, I need you to be honest with me."

"I don't know how. How am I supposed to say that I'm involved with a ghost?"

"You're involved with him? What does that even mean?"

"It means that when we're together..."

"Together? How can you be *together* when one of you is a ghost?" Carson demanded.

"In the car. We can be together in the car. And in my dreams."

"That's why you blew me off today? Why you blew off Claire? Were you dreaming of him this afternoon too?"

"Yes," Edwin said softly. "To all of it."

"I see."

"Please don't be mad, Carson. I didn't plan for this. I didn't mean for any of it to happen. It just... He always made me feel so good. Like nothing else matters except the two of us. Even when I'm awake, I can't stop thinking about him."

"That's not healthy."

"I didn't ask for your opinion on it."

"Well, you're going to get it anyway. You disappeared for half of a day. You nearly died. When you sleep, it's like somebody bashed you over the head. I wondered if you were sick, but now I see you just don't *want* to wake up."

Edwin shifted uncomfortably. "But I didn't die. And I'm not hurting anybody..."

"You're shutting yourself off from the rest of the world. That hurts plenty of people. We were really worried about you today, Edwin. And if I tell Claire and Cathy that you're spending more and more time in a fantasy world..."

Edwin sighed. "I don't know how to stop him."

"You can start by not going back to the car."

"Where is it now?"

"Cathy drove it home. I mean, I think you should get rid of the car. Dump it in the ocean if you have to."

"I can't do that."

"Then just avoid it. Drive your other car. Please, Edwin. I can't...I can't go through another afternoon like this one."

"Carson..."

"I'm already falling for you, Edwin. I know we just met. I know we haven't spent a huge amount of time together. But I keep feeling like you are somebody special. Like we have a real shot together." Carson stood and rubbed the front of his thighs. "If something doesn't happen to you."

“Where are you going?”

“I have to call my boss. Let him know where I've been all night.” He touched the wound above his eye. “I guess this was a blessing in disguise. I can tell him I was in an accident. Maybe he won't fire me.”

“Carson, I really am sorry.”

“I am too.” Carson flashed a sad, regretful smile and crossed the room. If Carson hadn't searched for him, would he be dead right now? Or would he slip away later? Maybe the next day, or the day after that. Either way, Edwin had made it a point to hide himself from the world, to descend into darkness so nobody could see, and it would be too easy to do it again.

“Thank you.”

Carson paused, his hand on the door. “You know what the crazy thing is?”

“What?”

“I'd do it again. Even knowing what I do, I would go out and find you again.”

“I guess that means I'm pretty lucky.”

“I'll be back in a bit. Do you want me to pick you up anything to eat?”

“You don't have—”

Carson held up his hand. “You slept through dinner. You're probably starving. What do you want to eat?”

“A cheeseburger and onion rings.”

“I'll be back shortly.”

“Thank you,” Edwin said, feeling more than a little regret as Carson slipped out the door. He had hurt him. And for what? Fucking Cooper? At that moment, he couldn't even remember what it had been like. He couldn't remember his dreams either. How had Cooper seduced him into staying asleep? What had he promised? What wonders did he show him? Edwin wasn't sure, but even without the details, he felt warm and secure.

He needed to resist Cooper. But how could he resist somebody who knew his thoughts, who understood him inside and out? Who needed him? How many times had Cooper told him that? His life had been snatched away from him, prematurely cut short by a stupid mistake. The sort of mistake that everybody was guilty of every once in a while, especially when they were kids, but not that everybody had to pay for. Cooper paid. And he had continued to pay for the next forty-seven years. Didn't that deserve some sort of consideration?

You were lucky...

Six hours in triple-digit temperatures. Anybody in Southern California would tell you not to mess with the heat. Every year, children, pets, and senior citizens died from heat stroke and dehydration. And that was just the cases that made the news. How many other people quietly expired in their homes without air-conditioning? How many other people became sick and passed out just because they didn't replenish their fluids? Edwin wasn't an MD, but he understood how dangerous that was. How stupid he had been. How foolish it had been to trust a dead man.

"How are you feeling?"

Cooper's voice from above him. Edwin looked up automatically, but he didn't see anything. "Fine."

"You're mad at me."

"Starting now, I'm not speaking to you."

"Edwin, please...I didn't mean anything by it. But we were having a good time. Don't you remember how much fun we were having?"

Edwin turned his head to stare out the small window. From his position, he could only see lights. Endless lights. The night sky bleeding into the horizon, stealing each speck of light until they all looked like stars. Behind each light would be a life. Somebody living, somebody dying. Each life unique, unknown. And none of them would know that a man lay in a hospital bed,

alone except for a specter, a phantom who seemed more real than most living people.

“Edwin, I didn't mean to hurt you. You must know that. I would never, ever want to hurt you. How could I? You've practically given me life again.”

“Don't say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you're dead. I can't give you life. I can't be involved with you. I can't... You're dead.”

“We can still be together. I think we proved that today.”

“In the car? That's not being together. Besides...I could have been seriously hurt.”

“I know. And I'm sorry.”

Cooper did sound appropriately repentant. The tone of his voice pushed Edwin away from his anger, but he resisted. He wanted to hold on to that anger. He wanted to be so enraged that he would never be vulnerable to Cooper's manipulation again.

“It's just that I didn't want it to end,” Cooper continued. “We were having a great time. We always have a great time when we're together.”

“I don't remember.”

“I can remind you.” Cooper's voice was closer now. “If you close your eyes, I can remind you. How good it felt to be together. How good it feels when we touch. How happy we are together.”

“I don't want to. I don't want... I just want to sleep normally. I just want to spend some time with Carson. Can't you just give me one night?”

Cooper's face wavered into view for a moment. His eyes were sad, his mouth pulled into a hurt frown. “You want me to leave you alone? I thought we were... I thought we were going to be together now.”

“No.”

“Then what was this afternoon about? You think I ever let anybody else do that to me before? No. I did it because I wanted to be with *you*, Edwin. I did it because I need *you*.”

“I have a headache,” Edwin said softly.

Cooper's face suddenly disappeared. “I'm sorry.”

“Did you cut Carson's face?”

“I didn't mean to. He was trying to break into the car, and...it hurt me. Whenever somebody touches the car, I can feel it. That's how I felt you, Edwin. The first time you ran your fingers over the steering wheel, and you sighed with pleasure. You felt so good. That's how I knew I needed you. But when Carson started hitting the window, I guess I just...overreacted.”

“He was just trying to help,” Edwin pointed out.

“I know. And I really didn't mean to hurt him. You've got to believe me, Edwin.”

Edwin sighed. “I do. But I still want to be alone tonight. You're getting to be too much, Cooper. I'm a mere mortal. I need a break.”

Several moments of silence passed. Edwin almost began to hope that Cooper had taken heed of his words and left. But another part of Edwin knew Cooper was never very far away. Then there was a whisper of wind against his ear. A slight hint that Cooper had settled down beside him. “You could be more than that.”

“Don't...”

“Shh. Just listen to me. Let me tell you...you could be more than a mere mortal. And nothing could come between us. Not your job. Not Carson. Nothing.”

“You want me to die,” Edwin said flatly.

“I want the two of us to be together.” Edwin didn't quite hear the words. In fact, he wasn't sure if Cooper was still whispering in his ear or if he was

already dreaming. Maybe Cooper had found a way to infiltrate his mind, even when he was fully awake. "Don't you know by now how much I love you?"

"You *don't* love me," Edwin immediately protested. "You can't... You don't even know me."

"I know enough about you. You know when you're in love, Edwin. Something just tells you, and the first moment I saw you in the car, I knew."

"What if I'm not in love with you?"

"Then why do you spend so much time with me? Why do you let me visit you in your dreams? Why did you meet me in the car?"

"Curiosity. That's all. Can't you just leave me alone for one night, please? I need a break. If you loved me, you would give me my privacy."

"Fine."

Edwin shivered. Cooper's voice was always rich and solid. Like the rumbling of the Spider's engine. But now it sounded different. Distant. Like metal scraping across metal. It set Edwin's teeth on edge.

"Cooper?"

No response. No indication of his presence. When he closed his eyes, he didn't see Cooper's face. He hoped when he opened them again, he would see Carson's.

* * * * *

Edwin did, but it was hours later. He woke up with a start, sitting straight up and reaching in the darkness for something warm, something solid. Something alive. He hadn't dreamed of Cooper, but his dreams were still horrifyingly vivid. Dark shapes that Edwin couldn't recognize. Faces he couldn't name. Signs racing past him as though he were in an out-of-control car, even when he thought he was standing still. Headlights looming. Brakes screaming. Mirthless laughter following him into a void.

"Carson? God, Carson? Are you here?"

"I'm here. I'm here." Hot fingers curled around his hand.

"I was dreaming..."

"I know."

"Was I asleep? Or was it...?"

"It was just regular sleep," Carson assured him quickly. "Can you tell me what you were dreaming about?"

"I don't... I don't know..."

Carson put his hand over Edwin's chest, directly above his heart. "You're still scared. Don't be. I'm here. And we're safe. The nurse on duty wouldn't allow God himself to disturb us."

"I think I dreamed about death."

"You died?"

"No. No." Edwin gasped for breath. Why were his lungs still burning? Why did his pulse still hammer in his throat? He was awake, and he was safe, and he was healthy. "Nobody died. I just dreamed about death. I saw it. I saw what it would be like to die."

"Don't talk like that," Carson whispered. "It was just a bad dream. Nothing more than that."

"You're not going to leave me tonight, are you?"

"No. The nurses said I could stay all night, since you're not sharing a room with anybody."

"Have you slept at all?"

"No, I've just been watching you."

Edwin felt the corner of his mouth lift. "It's too dark in here for that."

"Well, I've just been listening to you."

"Climb into bed with me. There's room enough."

"Scoot over."

It wasn't easy, but Carson managed to wedge himself onto the narrow hospital bed, his leg draped over Edwin's, his arm on Edwin's chest. Edwin immediately wrapped his arms around Carson's thin body and sighed with contentment. That was it. That was all he needed.

"I'm really sorry," Edwin murmured. "I didn't mean to worry you. I didn't mean to blow you off. I'm sorry I was such an asshole today."

"I would have appreciated a phone call, but...I don't think you're an asshole."

"Can I have a chance to make all of this up to you?" Edwin asked.

"We don't need to talk about this right now."

"I want to."

Carson shifted, settling his head on Edwin's shoulder. "Why?"

"Because it's more pleasant than talking about my dream." Or about that afternoon. Or about Cooper. The more time he spent thinking about Carson, the less energy and attention he had for Cooper. Especially since it seemed like Cooper was gone for the night.

"Okay. How would you like to make it up to me?"

"I want to take you out to dinner..."

"I could make you dinner."

"Shh. I want to take you out to dinner, okay?"

"Okay."

"I want to take you somewhere nice. Like Dal Rae. Someplace with great food and a real sense of history."

Carson chuckled. "Do we need a place with a real sense of history? I kind of want a place with no history. Something completely new."

Edwin considered that for a moment before nodding. "Yes, I think something completely new would be a good idea. Then I'd rent a convertible."

Carson trailed his fingers up and down Edwin's chest. "You'd rent a car for me?"

"Yeah. I'd want to take you up into the mountains."

"Won't that be cold?"

"Maybe. But that just means we'd have to sit close like this to keep warm. But once we got up in the mountains, we'd be able to see all the stars. And we could share a bottle of wine."

"That does sound nice. I also like the theater."

Edwin smiled. "Then we'll go eat dinner at a brand-new restaurant, go to the theater... Do you like dancing?"

"I love dancing."

"We'll go eat dinner at a brand-new restaurant, catch the newest play, and then find a club and dance until they kick us out. After that, we'll drive up into the mountains to count the morning stars and watch the sunrise."

Carson turned and kissed Edwin's chest through his shirt. "You're such a romantic. I didn't suspect that."

"I'm usually not. Unless I'm inspired."

"You're feeling inspired?"

"I'm feeling like I don't want to let you go anytime soon. I guess I'm getting used to falling asleep with you wrapped around me."

Carson sighed. "I'm getting used to it too. Which is pretty bad, because I'm pretty sure I won't be able to sleep with you tomorrow night."

"Why not?"

"I... Maybe you should come by my place tomorrow. It's not as nice as your house, but I have a huge tub and an even-bigger bed. Plus, I'll come home with a bunch of food left over from the party. I know that doesn't sound very exciting, but I always steal the sheet cake and run."

Edwin didn't have to ask why Carson wanted to spend the night at his own house. If he had seen Cooper once, he probably wasn't eager to see him again. And Edwin didn't want to subject him to that.

"It just so happens that stolen sheet cake is my favorite."

"Then you're definitely in luck. In fact, I think I might have some stolen sheet cake in my house right now."

"Any chance you could sneak me out of here?"

"No, I think the nurse on the night shift might notice. She's got an eye like a hawk."

"Damn. I really am feeling much better."

"It's because you're not dehydrated anymore. I guess the doctors around here know what they're doing."

Edwin tightened his hold on Carson. "I think it might have more to do with you. You're really good at..."

"What?"

Edwin stopped, unsure of how he wanted to frame his thoughts. Or if he even wanted to try. How could he even try to explain that being with Carson was a little bit like returning home after a long journey? It seemed like too much after just a few short days. Worse than that, Edwin knew his mental health was in doubt at the moment. As good as Carson made him feel, Cooper made him feel better. But in a different way. Like he was two different people, and Cooper knew how to reach inside of him and find the other part of him. But Carson...he knew how to put the parts together. Somehow.

"Reminding me of who I want to be."

"I think you're already pretty great," Carson murmured, his words slurring slightly.

"Are you falling asleep?"

"No. I've just had...a long day."

"You can fall asleep. It's okay."

“But we were talking.”

Edwin ran his fingers through Carson's hair. It was just a little too long. The edges were as soft as he remembered. “That's okay. I don't mind listening to you breathe.”

“You should sleep too, you know.”

“I'm not really feeling tired right now. I think I slept too much today.”

“You comfortable?” Carson mumbled.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Edwin kissed the top of his head and sighed. If he had met Carson at any other time in his life, he would have been thanking his lucky stars. He would have done everything in his power to keep Carson at his side, to prove himself worthy of such a handsome, funny, talented, caring guy. And now what was he doing? Sabotaging himself. “Pleasant dreams.”

Carson yawned widely, then settled down again. “They will be. I'll be dreaming of you.”

“You're sweet.”

“I've been dreaming of you all week. Good night.”

Edwin wished he could return the sentiment. He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't spend his days torn between the living and the dead, and his nights in a fantasyland not entirely of his own creation. He needed to get away from Cooper once and for all. Not that he had any idea how to do that. Cooper's need, his lust, his desire, was palpable. And completely overwhelming. What could he ever say that would make Cooper understand that he didn't belong in Edwin's world? Especially now that Cooper had touched that world?

Nobody wanted to be dead. Cooper was straining toward life. How could Edwin ever hope to stop him?

Chapter Fifteen

How did one have a heart-to-heart talk with a ghost? How did one break up with a ghost? Edwin would have taken the coward's way out and left a message on Cooper's voice mail, if he had a voice mail. He had actually taken that route before, and it had been surprisingly effective—in fact, it had been the easiest dissolution of a relationship that Edwin had ever experienced. He expected that had something to do with the fact that even Tom had had too much self-respect to chase a coward like Edwin. But to Edwin's knowledge, ghosts did not have phones.

Should he be proactive? Ask Cooper to materialize? Try to reach for him in his dreams? Go have a long it's-not-you-it's-me discussion with the Alfa Romeo? Or would it be better to wait for Cooper to visit him once again? Since the night in the hospital, Cooper hadn't made himself known. Which gave Edwin even more reason to think that the ghost had been lurking in the room, listening to their conversation, watching as Carson had curled up in the bed to fall asleep on Edwin's chest. Since Cooper had no doubt heard everything anyway, was it absolutely necessary to have the conversation over again? Perhaps Cooper would simply take the clue and stay away on his own?

Edwin went to work on Friday and pulled a double shift, giving Claire the day off with full pay to make up for his disappearing act. The doctors had warned him to take a long weekend and give his body a chance to rest—he wasn't as young as he used to be, after all—but Edwin didn't want to spend the day kicking around the house, thinking of Cooper and becoming increasingly vulnerable to his persuasion. Claire deserved the time off anyway. He also worked a double shift on Saturday, happy to run the place by himself, even

though Saturday was the busiest day of the week. The customers demanded too much of his attention. He couldn't spare a single thought for Cooper.

Until he got home on Saturday night and realized he had nothing better to do with his time than think about Cooper. He desperately wanted to see Carson, but despite Thursday night, he was still employed, still working long hours with the catering company. He had made the offer to ask for the night off, but Edwin refused. He did not want to be responsible for Carson losing his job. Still, he couldn't resist sending him a text message. It wasn't the same as being with the other man, but it helped Edwin feel a little less isolated. *Missing you tonight. Busy tomorrow?*

Carson's response came almost an hour later, but it had been worth the wait. *Come over tomorrow for brunch. Ten.*

That gave him something to look forward to, but not something to think about. He was too afraid to sleep. Too afraid that Cooper would arrive while he was at his most vulnerable and try to convince him to change his mind. Try? In that dream world, Cooper would probably be successful. He finally gave up the pretense of sleep around six, showered, and dressed for his date with Carson. But he doubted he could look the other man in the eye without first attempting the promised conversation with Cooper.

He stepped into the garage, eyeing the Alfa Romeo with a certain amount of trepidation. He didn't know if he would ever drive the car again. He didn't know if he could. He was most susceptible to Cooper there. More likely to give into the pleading green eyes, the full lips, the charming smile. More likely to remember just how good it had felt to have Cooper's hot body wrapped around his length, riding him, clenching him. His cock twitched at the memory, and without thinking, Edwin stepped closer, reaching out to touch the hood of the car. His fingers glided over the smooth metal, as light as any lover's caress.

"I knew you'd be back."

Edwin didn't jump. Hadn't a part of him known this would happen? Why else would he have left the relative safety of his home for the garage? Touching

the car put him in connection with Cooper in a way that merely thinking about him did not.

“You know we need to talk.”

“I heard what Carson said. You're really going to listen to him?”

The question came from behind him, but that wasn't an accurate way to gauge Cooper's location. Edwin kept studying the car, noticing for the first time that there wasn't a speck of dust on the hood, despite the fact that he hadn't washed it in days.

“I'm going to listen to him because he's right. It's not healthy. What we're doing? It's not healthy.”

“What does Carson know about it? He doesn't know what we have together. He doesn't know how good we are together.” Fingers rested on his arm, light but unmistakable. “You're going to tell me that we weren't amazing?”

“No. I can't tell you that,” Edwin admitted. He didn't shrug away Cooper's touch, even though the new rules should absolutely include no touching, casual or otherwise. “But that doesn't mean this is good for me. I'm alive...except when I'm with you.”

“You're talking about the dreams?”

“I'm talking about being unconscious in a hot car for nearly six hours. You were supposed to wake me, Cooper. You promised.”

“I didn't mean to hurt you. We were just...”

“Stop it,” Edwin said sharply, finally looking up. Of course, he was looking into nothing but thin air. “I want to see you.”

“Get in the car.”

“No.” He looked down to his shoulder where he could still feel Cooper touching him. “You don't need to be in the car to materialize or whatever it is you do. So let me see you.”

The fingers appeared first. Color spread up Cooper's arm, revealing more and more of his body. Edwin half expected to see Cooper's charming, coaxing

smile, but his mouth was set in a serious frown. Like he understood that Edwin wasn't joking.

"I think we can work this out, Edwin. You know how I feel about you."

Edwin shook his head. "That doesn't change the fact that you're a ghost. It doesn't change the fact that when I'm with you, the rest of the world doesn't matter. I could lose my job, my home, my friends, everything I love, as long as I have that car. I've...I've lived like this before, Cooper. I can't do it again."

"But if all that stuff disappears when we're together...doesn't it mean that all that stuff isn't really important?" Cooper pushed Edwin against the car and stepped closer, trapping Edwin in place. His eyes were dark—a shade Edwin had never seen before—and he suddenly seemed much older than eighteen. "Listen, Edwin, I used to care about that sort of thing too. I used to care about my friends, about school, about how I was going to follow in my dad's footsteps and make him proud of me. I used to care about my grades and about money. And you know what? Once you're dead...none of it matters. You won't even remember any of it. And you're going to be dead for a lot longer than you'll be alive."

"But I'm not dead right now. That's the thing, Cooper. I'm *not* dead. I have things to live for. I like my life."

"Only because you don't know—"

"Don't know what?"

"How pointless it all is. What we have together? *That* is what'll last. What we are together? That's all that matters. If I've learned anything since I've died, it's that."

"I don't believe you."

Cooper's frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

"If you didn't think being alive mattered, you wouldn't cling so hard to a life you can't have again."

"I'm not."

“Why haven't you moved on, then? It's because you're scared. Why do you need me so much? Because when we're together, when we're in this car, it's like you're alive again.”

“No.”

“Yes. Just admit it, Cooper. When we're together, you don't feel like a ghost.”

“No.” Cooper shook his head. “I don't feel so lonely. There's a difference. And if we're together, if it's just you and me, neither one of us will have to feel lonely again.”

“I don't feel lonely. I have my work, my friends, and now I have a great guy who really likes me.”

“You feel lonely. That's why you're so worried about getting old. Every time you look in the mirror, you see a guy who threw away the best years of his life, a guy who has no family, and a guy who has no prospects. But that's not true when you're with me. *None* of that is true.”

“That's where you're wrong. No matter who I'm with, that's always going to be true.”

“No, I can prove it. Just get in the car.”

“I already told you no.”

Cooper offered him a small sweet smile. It was the sort of smile designed to destroy defenses, and Edwin wasn't immune to its effects. “I'm not going to touch you. I'm not going to do anything. I just want to show you one thing.”

“Why am I supposed to trust you?”

Cooper held up his hands, his smile never faltering, though he didn't look away, his gaze resting on Edwin's shoulder instead of his face. “Because I care about you. Because I never intended to hurt you. Because I'm asking you to. I don't need more than a minute.”

No. This conversation is over. Leave me alone.

“Fine. One minute.”

Cooper beamed at him and stepped back, giving Edwin the room to move. Cooper opened the door with a flourish, and if anything should have given Edwin a bad feeling, it was the obvious excitement and satisfaction in Cooper's green eyes. But Edwin slid behind the wheel, making it a point to keep the door open and one foot flat on the garage floor. Cooper joined him in the passenger seat, the look of satisfaction never fading.

“What?” Edwin asked. “I don't see anything different in here.”

“There's not a difference in here. The difference is you.”

“What about me?”

“Look in the mirror.”

Edwin wanted to ask just what the hell Cooper was talking about, but he had the feeling no real explanation would be forthcoming. There was no choice but to do what Cooper said and study his reflection in the rearview mirror. But one glance sent the color from his cheeks and his heart kicking into overdrive.

“What did you do?”

“I didn't do anything.”

“What the *fuck* did you do? What did you do?” Edwin demanded, running his hands over his face. That was definitely his nose and his chin and his mouth. The image in the mirror mimicked him, the man frantically exploring his own face.

“Edwin, listen...I didn't do anything. I just wanted to show you—”

“Show me what? Jesus Christ. What is this?”

“I just wanted you to know how I see you.”

Edwin dragged his attention from the mirror to Cooper's eager, sincere eyes. There wasn't a hint of malice or deception. He looked hopeful and pleased all at the same time, like a child who expects praise for a clumsy attempt at a new task. “How you see me?”

“This is how you look in all your dreams. Didn't you know that?”

Edwin shook his head mutely and turned back to the mirror. It had never occurred to him that he subtracted twenty-five years in his subconscious, but now that Cooper said it, it made perfect sense. Because he never stopped thinking of himself as twenty-two years old, fresh out of school, with the world at his feet. Before he'd injured his knee. Before the codeine. Before the pain and fear and all-consuming hunger. Looking in the mirror always angered him, not because he thought himself abhorrent, but because he felt a little bit betrayed by his own body. How could it go on aging when he still had so much to do? When he still had so many regrets?

But for a moment, thanks to Cooper, he had stopped aging. The wrinkles had all been smoothed over, the gray hair was a dark, vibrant brown, and his eyes were sharp. His lips were firm, and the exhaustion that always narrowed his eyes had been lifted. He could barely remember ever being so young.

“Oh my God...”

“Don't you feel good right now?” Cooper asked.

It never occurred to Edwin to lie. “Yes.”

“Like you're given a new chance? Like you can do it all over again?”

Edwin sighed. “But I can't.”

“But you can.”

“Not with you, Cooper. Because I wouldn't be *living*. You're not giving me a reset button, you're offering...”

“A chance to be happy.” Cooper slid closer and caressed Edwin's cheek. “You're so beautiful. Every time I see you, I don't want to look away. We can be so happy together. I've been waiting so long for you, Edwin. I've been waiting so long for a person who could give me everything I've missed. You're everything to me, Edwin. We could be everything for each other. Don't let somebody else come between us. Somebody who couldn't understand.”

“But...” Edwin never looked away from the mirror. He kept expecting the illusion to be shattered. He expected his face to droop with the years resting on

his shoulders. He couldn't turn back the clock. He knew that was true. He wasn't delusional or crazy. But what Cooper offered—it was tempting. More than tempting. In some ways, it felt like an answer to a prayer he had never had the courage to voice. “It's not real.”

“It's as real as I am. And I think, if nothing else, you believe I'm real.”

“Yes.”

“I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do. I don't want you to be...unhappy. But this *is* real, Edwin. Don't make any mistake about that.”

Edwin couldn't remember exactly why being with Cooper was so bad. Didn't everybody dream of the day they could abandon all their problems and their sleepless nights and their stress in favor of actual happiness? Didn't people work hard, put in long hours at their jobs, abandon their families for hours at a time all in the hopes that one day they might be able to live the life they wanted to lead instead of the life they were born into? People wanted security. People wanted to be happy. People wanted to be loved.

Cooper loved him. Edwin didn't doubt that, regardless of what happened as a result of their bond. And wouldn't it feel good to let it all go? To let the pain of living slip through his fingers in favor of something as strong as real love? People only feared death because it was an unknown. But Edwin knew exactly what would happen—he'd be young again. He'd be with Cooper. Nothing would be able to stop him. He'd go where he wanted, when he wanted, and he'd always have a companion at his side.

“I can't do this.”

“You don't have to do anything right now. Just please don't make me leave you, Edwin. Not now that I've finally found you.”

“I should go. I'm supposed to meet Carson.”

“Are you going to take the car?”

“No. He doesn't want to see it. And Cooper...stay here. Please.”

“He doesn't want me to stay away from his house. He wants me gone.”

“I know.”

Cooper tilted his head. “Are you going to tell him the truth?”

“What's the truth?”

“That you don't want me to go.”

“I'm not going to talk to him about it—about you—today. But you've got to leave him alone. Leave us both alone today, please.”

“I don't see why I have to. You want to be with me, not him.”

“I enjoy being with him... It's not an easy situation, Cooper. It's complicated. For both of us. Don't make a difficult situation worse. Please?”

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“You have my word. I'll stay here for the rest of the day and leave the two of you alone. But do come home tonight.”

“Cooper.”

“Please. I miss dreaming with you. I know it's only been a few days for you, but time passes differently for me.”

“How so?”

“I don't know. It's hard to explain. But clocks don't apply to me. Sometimes I can sleep for days—or months—and it's like nothing more than a blink of an eye. Other times an afternoon can feel like years. I guess it's because I'm no longer a part of the way the world works. I only ever really feel the passage of time when I'm with you.”

Edwin swallowed. He had no way of knowing what it was like for Cooper, but it sounded horrible. It sounded lonely. He could help heal that loneliness. He could be the one who made all the difference. If he didn't push Cooper away.

"I'll come back tonight," Edwin said softly. "And we'll...dream again. But I need my privacy today."

"I'll stay away. I promise."

"Thank you." Edwin's focus drifted back to the mirror. He still looked young. So young. So fresh. All the years he had stared at that face, taking it for granted, how could he have known? How could he have known what his mistakes would cost him? But now he knew, and that knowledge just made the wrinkles deeper, made the bags under his eyes darker. "I should go now."

"You have a few hours..." Cooper closed his fingers around Edwin's hand. "You can stay in here."

"No. No." Edwin yanked away and pushed the door open. "Tonight. I'll be back tonight. You stay here."

He half expected Cooper to protest, or at least plead with him to stay for just a few more minutes, but he nodded, folding his hands in his lap. Edwin's heart twisted. He didn't want to leave Cooper alone in his car, but he didn't want the ghost trailing after him either. He wasn't sure how, exactly, he was going to resolve the situation between the three of them. One part of him recognized a resolution might not be possible. He had made two promises. Two mutually exclusive promises. And he just wasn't sure which he wanted to keep. Or which he wanted to break.

* * * * *

Edwin hadn't been keen on Carson's suggestion that they catch a movie in the late afternoon. Not until Carson took Edwin's hand with warm fingers and rested his head on Edwin's shoulder. Then he realized what a wonderful idea it was. He didn't pay any attention to the movie. He spent the entire ninety minutes concentrating on the heat soaking through his shirt, and the soft chuckles that came from Carson at random times. Edwin couldn't remember the last time anybody rested their head on his shoulder—it was nice. It was more than nice. It was cozy. It felt right.

That sense of coziness continued through their meal. They chose a tiny little café, sitting at a table in the corner of the patio, and split a pitcher of beer, a huge plate of fries, and a huge, gooey dessert. The sun was low, the air was clear, the sky sweet blue, and the smell of fresh lawn clippings somehow made their meal taste better. Carson was vibrant in the evening light, hair and eyes shining, his smile gleaming between bites.

“You're in such a good mood,” Edwin commented, after watching him flirt with their waiter.

“Why shouldn't I be? Aren't you?”

“I'm in a fine mood. I just... I don't think I've seen you smiling like this since the night we met.”

“That was only a week ago,” Carson pointed out.

“Then I don't think I've seen you smiling like this in the last week.”

“I haven't been this happy since last week. I didn't lose my job, the movie was good, this food is great, and you're here. I don't need anything else.”

“I'm not that great,” Edwin said.

“I think you are.”

“I think you are too. Just for the record.”

“Then why aren't you in a good mood?”

Edwin blinked. “Who says I'm not?”

“You just don't seem quite...happy right now. Are you still tired from the other day?”

“No, no. I'm not. I'm just...”

“Have you been sleeping?”

Edwin didn't know if that was an indirect question about Cooper or just a general inquiry about his health. But he answered automatically. “Yeah.”

Carson smiled and looked down. “Sorry, I'm full of questions. I probably shouldn't interrogate you.”

“You're fine. I just...” A full confession danced on the tip of his tongue. It may not be easy to tell Carson everything—the ambivalence, the desire, the confusion, the sight of his own youthful face—but it was probably the right thing to do. “I haven't been feeling like myself. I've missed you.”

“I've missed you too. I'm just grateful I got this afternoon off. Neal could have made me work today to make up for Thursday.”

Edwin winced. “I'm sorry.”

“No, don't. I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty. And no harm, no foul, right?”

“I guess so. God, I'm hoping this week is better than last week.”

The corner of Carson's mouth lifted. “We can get it off to a good start, if you want.”

“I think it's already off to a good start.”

“A better start, then. You can come over to my place, unless you've got other plans for the night.”

Edwin's promise to Cooper flashed in his mind, but out of the car, away from whatever magic Cooper worked on him, it seemed completely ridiculous to cut his time short with a man he genuinely liked in order to spend time with a ghost.

“No, no other plans. I didn't suggest it myself because I didn't want you to think that I only want you for one thing.”

“No danger of that. I know you only want me for one thing.” Carson leaned forward, and Edwin noticed the tiny bit of ketchup clinging to the corner of his mouth. Edwin almost wanted to lick it off. “My food.”

“There are plenty of relationships that are based on much shakier ground than food and sex.”

“I guess food and sex isn't too bad. I mean, that's what we're all wired to want.”

“Indeed. Evolution demands we find the person who can give us the most of both things.”

“So really, we're just following biological imperatives?”

“Well, I am. I'm not sure what biological imperatives make me attractive to you.”

Carson tilted his head. “It must be one of life's big mysteries. Not everything can be explained with science, after all.”

Edwin's stomach rolled. Was that a reference to Cooper? Or was Carson far less obsessed with the dead young man than Edwin was? Did Carson want to talk about Cooper? Or did he want to pretend that Thursday night was just some sort of dream? Or was Edwin thinking too much about it? Indulging in his own guilty conscience?

“I think it's my new favorite mystery.”

“Come home with me, and I'll show you it's not so much of a mystery after all.”

“This is the second time you've invited me.”

“I didn't hear a yes after the first time.”

“I think you should know that it's *always* going to be yes when you invite me back to your place.”

“Let's get the check and get out of here.”

“That's the best thing I've heard all day.”

Carson beamed and stood up. When Carson smiled at him like that, he forgot most of his misgivings. And Edwin knew that when Carson kissed him, he would forget everything else. If Cooper didn't exist—if he had never wedged himself into Edwin's life—he would be happy with Carson. In fact, as he followed Carson to his car, it occurred to him that if things were slightly different, he'd be more happy than at any other point in his life. If that was the case—and he absolutely believed it was—then why did Cooper have him tied up in knots?

Edwin felt like he couldn't get his head on straight. Maybe it hadn't been on straight for a long time.

“Carson?”

“Yeah?”

“What if I'm crazy?”

“You're not.”

“How could you know, though? You never knew me before. Maybe I went crazy before I ever met you.”

“Then we're both crazy, and I know I'm not crazy.”

“I suppose I can't argue with that.”

Cooper leaned closer, unmindful of the table between them, and placed a slow, sweet kiss on Edwin's mouth. His lips were salty and warm, his mouth pliant against Edwin's. He closed his eyes, and for a moment, the world disappeared.

Chapter Sixteen

The kiss stained Edwin's mouth. His lips tingled from it for the entire drive back to Carson's apartment. He kept touching them, like he expected to wipe the sweet taste away, like it was nothing more than a bit of raspberry jam clinging to his lips. He stole glances of the younger man as Carson drove, imagining him without his clothes, remembering what it was like to kiss his shoulder or the hollow of his throat or the inside of his elbow. It felt like an eternity since he'd known Carson's body, and he wanted to get reacquainted with it. He wanted to lose himself in each caress, until there were no more doubts, no more fears.

Did Carson ever feel the same desire? Did he turn to Edwin because he wanted to block out the rest of the world? Or was he still too young, too fresh, too full of life to resort to that sort of physical comfort? He didn't know a way to ask without sounding like a fool, so he held his peace, counting the seconds until they were out of the car and in Carson's small, brightly lit home.

He lived in what appeared to be a brand-new building. The appliances were all very modern, and the floor layout made the most of a limited amount of space. His entire living room wall was made up of a sliding glass door that led to a small but still respectable backyard. His living room was tidy, but his kitchen was a mess. But that wasn't entirely fair. It wasn't exactly a mess. It was cluttered, full of bits and pieces that Carson had collected over the years in preparation for his new restaurant. The equipment ate up space, claiming the counters and the floors, bursting from the cupboards, perched precariously on the fridge.

Edwin loved this kitchen. He wished his own kitchen were as full. There was something comforting about it. Or maybe he was just picking up on Carson's comfort level. A certain amount of peace settled in his eyes when he stepped into the room. Like its very existence offered him a certain level of reassurance. And confidence.

"Do you want the grand tour?" Carson asked.

"That depends. Does it start or end in your bedroom?"

"Both, actually." He grabbed Edwin's hand and pulled him toward the hall. "Let me show you."

Edwin's cock twitched with each step toward the unknown room, and his gaze dropped to the curve of Carson's ass. Maybe it was just because he hadn't admired Carson in a few days, or maybe he was just wearing his special ass-hugging jeans, but he looked better than usual. The thought of stretching Carson's trim body out on the bed and dragging his mouth from Carson's neck to the gentle swell of his ass made Edwin completely hard. And once he tasted Carson's taut skin, he would sink into the welcoming heat until the room spun around him.

Carson glanced over his shoulder, and the heat Edwin saw in his eyes convinced him that they were on the same wavelength. He was further convinced when Carson dragged him into his bedroom, slammed the door shut, and claimed Edwin's mouth with nothing more than hungry desperation. Edwin responded immediately, plunging his tongue into Carson's mouth, seeking out the salty curves. He took several deep breaths, trying to capture the scent of Carson's skin. He was sweaty and musky. He smelled like sunshine and popcorn and beer. He was summer.

They stumbled to the bed together, their mouths breaking apart while they tugged at each other's clothes and groaned in frustration when the material refused to cooperate. By the time they fell to the mattress, Edwin's shirt was missing, as were both of his shoes. Carson's pants were hanging open, and his shirt was caught around his neck, giving Edwin access to his sculpted chest,

his ridged stomach, and his smooth erection. His muscles tensed and fluttered every time Edwin touched him, as though Carson was hungry for contact. Maybe he was. Maybe he felt like an eternity had passed for him as well.

Carson wrapped his arms around Edwin and pulled him close, until their chests were flush, their hips aligned. They barely took any time to breathe. Each pause lasted only a half second, and they were seeking each other again. Edwin smoothed his hands over Carson's body, reminding himself of each mark, each dip, each delicious place to kiss and taste. He pushed against Carson's body, thrusting his hips automatically, grinding until they were both leaving wet spots on their boxers.

“Edwin...”

“What?”

“I want you to fuck me. I've been thinking about it for the past two days. Thinking about how much I need you. I can't wait. Don't make me wait.”

“I won't,” Edwin promised. “Just tell me. Tell me what you want.”

“On my stomach. So you can just pound into me.”

Edwin nodded frantically, pushing at the waistband of Carson's underwear. He worked it down his thighs, and Carson kicked them off. With a final, hard kiss, he rolled Carson onto his stomach, allowing for the most perfect view of Carson's beautiful body.

“The condoms and everything are in the bathroom. In the drawer closest to the door.”

“Why do you keep them in the bathroom?”

“Because I don't bring too many guys up here. I can't remember the last time I needed to have the condoms on hand.”

Edwin frowned. “Really?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Carson grinned. “You think I'm a slut?”

“Slut is a strong word.”

“Go get the condoms and shut up.”

Edwin pushed himself from the bed. "Yes, sir."

He didn't like stepping out of the room, but he loved the view on the return. The last threads of sunlight slanted into the room, coloring Carson's skin and casting shadows over his back and thighs. The view was exactly what Edwin had imagined. Like he had already been in this moment, standing in this position, admiring Carson's form. Like maybe he had dreamed it.

"Are you going to be standing there all night?" Carson asked, his voice muffled by his arm.

"I might. It's not like I get to see this every day."

"I'll take some dirty pictures for you."

"That's not the same."

Carson looked over his shoulder. "Are you saying you don't want to have dirty pictures of me?"

"I'm not saying that at all. It's just not the same." Edwin ventured into the room and tossed the condoms on the bed. "A picture can't do you justice. Besides, who would take these dirty photos?"

"A professional photographer, of course. I even know one."

"Oh? Who?"

"An ex-boyfriend."

Edwin paused. "You're not going to pose nude for an ex-boyfriend. I don't care if he is a professional photographer."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

"You *sound* jealous. Stefan's harmless. And he always wanted to shoot me naked."

"Stop talking about Stefan."

"Or what?"

"Or I won't fuck you."

Carson's smile widened. "I'll be good."

"I know you will be," Edwin murmured, spreading Carson's cheeks to pour lube over his waiting hole. He smeared it around the clenched ring, dipping his finger into his entrance just enough to coat the rim. Carson squirmed beneath him, pushing against the intrusion, encouraging more contact. Carson was so eager for him, so willing, that Edwin couldn't help but ache in return. For every response, Edwin reacted tenfold. The tightness in his throat told him that the banter was over. He didn't think he would be able to utter another word until he was spent.

Edwin straddled Carson's thighs, positioning himself so he could sink into his body in a single easy stroke. As much as he wanted to do just that, he held back, choosing instead to drag the tip of his cock up and down Carson's ass. By the time he reached his balls, Edwin's cock was glistening with precum and lube. He brushed the tip across the loose skin, leaving a long thread of precum before moving back up his body.

"Edwin...fuck... I've never been with anybody like you before. Do you know that? Nobody ever..."

Edwin didn't know that, but he didn't want Carson to continue. Not with all the doubts clouding in the back of his mind. Not with the half-remembered and broken promises lingering in his past. He wasn't worthy of Carson's praise, of his pleas, of his desires. Not even on his best day. But there was only one sure way to stop the words, and that was to give them what they both wanted. He leaned forward to brace himself on one hand and used the other to guide his stiff cock into Carson's hot channel.

They both moaned at the slow intrusion into Carson's unstretched flesh. The tight muscles pulled him forward, gripping him, holding him with a sort of force that Edwin couldn't imagine. Carson's body was solid. Real. Warm. Quivering. Slick with sweat, his arms and legs covered in thick hair, his back bowed with pleasure.

Edwin had to move. They both needed it. He wanted to plunge into the heat again and again—he wanted to give Carson exactly what he had requested.

“That's it,” Carson encouraged. “Oh God...oh God...that's it. Don't stop...Edwin...please don't stop.”

Edwin dropped his head and skimmed his mouth over Carson's shoulders and the back of his neck. He kissed each freckle, licked at the tiny drops of sweat on his nape, ran his lips over the soft hair just below his ears. Carson shuddered beneath him, goose bumps on his shoulders and arms despite the heat between them. The more they moved, the hotter he felt. It was just Carson, sweeping through him like a fever. He slowed his rhythm, desperate to prolong their coupling for as long as he could, afraid of how it would feel when he finally fell away from Carson's body.

Edwin didn't stop moving until he felt a certain weight against his back. He froze, his heart clenching with fear. Carson whimpered in protest, a sound he felt vibrate through him. Cooper must have felt it too, because he whispered in Edwin's ear, “Don't stop moving. Don't let on that I'm here. Don't say anything either. You know he'll freak out if you start talking to me. Then he won't let you come back.”

“Don't...please...” Edwin whispered desperately. Carson gave no sign of hearing him, but neither did Cooper. Fingers trailed down his spine and then dipped between his cheeks, a thumb pressing against his hole—a promise and a warning.

“Edwin?” Carson gasped, pushing back. “Please.”

“Look at him,” Cooper murmured. The words were embedded in his brain, burrowing deeper and deeper. “He wants you. Don't leave him waiting.”

The bile in the back of Edwin's throat burned and choked him. He tried to swallow it, but he couldn't. He stared at the back of Carson's dark head, the pale slope of his shoulders, and forced himself to move his hips. Cooper surrounded him, cold and hot. Edwin hoped that Cooper would stop with the

touching. He hoped he would just continue to whisper soft, mocking words. But Edwin knew it wouldn't stop there. Even before he felt strong fingers spread his cheeks, he knew it wouldn't stop there.

Why are you doing this? Why are you here? Why can't you leave me alone?

"You've let me do this before," Cooper continued. "Do you remember? In a dream. I pulled you against me and..."

Edwin did remember. He remembered every dream, every interaction, every word and touch. Before, they had been pleasant reminders, but now they took on the hard edge of fever dreams. Of horrid, waking nightmares.

"Relax," Cooper said. "I don't want to hurt you. I want you to feel good, Edwin. I just want to show you how good we are together."

Edwin responded by burying his face in Carson's neck. He concentrated on the texture and smell of his skin, the light brush of his hair, the moans vibrating through him. He didn't let his mind drift from the heat of Carson's body, from the way the muscles felt beneath him. He opened his senses to Carson, letting him feel every single one. But even that wasn't enough to distract Edwin from what Cooper was doing. The blunt pressure of his cock against Edwin's ass, the whispered reassurances, the promise that Edwin was going to feel good.

"God, don't stop," Carson begged. "I love this, Edwin. I love what you do to me."

Tears of frustration stung the backs of Edwin's eyes. He wanted to push Cooper away, but he couldn't. No amount of reasoning and pleading could force Cooper to leave him alone. And if Carson had even a hint of what was happening...that would be it. It would be over, and despite Edwin's earlier ambivalence, he knew now he wasn't ready to lose Carson. His body continued to move automatically, independent of his now-racing mind. His frustration reached new, breathless heights when he felt Cooper push forward, forcing his way into Edwin's clenched, resisting body.

“That's it...” Cooper sighed with obvious satisfaction. “God, you feel amazing. I didn't know it could feel like this.”

Edwin bit back against the cry of pain building in his throat. He felt like Cooper was tearing him open, and there was no hint of pleasure. Beneath him, Carson began to move harder, sliding his cock against the bed for the friction. Edwin was happy to let Carson take over the rhythm, happy to let him control the tempo. He knew from his hungry and desperate sounds that Carson was rushing closer to his orgasm, and Edwin tried to cling to that the way he clung to Carson's body, but that wasn't nearly enough to distract him from Cooper, thrusting into his channel again and again.

“So close,” Carson moaned. “So...oh God...so...close...”

“I want to feel you.” *Need. I need to feel you, Carson. I need to make sure you're real. Please. Please be real.* “Come for me.”

“No...not yet...not yet...I need more.”

Edwin moaned, resting his forehead against Carson's shoulder. Could Carson feel the added pressure? Could he tell that Edwin wasn't in control of his own body? Did he sense the force above them, directing them, taking Edwin? Or was he too lost in his own pleasure? Edwin knew the answer to that question. There was only one answer, because if Carson even had an inkling, that would be it. Pain shot up his spine each time Cooper entered him, and he didn't know how he managed to keep his erection. Maybe it was nothing more than sheer force of will.

“You've already got me so close,” Edwin warned, hoping that would encourage Carson to let go before Edwin couldn't take it anymore. The condom would help. If he did go soft, at least he could apologize for coming so quickly, rather than let on to the truth.

“I can't wait to feel your orgasm,” Cooper whispered. “I can't wait to see how tight you get. I can't wait to know how you feel.”

Edwin almost laughed. Cooper would have to go on waiting, because it wasn't going to happen. He couldn't trick his body into accepting or enjoying the intrusion. Not when pain and anger buffered him, making him immune to anything like pleasure. He reached beneath Carson's body to seek out his cock. It was slick with precum, and he jolted, his muscles clenching around Edwin, as soon as Edwin touched the sensitive tip.

“Oh yes. Like that,” Carson moaned.

Edwin stripped his cock, stroking him almost desperately. If he got Carson off, he could disappear into the bathroom—though he didn't know if Cooper would let him move. He felt heavier and heavier against Edwin's back, like bags of cement tied to his shoulders and thighs. He might have no choice but to lie there, trapped between his lovers, waiting until Cooper finally had his fill. And then what? Try to talk to Carson about it while he knew Cooper was hovering above them? Listening to every word? *Haunting* them?

“Oh fuck...Edwin...oh...yes...yes...just a little bit...just a bit harder...” Carson begged, his body tensing in increments until he was as solid as a rock beneath Edwin. They were all silent for a beat, and then Carson shouted, his cock erupting in Edwin's hands, the cum smearing over his stomach and against the sheet.

Edwin stopped moving as soon as Carson did, but Cooper didn't. The ghost was oddly silent as well. Perhaps it took too much energy to fuck him—he couldn't speak to him at the same time.

“Edwin? What is going on?”

“Nothing...”

Carson looked over his shoulder. “No, what's happening? Don't tell me it's nothing. I can feel...”

“Carson...”

Horror registered on Carson's face. The two of them moved in a steady rhythm that neither controlled, and the headboard bounced against the wall.

“Don't. Don't tell me...don't tell me that it's...”

“Carson, I can explain.”

“Make him stop right now.”

Edwin opened his mouth, afraid to admit that he couldn't stop Cooper. Carson studied him for another moment and then looked away with disgust, burying his face in the pillow with an unmistakable sound of dismissal.

“Carson...I didn't...I didn't do this...” There was a hint of whining in his voice, like a child, but he didn't care. Especially since he felt like doing more than whining. He felt like crying and begging and trying to make Carson understand. He felt like hitting something. He wanted to slam his fist through something—Cooper's face, though a wall would do in a pinch.

Unseen fingers dug into his hips, holding him in place for a final flurry of thrusts, and then Cooper finished, slumped over Edwin's back, moaning. Whispering how good he was. How good it all was. Promising him things could be that good forever.

“Edwin.” There was a clear warning in Carson's voice.

“Wait...”

The weight dissipated, clearing from Edwin's back. He collapsed to the bed with a sigh of relief and waited for the complete exhaustion, or a mocking word from Cooper, or any hint that he still had a night's worth of torment to look forward to. He got that hint, but not from the specter.

“What the fuck was that?” Carson demanded, jumping from the bed.

“I don't...”

“How could you do this? How could you...treat me like this?”

“Carson, please.” Edwin didn't try to stand as well. He didn't think his legs would support him. He rolled onto his back, wincing as the weight settled on his sore ass, and tried to pull the sheet over his legs.

“Is this what you want? Some sort of sick...twisted...” Carson's face contorted, the words stuttering to a stop. “You should go.”

“Please, don't make me go.”

“I didn't sign up for this, Edwin. Even if I think I might be falling in love with you, I didn't sign up for this. For Christ's sake. In my bed? In my goddamned *bed*? You let him come here?”

“I didn't *let* him.”

“You didn't stop him. You were supposed to...”

“What? What was I supposed to do?”

“Banish him, or ignore him, or exorcise him. I don't know. Whatever you do with a ghost.”

“I would have if I knew how.”

“Really? That's why he was fucking you? I mean...fuck. Fuck, how does a ghost even *do* that?”

“I don't...I don't know. He can always touch me, even when we aren't in the car.”

Carson narrowed his eyes. “That's just special, isn't it? Get out of here. I don't want to see you right now.”

“I don't want to go.”

“What you want really isn't a part of this discussion,” Carson pointed out.

“Just...give me a chance. I'm going to be completely honest. If you don't like what you hear, I'll leave you alone. End of story. You'll never hear from me again.”

“Edwin...honestly...I don't see how I could possibly like anything I hear about this.” Carson grabbed a robe from the back of the door and shrugged it on. “I'll listen to you. But I won't pretend I think it's going to make any difference at all.”

“Today—this morning before we met—I went out to the car, and I spoke to Cooper. He was waiting for me. Or maybe he just knew I'd go out there sooner or later to look for him. But as soon as he started talking to me...I realized I didn't want to lose him.”

"This is great." Carson folded his arms. "I'm glad I decided to let you stay here to tell me all this."

"He coaxed me into the car," Edwin continued without acknowledging the interruption. He didn't think it would make a huge difference, but he wanted to get through the entire story. From start to finish. "And Carson...what I saw... He told me to look in the mirror, and I *saw* myself."

"That's amazing."

"I mean...I saw my face, only twenty years younger. It was like Cooper had turned back the clock, and he promised he could take away all the pain and the regret and everything that makes me old, if—"

"He promised he would take away your life," Carson cut in harshly. "He promised to *kill* you. Is life so cheap to you? All of the regrets, all of that hard stuff, is what makes you, you. Do you think you'd be out there every week helping people like Warren if you didn't have your own regrets?"

"Maybe you're too young to understand, but..."

Carson laughed. "You didn't have any regrets by the time you were twenty-six? You didn't look back and think you'd do anything different? That's when you started using, isn't it? So maybe your life wasn't exactly rosy pink then either."

"You're right." Edwin took a deep breath. "You're right. I know you're right. And when I'm with you...I don't want to be dead. I forget all about the hold he has on me. I forget about everything he makes me feel. Because with you, everything is better."

"That's not going to change anything."

"I didn't ask him to be here. Okay, I did tell him to wait for me to get home, and I know I shouldn't have. I know I promised you I wouldn't. But I didn't tell him to be here. And I didn't want him to—"

"You didn't stop him," Carson said softly.

"I didn't know how. I *don't* know how."

“You mean he...”

“I don't know how to stop him,” Edwin repeated. “I don't know. I need your help.”

Carson finally softened, his eyes shifting from angry to concerned. “Are you all right?”

“I'm...I'm fine.”

He perched on the edge of the bed and took Edwin's hand. “Are you sure? Did he...? Are you hurt? If you're hurt...”

“I don't think I'm hurt. No. I don't think he intended to hurt me. But...”

“Is he still here?”

“I don't know.”

Carson caressed Edwin's knuckles with his thumb. “I don't know how to help. I don't know how to deal with ghosts.”

“Maybe the two of us together can figure it out.”

“I'm sorry I shouted at you.”

Edwin shook his head. “No. Don't apologize for that. You didn't know...”

“Edwin, he... You know what he did... He...”

“Don't say it. Don't say anything else about it.”

“Remember that big bathtub I mentioned before? Maybe we should go have a nice, long soak.”

Edwin nodded, grateful in ways that he couldn't explain. He rose slowly from the bed, worried that his legs would give out on him, worried that he would be too sore to walk comfortably, worried that those icy fingers would dance down his spine again. Carson took his arm, leading him into the bathroom without a word. He hadn't been kidding about the tub. It would fit both of them.

“How did you get a tub this big?” Edwin asked with wonder.

“I got lucky. I got a deal, and my property manager gave me permission to install it. I guess he figured it was a good investment, because part of the deal was that I could not uninstall it later.”

Edwin smiled a little at that, though he didn't feel much like smiling. He didn't feel like doing much of anything except sinking into the hot water with Carson holding him. He hadn't felt this weak in a long time. Maybe years. Maybe not since his first week in rehab.

“You should tell me to go,” Edwin said softly.

“Why?”

“You don't need this in your life.”

Carson didn't respond. He bent over the edge of the tub and turned the water on hot, then stood and removed his robe. He tossed it aside indifferently, and it suddenly struck Edwin that he had never asked what Carson regretted. What was the thing that plagued him? What would he take back? Edwin *had* made his first major mistake before he was twenty-six, after all.

“Come on. In you go.”

Edwin allowed Carson to help him over the deep edge. He sat slowly, settling in just inches of hot water. Carson lowered himself on the opposite end. He looked so comfortable that Edwin couldn't resist awkwardly repositioning himself in the tub, turning around so he could relax with his back against Carson's chest.

“What is Warren's wife's name?” Carson asked.

“Angela.”

“What did you tell Angela? Did you tell her to get far away from Warren?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he...he needs her. He needs somebody. But this isn't the same.”

“I think it's pretty close. You asked me for help. I'm going to do everything in my power to do just that. It's too late for you to change your mind.”

Edwin almost smiled. "Is it really?"

"Yes, it really is. I don't want to see you get hurt, Edwin. And Cooper...he could hurt you. He *has* hurt you. He'll do it again."

"I know. But do you believe me when I say I don't think he means it?"

"No."

"But it's true."

"I know you think it's true."

"That's not what it is. It's just that—"

"Don't, Edwin. It doesn't matter to me what Cooper wants or why he's doing this to you. I don't care."

"How could you not?"

"He's dead," Carson said simply. "He's dead, and he should have moved on a long time ago. You're not dead. You're full of life. You make a difference in so many lives. You believe in people. You fight for what you believe in. So no, I don't care about his problems. I care about you and your problems."

"But what if you were in his position? You might be one day, you know. We're all going to die. We don't know that we won't end up haunting somebody or someplace or something. What if you do, and you finally find a way to reach the world...a way to return? You're saying you wouldn't take it?"

"I won't force myself on anybody, for starters." Carson ran his palms over Edwin's chest, taking some of the sting out of his words. "But think about what you're actually saying here. There's no impulse stronger than the one for survival. A cornered animal—a cornered person—will fight for life no matter what. I've known two people who were diagnosed with terminal cancer. They didn't just go home and give up. They fought. They took every experimental drug, did everything the doctors told them to do, and searched high and low for more answers. Even Warren doesn't want to die. He comes back to you again and again because you're his connection to the world. The one person who

makes living seem possible. It's that very drive, that very connection, that makes Cooper so dangerous.”

“You're saying that as long as he senses it—”

“He'll never leave you alone,” Carson finished. “He can't. I don't know if your instincts are found in your body or your soul... I don't even know what a ghost *is*. But everybody seems to agree that ghosts linger because they can't accept their deaths.”

“You're right.” Edwin sighed and dropped his head back to Carson's shoulder. “He was so young. He was a kid.”

“I know.”

“Eighteen... He never even saw any of the world. I don't think I'd be willing to move on either.”

“But you were willing to leave the world for him.”

Edwin shook his head. “I don't think I was exactly willing. But death has its own freedom, doesn't it?”

“Does it? Is Cooper free from pain? Is he free from desire? Is he free from loneliness? Giving in to him won't help him... It won't make things better. It'll just trap you both.”

“Were you born this smart?”

“I'm actually a certified genius. Haven't I mentioned that?”

Edwin lifted his head. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Except I don't remember any questions on the IQ test about ghosts, life, death, and everything else. It mainly tested my memory and ability to count.”

Edwin snorted. “Now I'm beginning to feel like I'm too old *and* too stupid for you.”

Carson cupped his face and kissed his mouth. “I think you say things like that just so I'll be forced to compliment you.”

“Is it working?”

“It is. You're brilliant, and your age is perfect.” Carson kissed him again.
“Are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah. I'm going to have to be, aren't I? There's nothing I can do about it.”

“I'm so sorry. I wish I could...protect you.”

“From my own mistakes? That's not how it works.”

“It's not?”

Edwin shook his head. “That is one thing I've learned. You can never protect somebody from making mistakes. But occasionally, very occasionally, you can help clean the mess up.”

“I don't think you made any serious mistakes, Edwin.”

“I've made a few. And so has Cooper. Maybe it's not too late to clean it up.”

“It's not.” Carson wrapped his arms around Edwin in a tight embrace and sighed. “It's not.”

Edwin nodded, but he wasn't sure if he actually believed him. Still, he had asked Carson for help. Would he have taken that step—could he have even considered it—if he didn't already partially believe it was possible to do something, *anything*, to end the torment for both of them?

Chapter Seventeen

Carson didn't know what to do about ghosts. He didn't know anybody who would have the first clue about dealing with ghosts. There were no Ghost Busters to put Cooper in a containment unit for a reasonable fee. He knew there were television shows featuring people who claimed to be ghost hunters, but he wasn't convinced they weren't a bunch of charlatans. In fact, he guessed that if he tried to contact them, they would show up with their electromagnetic equipment, and strange little devices that made obnoxious sounds, and special goggles designed to show the ghostly spectrum, and not actually do anything to help him at all.

There was an entire institution dedicated to the mysteries of death. Several, in fact. But Carson hadn't stepped inside a church since he was twelve, and he didn't know if he wanted his return to the religion of his childhood to be dependent on a dead eighteen-year-old haunting his male lover.

Unfortunately, it was the only workable solution that stuck in Carson's mind after Edwin had provided the details of every conversation and every dream. Some of it had been difficult to hear. If he had seen the entire dynamic unfolding on the movie screen, he would have been intrigued. And maybe even a little turned on. But Edwin's explanation did nothing more than horrify him. Edwin wouldn't say as much, but it was clear that Cooper had manipulated him, digging at his mind again and again, until Edwin had no choice but to break.

After Edwin's entire explanation, the one thing that had stood out the most was Cooper's fear. Cooper didn't want to be alone, and so his demands

and grappling for attention had become more and more intense. He may have been on the earth for sixty-five years, but he still had the emotional maturity of a spoiled teenage boy. Worse than that, he had the very real, very understandable doubt that once he let go, he would be doing nothing more than falling backward into a dark abyss. Who could convince him to take that fall?

Edwin had suggested they start from a different angle. Instead of going directly to the church—the denomination to be decided at a later date—they could start with Cooper's family. All of his younger brothers and sisters were apparently living. Carson had agreed to help with that idea, partially because he was pleased Edwin had any suggestions at all, though he wasn't sure what good that would do for them. What were they going to say? What could they possibly say to explain their visit, much less their problem?

Edwin had also asked if he could crash at Carson's. They both recognized that it wouldn't do anything to stop Cooper, but Carson couldn't bring himself to get anywhere near the twice-damned Alfa Romeo, and Edwin didn't want to be alone. It wasn't an ideal situation, but Carson would rather Edwin move permanently into his apartment than be stuck alone in his house, subject to a sociopathic ghost's chaotic whims. He wished he didn't have to go in to work, but he supposed at the very least he could touch base with Cathy, then make his excuses to leave if it became unbearable to be separated from Edwin for too long.

As soon as Carson stepped into the restaurant, Cathy bustled up to him, her face contorted with excitement. He couldn't even utter a word before she grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the storage closet.

“We need to talk. Now.”

“About what?” He knew the answer. He wondered how much he dared tell her. He didn't want to infringe on Edwin's privacy, but the situation was so out of hand, he needed an ally.

“My research. About Cooper.”

“Edwin already told me about him. Who his parents were. How he died.”

Cathy didn't seem impressed. “I know Edwin. He probably just looked up a few old newspapers and called it good. I'll bet he didn't dig nearly as far as I did.”

Carson frowned. “How far did you dig?”

“Far. I know everything about his parents, and his grandparents, and his siblings, and his little nieces and nephews.”

“Why could you possibly need that information?”

Cathy shut the storage door and pulled the chain on the light overhead. “He's a fucking ghost. Don't you think as much information as possible is good?”

“I don't know. I don't really know much of anything, honestly.”

Cathy frowned and studied his face. “Did something happen?”

“Yes. But I don't really want to talk about it right now.”

“Is everybody okay? Edwin?”

“He's...going to be fine. He'll be better if I can give him information—or really anything—that'll help.”

The light swayed overhead, the shadows growing long, then shrinking again. Cathy's eyes were dark, and for once, she was still, her small body not fluttering around the room or twitching or otherwise trying to burn off energy. She wasn't smiling either. Carson had never really noticed Cathy's smile, but now that it was gone, he missed it. He longed for it.

“Cooper did die in that car. That much has never been disputed by anybody.”

Carson frowned. “What *has* been disputed?”

“For starters, who was in the car with him. The newspaper reported that he was with his friends. Well, the initial story reported that, but the same newspaper ran a correction the next day on the story. The *Los Angeles Times* actually reported that Cooper had been driving alone, but one of the gossip

rags thought the story was worth covering, and *they* said he was with his father and his brother.”

“That's really basic information. I mean, surely somebody could have checked with the police or the hospital or something.”

“Do you have any idea how rich Cooper's family was?”

“No.”

“Really fucking rich. I mean, imagine the Kennedys without the political ties. That sort of money buys a lot of influence.”

“You think Cooper's dad...bought off the newspapers?”

“I think he bought off the cops.”

“You have any proof?”

Cathy rolled her eyes. “No, the library didn't have the copy of the payola receipts.”

“Why would his father do this? I mean, what was he trying to hide?”

“I don't know, but...I have a friend who works at the courthouse, and she was able to look up some old records. There's some evidence that he was brought in for questioning several times, but he was actually placed under arrest once.”

“For murder?”

“For tampering with evidence. Whatever he was trying to hide, the police wanted that damned car. Only, Samson had it shipped out of the country and back to Italy for repairs. When the police went to impound it, it was long gone, and whatever evidence it had was gone with it.”

“What happened to those charges?”

Cathy rolled her eyes again. “What do you think? Dropped, and so was the entire issue. Samson went back to his massive home and what remained of his family, and Cooper's death officially became a cold case.”

“There's no way we could solve it now.”

"I know. Do you think if we did, it would help?"

"Edwin would know better than me. But Cooper just seems...lonely. I don't know if he has unfinished business or something. I think he just needs... He keeps telling Edwin he just needs a connection. I don't know what that means to him. But he also told Edwin that he doesn't *remember* much of his life. He said that he only remembers a few things from right before he died."

Cathy leaned against the door and folded her arms. Carson's heart began to sink. They obviously weren't going anywhere for a while. "There's more."

"How much more?"

"About four years after Cooper died, his mother committed suicide. Samson couldn't keep that one out of the newspapers completely, but it got a remarkably small amount of coverage, considering who she was and how she did it."

"Do I want to know?"

"You could probably guess. According to witnesses, she calmly drove into oncoming traffic."

"That could have been an accident."

"The police ruled that out, as well as foul play, because she left a note."

"That was enough for them?"

"I'm sure Samson was more than willing to pay enough money to make the investigation disappear."

"What did the note say?"

"I don't know. It wasn't published. And since the whole mansion has been liquidated, even if it still exists somewhere, I doubt I'll be able to find it. They hinted it was depression. Over Cooper. I also have another suspicion."

"What?"

"This."

Cathy pulled a small photograph from her purse and thrust it in Carson's hands. He looked at her questioningly, but she didn't give him any explanation. He had no choice but to study the image. Not that it made any sense to him. He didn't recognize the smiling people, even though he suspected he should. The whole image reminded him of that old song on *Sesame Street*. One of those things just wasn't like the other. In this case, it was the young man standing in the middle of the image, his mouth pulled into a wide smile beneath beautiful green eyes. Fine blond hair hung over his brow and his ears—it needed to be cut—and his body was trim and fit. He was, without a doubt, a perfect tribute to youth.

The people flanking him were none of those things. They were both shorter, both had dark hair, dark skin, and dark eyes.

“Samson James was Italian?”

“Greek.”

“And Olive?”

“Same. Samson apparently changed his name as soon as he turned eighteen.”

“Was Cooper adopted?”

“No.”

“Was he Samson's son?”

Cathy shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. But one thing is for certain—that boy certainly wasn't completely Greek. I found that picture in a newspaper story about Cooper's graduating class. I'm guessing they chose to use that shot because Cooper was really photogenic.”

“Gorgeous. He was gorgeous. This must be what Edwin sees every night.”

“Yeah. I wish I had more for you.”

Carson shook his head. “No, this is great. I mean, I didn't even know where to start before.”

“Start what?”

“We need to get him away from Edwin. Make him move on or let go or whatever it is he needs to do. I thought maybe I should go see a priest. Edwin wanted to see one of Cooper's living relatives. Maybe we're both right. You mind if I keep this?”

“Not at all.” Cathy rubbed the back of her neck. The first hint that her nervous twitches were returning. “I had a really bad feeling the entire time I was going through this stuff. Like, this heavy feeling, right in my chest.”

“It's just your instincts.”

She tilted her head. “What are my instincts telling me?”

“That there was something seriously wrong in that house.” Carson sighed. “I don't want to be here. I want to go be with Edwin.”

“Did he go to work today?”

“He insisted on it. Despite everything.”

“Maybe that's the best thing,” Cathy said gently. “He shouldn't just sit at home and mope.”

“Yeah.” It was easy for Cathy to say that. She hadn't seen the fear in his eyes. She hadn't seen the haunted look on his face. She hadn't seen her lover violated and huddled in the tub, talking like everything was fine, smiling like everything was normal, when they both knew that wasn't true. But Carson couldn't say any of that. He could only think it, over and over, letting the memories chase themselves.

It occurred to him later that day that he was finally beginning to understand obsession.

* * * * *

“What sort of restaurant are you going to open?” Edwin asked as Carson set two heaping plates on the table. He had come home with bags of groceries, declaring they were having a Mexican night. Edwin hadn't even mentioned being hungry—his appetite had been missing for several days now—but he wasn't going to complain about the supper. Especially since it obviously gave

Carson pleasure to prepare food. Or maybe it just comforted him. Either way, Edwin knew if he wasn't careful, he would eventually gain a hundred pounds under Carson's care.

“I think that's a funny question to ask.”

Edwin frowned. “Why?”

“Most people ask what type I want to open, or otherwise couch it with hypothetical language. You asked like my restaurant is a forgone conclusion.”

Edwin shrugged. “Why wouldn't it be a forgone conclusion? You're very talented; you're young, you're driven, and you're focused. It's only a matter of time.”

“And money.” Carson sat across from him. “And luck.”

“You've got some money saved up.”

“I do. A bit.”

“You haven't answered my question. French? Italian? Asian?”

Carson shook his head. “None of those things. Seafood. I know, it doesn't sound hugely exciting. But I don't think there's anything better than a freshly caught fish, prepared simply, and garnished with a bit of lemon. I'm working a menu that draws on all the influences in the area without being too broad. You don't mind spicy food, do you?”

“No.”

Carson smiled and took a big bite of his burrito. “Good.”

“How close are you to opening the restaurant?”

“How close are you to learning how to fly?”

Edwin frowned. “It can't be that far off.”

“It is. Trust me, it is. It requires a huge amount of capital, the perfect location, all of the various permits, and the ability to devote my entire life to it. I don't have any of those things. I am saving money every week, but at the rate I'm going, it'll be another ten years, easily.”

Edwin picked at the folded corner of his burrito. Carson had worked hard on this meal. He could at least try to take a bite. But the conversation interested him far more than the food. “Ten years? What if something happens?”

“Like what?”

“Like, I don't know, you decide you don't want to own a restaurant?”

“Then I'll have a bunch of money socked away for whatever I really want to do.” Carson shrugged and took another bite. “Ten years really isn't that long, in the grand scheme of things. Besides, I want it bad enough, it's worth the wait.”

Edwin thought of the Alfa Romeo, sitting in his garage, empty except for Cooper. It had been three days since Cooper had fucked him, and the ghost hadn't made himself known in that time. Edwin didn't know if he was sulking in the corner, watching the two of them eat, if he had opted to return to the car, or if he had simply moved on and disappeared. The third option was probably the best, but Edwin hoped it wasn't the case. He didn't know what he wanted from Cooper, but simply never seeing him again wasn't acceptable. And he couldn't explain why.

“How was the clinic?” Carson asked, pulling Edwin from his thoughts.

“Good. Warren is still there. He and Angela felt that going home too early would be detrimental. I'm going to make sure that he stays as long as he needs to.”

“Do you think... Do you ever worry that you get too involved in their lives?”

“No.”

Carson looked up. “I didn't mean anything by that. I was just...”

“I know. And it can be dangerous. A lot of them don't have any real sense of boundaries. That's why I don't give out my number or address. Not to mention the fact that their addiction trumps everything. I was mugged once at the center.”

Carson's eyes widened. "Really? What happened? Were you hurt?"

"He didn't want to hurt me. He was crying, threatening me in one breath, and apologizing in the next. I gave him my money, and we never saw him again. I hope he got the help he needed somewhere, but..."

"What if he had come back a week or a month later? Would you have helped him?"

"Yes."

"As simple as that?"

"I don't get to decide who deserves a second chance. Or a hundredth chance."

"I don't know if I could handle that. People like Warren... There's got to be a line. A point where you have to take a step back and make them walk or fall on their own. You said the other night that you can't protect people from their mistakes."

"I know. And that isn't my intention."

"But you think you can save them."

"Sure."

"What if they don't want to be saved?"

"I'll be there when they're ready."

Carson shook his head. "Sometimes I don't know what to think of you."

"I'm fine with that. As long as you still like me."

"I do. I like you a lot. And I have something for you."

Carson smiled. "Besides this delicious dinner?"

"How do you know it's delicious? You haven't even had a bite."

Edwin looked down to his untouched food with a guilty grimace. "Sorry. I'm sure it's delicious. I'm just not hungry."

"You've got to eat, Edwin. You're not going to be doing anybody any favors if you starve yourself."

"I know."

"You haven't been sleeping either."

Edwin sighed. "I'm always a little bit scared to close my eyes."

"Has it been Cooper?"

"No. Yes. Sort of. He hasn't been around. But I'm still a little bit worried that he'll pop up in my dreams." More than that, he was a little bit worried Cooper wouldn't pop up in his dreams. "What did you have for me?"

Carson pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and slid it across the table. Edwin unfolded it and scanned the scribbled name, phone number, and address in San Diego. "Who is Hazel Milk?"

"Actually, her full name is Hazel James Milk. She's Cooper's sister."

"You found his sister?"

"Yeah, it wasn't that hard. And I knew you wanted to talk to her."

"You didn't have to do this."

"It's just a name. I don't know if she'll help you, or if you want to try calling her, or what. But now you have that option."

"I owe you."

"You don't. I told you I'd help. So I'm here, helping."

"I'm going to return the favor one day. I want you to know that. When you need help, no matter what you're doing, I'm going to be here for you."

Carson tilted his head and offered a soft smile. "I know that. I wouldn't be here otherwise. Now, will you eat, please?"

Edwin nodded, but his attention drifted from the food to the name. This was right. It was the right path. He didn't know why, exactly, he was so sure of that fact, but he didn't doubt it for a moment. Whatever Cooper needed, whatever it would take to free them both, could be found with Cooper's sister. He just hoped she'd agree to meet him.

* * * * *

It felt good to get behind the wheel of the Spider again. Edwin didn't realize how much he'd itched to feel the warm leather beneath his fingers, the engine vibrating beneath his feet, and the freedom that always came with a powerful car and an open road. He drove with the top down and ignored the broken window. As soon as he pointed the car down the freeway, he knew he could just keep driving. South, past San Diego, and then east, across the expanse of the country. Then maybe north to Canada. As long as he was in the Alfa Romeo, he could go anywhere he wanted. Be anybody he wanted to be.

He petted the dashboard, fiddled with the radio, and whistled under his breath. Every time he glanced in the rearview mirror, he saw Carson's familiar car. He had been willing to go with Edwin to San Diego to meet Hazel, but he'd flatly refused to get in the Spider. Edwin didn't want to go by himself, but Hazel had insisted he bring the car. She wanted to see it. "*I don't have anything of Cooper's.*" Forty-seven years, but the note of loss in her voice when she said Cooper's name still rang clear.

"I can't get over how good you look in this car," Cooper said from the passenger seat.

Edwin glanced at himself in the mirror. This time, his heart didn't jump to his throat, but he felt like he was looking at a stranger.

"Why did you do this?"

"I thought you liked it."

"What have you been doing for the past couple of days?"

"Watching you. Waiting for you to drive the car again."

Edwin gestured at his face. "Fix this. I don't want to look like this anymore."

"That's a lie."

"Cooper."

“It is. Why are you lying to me? I know how you want to look. I know how you want to be. I know what you dream about. I know what you need. Can Carson say that?”

“Don't talk about Carson. And you don't know what I want or what I need.”

“Have you been lying to me? You can't lie in your dreams, Edwin. You can't keep your real self from me. You can hide it from Carson. You can make Carson believe whatever you want him to believe. Right now, he believes you really want me to leave you alone.”

Edwin took a deep breath. “That is what I want.”

“Really?” Cooper moved closer, crowding against him. An immediate sense of contentment washed over him. Edwin kept his eyes glued to the road, though he wanted to see if Cooper was solid. He wanted to see those beautiful green eyes. “You never want to see me again?”

“No, I don't. We can't keep doing this, Cooper. I can't handle it. You can't. You crossed a line. Do you even know that? Do you even realize that?”

“I thought that's what you wanted.”

“No. *No*. You don't listen. I don't know what you're hearing, but it's not what I'm saying.”

“I hear every word you say. I hear every word you don't say.” Cooper's hand slid along his thigh, inching closer to Edwin's cock. “I hear the words you don't say. I hear what your body tells me.”

“That's not an excuse.”

“I hear what your body is saying right now.” His fingers moved in a slow circle, trying to coax blood to Edwin's limp shaft. “Let me make it up to you. Let me show you.”

“You can't make it up to me if you don't even realize what you did wrong. And I can't believe we're even having this conversation.”

“Stop fighting me. Why can't you see how easy it'll be, how nice it'll be, if you just stop fighting me?” Cooper's voice climbed higher with each word.

“Stop fighting you? What do you want me to do?”

“I saved you once, Edwin. Remember? I grabbed the wheel and yanked it, and I saved your life. Don't you think I could just as easily grab that wheel again?”

“You're threatening me? Is that supposed to make me want you?”

“I'm not...”

“You are. You just threatened to take over the wheel. And what? Drive me into oncoming traffic?”

“I would never do that to you, Edwin. I told you. I *love* you.”

“Then why would you even hint at something like that? That's not how people express love, Cooper.”

“What about what you're doing to me? What about the way you're treating me? What am I supposed to do when you spend all of your time with Carson?”

Edwin blinked. “I'm not doing anything to hurt you. I'm living my life. I'm dating, I'm going to work, I'm doing what I need to do.”

“Why don't you love me? Why can't I do anything to make you love me?”

The question was asked with such anguish that Edwin was almost certain Cooper had uttered it before. In another time. To another person. He felt Cooper's pain. It radiated through him. It twisted under his skin like snakes, writhing and wriggling in erratic, unpredictable patterns.

“This isn't about love, Cooper. It can't be.”

“Because nobody could love me?”

“That's not true. I know you're upset. I can feel how upset you are. But that doesn't mean—”

The wheel suddenly yanked from Edwin's hand, sending him careening into the lane to his right. Edwin quickly yanked it back as horns blared around him, his foot automatically slamming the brake.

“Cooper! What the fuck was that?”

“I'm getting your attention.”

“You *have* my attention. You've always had it.”

“I want to know why you don't love me. I want to know what the fuck I'm supposed to do to get your attention.”

Edwin glanced behind him to see Carson waiting, his eyes wide and questioning. Before Edwin could say anything, Carson jumped out of his car. As soon as he took the first step toward the Spider, Edwin knew what was going to happen.

“Don't!” His shout carried up and down the street. He knew Carson heard him. He knew Cooper heard him. He knew the kids standing on the corner heard him. But everything kept moving, despite his shouted protest. Carson kept coming toward him, his mouth forming words that Edwin didn't understand. He tried again, but the sound was much weaker. No more than a whisper.

The brake moved beneath his foot, the wheel jerked hard, and Edwin heard several things at once. Horns from nearby traffic, shouts of horror, shouts of pain, the crunching of bone. Edwin pressed on the brake until he was nearly standing in the car, and twisted the steering wheel. “Cooper. Stop. Please. Stop.”

“Somebody call the ambulance!” A woman's voice from behind him.

“Somebody call the police!”

The tension on the steering wheel disappeared before Edwin could react. The wheel jerked hard to the left, into traffic. Edwin didn't care where Cooper took them, as long as the wheels weren't crushing Carson's vulnerable body.

Tires squealed—his only warning before an SUV crashed into the side of the car. Edwin tried to shout once more before everything went black.

Chapter Eighteen

The hospital sheets were not very flattering for Carson's complexion. Neither were the bandages around his head and arms. They made him look a sort of ashen grey, like the color had been leached from his skin. The dark shade of his hair and eyelashes didn't help matters. In fact, there was such a dark contrast between his hair and his skin that Edwin could count each lash and, later, each whisker easily. He sat in a chair next to the bed and counted every hair on Carson's head, muttering prayers at the same time, trying to reach a god, any god, who could help.

The doctors reassured him that Carson was not seriously injured. He had a concussion, but he would wake up soon, and when he did, he wouldn't suffer any long-term problems. Edwin believed them. They all seemed like competent, caring people. But just because he understood it all mentally didn't mean he really believed it. How could he, when Carson looked thin and pale, a mere shadow of his vibrant self? How could he believe everything would be okay when Carson looked helpless?

And it was all his fault.

Not that he was going to be punished for what he had done. The police were investigating, but they believed Carson had been injured in an unfortunate accident. One he had partially caused when he jumped out of his car. After passing out, Edwin had awakened in the back of an ambulance, his arm in a sling, EMTs hovering above him. That was the last time Edwin had closed his eyes. He refused to sleep. He refused painkillers for his broken arm. At that point, he feared once he started taking drugs, he wouldn't be able to

stop. He would just keep taking them until he killed himself. And if he slept, Cooper might invade his dreams. Might completely overtake him.

In the twenty-four hours after the accident, Carson's entire family arrived, hovered in the room, and tried to push him out. He couldn't remember if Carson had mentioned being out to his family, so Edwin played it cool. He claimed they were friends. He claimed he was a potential investor in Carson's restaurant. He claimed they worked together. His story changed so many times, he half expected Carson's mother to find a nice orderly to escort him out. What was her name? Rachel. Rachel sounded right. Rachel Heston, her daughter, Samantha, and her other son—with Carson's coloring—Bradley.

Late the second night, Carson's eyes finally opened. They were unfocused, staring directly at the ceiling. Edwin's first impulse was to go to him and hold him and apologize and promise to make things better. But he resisted, in favor of finding a nurse. By the time they returned, Carson had turned his head, and his fuzzy eyes were moving around the room, seeking something—or somebody. When they landed on Edwin, his lips moved. It might have been a smile. Edwin hoped it was.

“Mr. Heston, how are you feeling?” the nurse asked pleasantly as she checked his vitals.

“I—What am I doing here?”

“You were in a car accident.” She offered a small consoling smile. “But you're going to be fine.”

“My head is killing me.”

“I know. You have quite a bump. Would you like some water?”

“Please.”

She offered him a cup of chipped ice, monitoring how much he swallowed before pulling it away from him. “I'll let the attending know you're awake.”

Carson looked over to Edwin, and he didn't need to say a word. The question was all over his face. And the answer was probably all over Edwin's.

"If you're feeling better later, I'll make sure you get your lunch," the nurse continued.

"Thank you," Carson managed. Edwin had had a few meals from the hospital cafeteria, and while he had found them acceptable, he had the feeling Carson wouldn't enjoy them.

"If you need some time to yourself, say the word." She sent a meaningful glance to Edwin. He shifted uncomfortably, hoping Carson wouldn't jump on her offer to kick him out of the room. He needed to speak to Carson. He needed to hear his voice. He needed to apologize. He even needed to take the full brunt of Carson's disappointment. Even though he had no intention of taxing Carson's tired body, he needed to know where they stood now.

"I'm fine."

She straightened. "Just press the Call button if you need anything."

Carson inclined his head slightly, indicating his understanding, and the nurse glanced at Edwin dismissively before bustling out.

"I didn't know if you were out, so pretty much everybody here thinks I'm just the jerk who ran you over," Edwin said. "Do you remember what happened? They said that you might not remember the accident itself."

"I remember it," Carson said softly. "I stopped because it looked like you lost control over your car. Then I saw you struggling with the wheel, and then you hit me. Did I break anything?"

"No. You were knocked out, but you don't have any broken bones or internal bleeding or anything like that."

"What happened to you?"

"I fought with him for the wheel, trying to get the car away from you. I ended up pulling in front of traffic. The side of the car is completely fucked, and I was knocked out for a bit too. I have a compound fracture in my arm, but that's it."

"I told you not to drive that car."

"I know." Edwin lowered himself to the chair and sighed. "You were right. This whole time."

"I know. And you look like shit."

"I haven't slept since they set my arm. Or taken anything for the pain."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid to," Edwin said simply. And since he was with Carson, he didn't need to expound on that answer.

"You can go get some sleep now. You should go get some sleep now."

"What if he's just waiting for me to fall asleep again?"

Carson dropped his head back to the pillow, staring up at the ceiling. "You can't avoid sleep for the rest of your life. Sooner or later..."

"I know. And I'm just going to have to get used to it. Him being here, haunting me, making demands of me, trying to control me... That's never going to change."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. There's no way to get rid of Cooper. He won't leave me alone. He clearly has free will and control over himself, so I don't think an exorcism would work. He wants me, so maybe...maybe I should just give him what he wants."

"No."

"I can't risk this happening again. What if next time he actually succeeds?" That thought had been paramount while he watched Carson sleep. It was hard enough to see his lover in the hospital bed. How could he ever see the young, vibrant man in a coffin? He wouldn't be able to handle it. He would go mad with grief and rage and guilt. "This is the only way. The best way. It's too dangerous."

"You're just going to give up and let Cooper win? You're not even going to wait until I've recovered? You're just going to dump me now?"

"I'm doing it for your own good."

“You're doing it because you want to,” Carson shot back. “You asked me for help with Cooper, and I'm willing to move heaven and earth...”

“From your hospital bed? Cooper is—He's lost it. There's something about him... He's just broken.”

“And you want to fix him?”

“No.”

“Yes, you do. That's why you can't tear yourself away from him. I'm not broken, so I'm not quite enough to keep your interest.”

Edwin's mouth fell open. “That's not true.”

“You want to fix people, Edwin. You think you have the power to solve the world's problems. One damaged person at a time.”

“No, no, that's not what it is. I know that I can't fix anybody. Or anything.”

“That doesn't stop you from trying.”

“What's wrong with that? What's wrong with trying to help people?”

“There's nothing *wrong* with it. Not until it becomes the defining feature of your life. You're willing to throw us away, willing to give up an entire future, over the possibility of saving somebody who has been dead your entire life.”

“I told you, I don't know how to get rid of him!”

Despite Edwin's outburst, Carson remained calm. “You know. You don't want to do it, but you know what you have to do.”

“I don't. I—”

“Excuse me?”

With identical frowns, the two men turned to greet the unexpected woman. She was short, probably no taller than five feet, and her black curls were liberally coated with gray. She wore a heavy coat—far too heavy for the summer temperatures—and carried a purse that was at least two times too big for her. Her brown eyes were bright and alert, and her face was mostly free

from wrinkles. It was a bit difficult to tell her age, even though she stood with a slight hunch in her shoulders, as if bowed by the weight of aging.

"I'm looking for Edwin Masters? I was told I might be able to find him here."

"I'm Edwin."

She smiled. "I'm Hazel Milk. We spoke on the phone..."

Edwin jumped to his feet. "Of course, of course. You'll have to excuse us; we weren't expecting visitors today. Come in, please. Sit down."

"I wasn't sure if I should even visit today. But since you've called me, I've been thinking...well, since you're not far from my home and you wanted to discuss the car, I should give it a shot."

"We actually want to discuss Cooper," Carson said.

Hazel frowned. "What?"

"We're happy you could make it," Edwin said quickly, directing her toward the nearest chair. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Water. Please. It's so hot out there... I can't handle the heat the way I used to. I suppose that's just part of getting older." She settled on the edge of the chair, leaning toward Carson. "How are you doing, dear? Such an unfortunate accident. That's why I never drive, if I can help it."

"Well, to be fair, I wasn't driving at the time of the accident."

"But you are going to be okay?"

"That's what they say."

Edwin passed Hazel a glass of water. "He's going to be fine. Thank God."

Hazel smiled and sipped from the ice water. "Yes, thank God for that. I feel so bad. You wouldn't have ever been in that accident if you weren't coming down to see me."

"It wasn't your fault," Carson said. "We both made mistakes we shouldn't have."

Hazel looked up to Edwin. "I'll be happy to talk now, if you'd like to. I don't know if I could tell you much, though. Papa would never let anybody near that car after...after the accident. In fact, I haven't even seen it in almost forty-eight years."

"Perhaps you should come back later," Edwin suggested softly. "We both have questions, but Carson just barely woke up, and we don't want to wear him out."

"I feel fine," Carson said.

Edwin looked over to him. "You just woke up. I'm sure if the nurse was in here, she'd say the same thing."

"The nurse isn't in here. And right now, I'm not letting you make my decisions for me. Mrs. Milk came all the way to the hospital to see us, I think it'd be rude to send her away."

Edwin blinked at the tone in Carson's voice, but he didn't register another protest. Despite the hours he'd spent at Carson's bedside, he didn't actually have a say in any of Carson's decisions. And whatever vote he might have had was lost when he told Carson they couldn't see each other anymore. Carson had his attention focused on Hazel, studiously ignoring Edwin's gaze. Was he trying to disguise his anger? Or was there something else lurking in Carson's eyes that he didn't want Edwin to see?

"I don't want to cause a fuss..."

"You're not," Edwin said. "Why haven't you seen the car in forty-seven years? It was in the garage, wasn't it?"

"Oh, well, yes, of course. But Papa, he always kept it locked. Nobody was allowed in. I think I heard he rented the car out a few times. Movies, you know. But otherwise, he kept it locked up."

"After the accident, you mean? After it returned from Italy?"

"Yes. Mama begged him to get rid of the car. She called me once—after I was married—and told me that he spent almost every night out in the garage."

Carson frowned. "Why?"

"She thought he was punishing her. That's what she told me, at any rate. I think it was probably guilt." She sipped from the water again. "Papa was a good man. He wasn't perfect, though. He had his own demons."

"What sort of demons? Why would he feel guilty?" Edwin asked.

"The fight. Cooper left the house that night after a huge fight. The two of them never got along. Cooper...he just saw the man he called Papa. He never understood. But he was so young, and how could he understand? None of us did. Sometimes I don't think even Mama really understood."

"Cooper wasn't your father's son, was he?" Carson asked.

"No, he..." Hazel's voice cracked, and she looked away, covering her mouth. Edwin and Carson exchanged an alarmed glance before Edwin moved to wrap his arm around her. She let him pull her into a half embrace, her cheek resting against his stomach. Her tears made his shirt damp, and he was suddenly sorry he'd ever called her. If he hadn't done that, Carson wouldn't be in the hospital, the car wouldn't be mostly totaled, and this poor woman wouldn't be sitting in a hospital room, crying pathetically, receiving the comfort of a stranger. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"No, no, we understand. You don't have to talk about this."

"It's silly, I know. It's all ancient history." She lifted her head, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. "I've tried to ignore it since Mama died. Never talk about it, never think about it, and maybe it'll go away. But it never does. I was thinking about poor Cooper just the day before you called me. In fact, I've been thinking about him since the estate sale. Quite frankly, hearing from you surprised me. I kept wondering what happened to that car."

"You might feel better if you tell us," Carson suggested. "I understand it's a bit painful and personal. But...we wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"Why is it important? Why does any of this matter for the car?"

“It doesn't,” Edwin admitted. “We really just wanted to know more history of the car. We plan to show it, and any information we can have about the car's history will help us. But it feels like you might want to talk about what happened, and...we're willing to listen.”

Hazel nodded and dabbed her eyes again. “I think one of my first memories of Cooper was when he was six and I was four. I followed him around everywhere. Mama called me his little shadow. I just thought he was perfect. I suppose it's the sort of hero worship only younger sisters are capable of. I thought he was my prince. And we'd get into mischief together. Once, we went into Papa's library because Cooper wanted to show me Papa's big atlas. It had all sorts of wonderful pictures. Cooper was absolutely fascinated by it. Well, Papa caught us. He didn't even say a word. He grabbed Cooper by the hand, picked him off the floor, and just spanked him until he was just sobbing. He couldn't even breathe.”

Edwin winced, but Carson's face was impassive. He tried to imagine Cooper as a little boy. He had no doubt that Cooper had been attractive and vibrant—a beautiful child with beautiful eyes. How could anybody dream of hurting him?

“That sort of thing happened all the time,” Hazel continued. “Papa would never touch the four younger children. Ever. I was never spanked in my life. But all Cooper had to do was look at him from the corner of his eye, and Papa would just...lose his mind. He punished Cooper for everything. Starting when Cooper was twelve, Papa began leaving him at home while we went on vacations and day trips. He said that Cooper was too much of a troublemaker.”

Edwin frowned. “What about the car? It doesn't sound like your father would give him such an amazing car.”

“Papa didn't. That was a gift from Mama for his eighteenth birthday. She bought it herself, out of money she had saved and tucked away. Cooper was thrilled. But Papa...” Hazel swallowed, then swallowed again. “I had never seen him so furious. And for the first time, Cooper stood up to him.”

"I don't understand why he was so angry," Carson said.

"Control," Edwin answered. "A car has always meant freedom in America. If you have a car, you can go anywhere you want. Do whatever you want to do."

"Right. The fight that night... The four of us huddled up on my bed and cried. We couldn't even breathe. I remember looking over at Stevie, the baby, and his face was flaming red and he had cried himself breathless. It sounded like the end of the world downstairs. Papa had tried to hit Cooper, but Cooper defended himself. So, Papa...went after Mama. And Cooper lost it. That was when I ran upstairs and gathered up everybody. And we could hear them, for what felt like hours. Shouting. And crying. And punching. It seemed like they were breaking every glass in the house, and Mama was screaming and begging for them to stop. Then...Cooper just left. I—" She caught her breath.

"Mrs. Milk..."

Hazel waved Edwin off. "I watched him from the window. He pulled out of the yard like a bat out of hell. And that was it. He was gone."

Edwin sunk in his chair, overcome by sympathy for the boy who had probably felt like he didn't belong anywhere. Cast out of his family, despised by his father for something he didn't understand, something he had no control over, and now all he wanted was the one thing he'd never had when he was alive. Love.

"Why did he keep the car, then?" Carson asked.

"Papa went a little crazy after that, I think. They both did. He kept insisting everything would be better once he fixed the car. Even when he was told not to do anything to the car. When it finally got back from Europe, Mama took one look at the flawless car and insisted Papa lock it up in the garage. She was crying the whole time. Things were never the same after that."

Edwin swallowed hard, but the lump stayed in his throat. Samson must have believed himself guilty for Cooper's death. After eighteen years, he had finally won. He had finally sent Cooper out of his life. Maybe the moment

Cooper died, he had come to his senses. Or maybe it was afterward, when Cooper revealed himself to his father. Because Edwin had no doubt that Samson had kept Cooper tied to the car with the force of his own guilt.

“But you were right.” Hazel looked over to Carson. “Cooper wasn't Papa's son. Mama admitted as much in her...in the letter she left us. She didn't name his real father. Just said that he was a young man who was shipped out to Europe, and she never heard from him again. I think Papa suspected, but he never had evidence until that day.”

“Did...did your father ever mention seeing Cooper again after he died?” Carson asked. Edwin looked up sharply.

“He...he talked about Cooper a lot. That's all.”

“I think you're the most popular patient on this floor,” the attending said as he stepped into the room. He smiled a greeting at Edwin and Hazel. “If you don't mind stepping out for a few minutes, I'd like to give Mr. Heston a quick exam.”

“Of course.” Edwin stood and offered his hand to Hazel, who took it with a small watery smile. “I'll be back in a bit.”

“Really?” Carson asked.

“Yes. Really.”

“You know I'll be here.”

Edwin smiled at him. He hoped it was a reassuring smile, though he didn't know if he could actually offer anything as a reassurance. Hazel clung to his arm, surprisingly strong despite her slight frame and the way her hands trembled. As soon as they stepped into the hall, she shook her head apologetically.

“I'm sorry. That all just came...spilling out of me.”

“That's fine.”

“Will it help you with the history?”

“I think it will. I hadn't realized how little it was driven before the accident. But...if he kept the car locked up, why did it have so many miles on it?”

Hazel shrugged. “I couldn't tell you. Like I said, I haven't even seen it since the night of the accident. And after Mama died, none of us really had reason to go home again. We all became quite...estranged.”

“So, Samson spent the forty years after his wife's death with nothing but the servants and the car for company?”

“He—I always regretted that, but he didn't help the situation. There's only so many times you can reach out to another person and be ignored before you just...stop.”

“Yes. Yes, I can see how that would be the case.”

“Are you sure your friend is going to be okay?”

“I don't know. I hope so. I—If he's not, I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself.”

Hazel tilted her head, looking at him quizzically. “I thought it was an accident.”

“There's always somebody at fault in an accident, I think.”

“Papa thought so too. I would stay longer, but I've got an appointment this afternoon.”

“Do you have to leave now? There's a Starbucks in the lobby. We could get a cup of coffee. It might be good to give yourself some time before you drive anywhere.”

“That's very kind of you, Mr. Masters, but I think I'd like to be alone right now.”

“I understand.”

“Once you've got the Spider back, I would still like to see it.”

“I'll call you.”

She patted his arm. "I'll look forward to that. And take care of yourself. You look exhausted. I don't think I've ever seen anybody who looks so run-down."

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"Don't carry guilt around that doesn't belong to you. Trust me. It'll make you old."

"You're not talking about your father, are you?"

She squeezed his elbow. "No, I'm not."

Edwin wanted to offer to walk her down to her car, but he didn't want to impose on her. He felt like he had already imposed enough. For an entire lifetime.

Edwin found a chair, and as soon as he sat down, his eyes began to droop. He needed to keep himself awake. At least until he had a chance to speak to Carson. Then he could find a corner somewhere and curl up. There were weights tied to his ears and his eyelids, and they dragged his head down. Every time he felt his chin touch his chest, he jerked up again, like a mostly broken marionette.

The twelfth or thirteenth time he jerked himself awake, he saw the doctor—what was his name?—leave Carson's room. He looked to be several miles away, like a man walking past the narrow opening of a very long tunnel. Edwin forced himself to his feet, ignoring the dark lines around his vision, and stumbled his way back to Carson's room. One short conversation. That was all he needed. Then he could let himself sleep.

"You really do look like shit," Carson greeted.

"You're not looking so hot yourself."

"Dr. Simpson said I can go home tomorrow."

Edwin smiled. "That's good."

"Can you drive in your condition?"

"If I drive very carefully. But are you sure you want me to? Your parents will probably be happy to."

"I guess that depends on the answer to my next question."

"What?"

"Are you still dumping me?"

Edwin sighed and perched on the foot of the bed. "I told you, I can't keep you safe. I can't even keep myself safe. I can't risk hurting you again."

"You know what you have to do, don't you?"

"Carson..."

"After Hazel's story, you know what needs to be done. You must."

"I don't know if—"

"You know," Carson said flatly. "And I think that if you want the two of us to have a future, you'll do it."

"Do you really think it's that easy?" Edwin demanded.

"I think you know what's real. I think you know what's important. I think you know when it's time to let go. When it's time to move on."

"I don't know if anybody can ever really move on."

"You can. And I guess if you do, I'll know tomorrow. I'll be leaving here at ten."

"Ten," Edwin repeated.

"Ten sharp. For what it's worth, I hope you're here."

Edwin crossed to the door before looking over his shoulder. "For what it's worth? I want to be here too."

Chapter Nineteen

Edwin's dreams brought him to the ocean, emerald green waves crashing into a rocky shore and splashing over his feet. Edwin didn't look around. He sat where he stood, letting the water pull at him, splash over his pants, coat his skin with a fine salty mist. The sky was bright, full of stars, even though a fat moon sat on the edge of the horizon. Cooper never dimmed the stars when the moon was full and yellow. The waves whispered to him in captive promises, and he knew none of this was his own creation.

This was an apology.

"You spoke to Hazel today," Cooper said from behind him.

"Yes."

"You could have just asked me. I would have told you everything."

"Maybe."

"But you were really looking for a way to get rid of me."

"Something is holding you here, Cooper. Something you won't let go of, no matter what. I needed to know what that was."

"You. You keep me here."

"You just met me, Cooper. Don't you remember that?"

His only answer was silence. Did Cooper remember? Or had he just focused on Edwin until nothing else existed, either before or after him?

"But you don't love me," Cooper finally said, sitting beside Edwin on the rocks.

"No, but I might have. If we were born at the same time. We didn't even exist at the same time. I wasn't born until months after your accident."

“You're just saying that.”

“No, I'm not. I would have taken one look at you and fallen totally in love. Did you haunt Samson? Did he ever see you?”

“No. At least, I don't think so. The things he saw—the things he felt—they were all in his own mind.”

“This conversation is in my own mind,” Edwin reminded him. “Did he reach you, though? Did you hear his apologies?”

“What makes you think he ever apologized to me? Did you apologize to every person you might have hurt?”

“Then what was he doing for all those hours?”

“Raging.”

Edwin frowned, looking away from the perpetually young man to study the waves. They were Cooper's waves. Why did he return to the ocean again and again? What fascinated him about the water? Had he lost something there once? Or had he found it?

“What was it like when you died?”

“I don't remember.”

“Really?”

“I've imagined what it must be like. I've tried to picture it. But there aren't any actual memories.”

“What about...? What is the first thing you remember?”

“Samson shouting that Mama was dead. Shouting at me. Saying that we had finally killed her. Finally drove her to her grave. Shouting that neither one of us deserved to rest, because now she never could. He shouted and shouted and shouted.”

“He called you. And he trapped you there. He made you a prisoner of his own guilt. I think I called to you too, in a way.”

“I don't understand.”

"I don't either," Edwin admitted. "But you do deserve your peace. You do deserve to rest. You deserve..." He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. "I never told you the real reason I bought that car."

"What is it?"

"I was five. And I was standing in my driveway, and my mother got in the car, and she said something to me. But I couldn't hear it, because that's when the engine started. I guess she was probably telling me good-bye. That moment—those lost words—stayed with me, and I always traced it back to the car. I always associated the engine with my mother's voice. I spent thirty thousand dollars and—But I'll never be able to have the thing I really need."

"What happened to her?"

"She wasn't ready to be a parent, I suppose. She went to San Francisco. It was sixty-seven. She was barely twenty-two. You deserve a life, Cooper. You deserve to live to a ripe old age, and you deserve to have children and grandchildren. You deserve to know what it's like to be loved. But I can't make that happen."

"You're going to send me away."

The accusation in his voice sounded like glass breaking against rocks.

"I'm going to let you go," Edwin said softly. "I'm going to let it all go."

"But we could have been..."

"Cooper, you are dead. Why won't you accept that? Why won't you let yourself accept that? You can't change it. You can't undo it. It's horrible, and it's unfair, and I'm sorry."

"But I can touch you."

Edwin supposed it was as simple as that for Cooper. As long as they had a connection, he would never voluntarily give it up. Did that mean he was going to kill Cooper all over again? Or did that mean he was finally going to do the right thing by a young man who had probably only known a moment of love

in his entire life? What if there was nothing else? What if there was nothing more? What if he was destroying a consciousness?

“Are you happy like this, Cooper?”

“I'm happy with you.”

“That's not what I asked. But you don't need to answer me. I think I already know.”

“I don't want to go. Please don't make me. Please...please, Edwin.”

“I can't. I'm sorry.”

“But what if there's nothing there? What if...? What if I just...”

“Stop? I don't know, Cooper. But none of us do.” Edwin leaned over and kissed Cooper's cheek. “I'm waking up now.”

“Edwin, wait.”

“What?”

“I'm sorry.”

Edwin wasn't sure if he believed him. He wasn't sure if Cooper was fully capable of feeling regret or sorrow. He wasn't even sure if Cooper understood what he was apologizing for. But Edwin nodded. “Thank you.”

* * * * *

The '62 Alfa Romeo Spider 2600 glittered in the sun, a little the worse for wear, but still beautiful. Edwin circled the car once, letting his fingers linger on the hot chrome as he walked. He wiped a piece of dirt from the passenger door, choosing to focus on that small flaw instead of the almost completely demolished driver's side. Studying it made the back of his eyes tingle, but he still lingered over every detail. He didn't want to forget one. A picture wouldn't do the car justice.

“Are you sure you want to crush this one?” Justin wiped an oily hand across his forehead. “It seems like a shame.”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

"But it's hardly totaled. I could use it for parts, if nothing else."

"No. Please. I'd like it to be crushed."

"I still think it's a shame."

"Yes, it is."

"You must have paid a pretty penny for this beauty. And the fact that she still runs? You know how rare that is for these Spiders, right?"

"It's an amazing car. But it's my car, and I want it to be crushed now."

"Right now?"

"Yes. I'd like to see it."

"Do you have something against this particular car?"

Edwin smiled a little. "Let's just call it an insurance policy."

"You're not trying to hide anything...hinky...are you?"

"No. Nothing like that. Here. Does this help?" Edwin pulled a crisp, fresh bill from his wallet and passed it over. Justin's eyes widened as he accepted it, and he nodded with quite a bit of enthusiasm.

"Yeah, yeah, that helps. Well, you can just stand here. The crusher is right over there. Just shout if you change your mind."

Edwin nodded, though he knew he wouldn't be changing his mind. He thought he saw the outline of Cooper's figure in the backseat, and he murmured a soft prayer. *Please take him. Please let him rest in peace. Please let this be the right thing.*

Warm fingers folded around his. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. This is the right thing. You were right."

Carson sighed. "I don't take any pleasure in being right. I wish I was wrong. I know what this car means to you."

Edwin tracked the progress of the tow truck across the junkyard. Cooper's silhouette made his heart ache. "It's just a car. It's never been anything except a car."

“You paid thirty grand for that car.”

“That just means I was foolish. It doesn't change the fact that it's nothing more than a hunk of metal. And that's all it's ever been.”

“It was beautiful, though.”

“Yeah.” The huge magnet swung around to lift the Spider high in the air. “Did I ever tell you about my mother?”

“No.”

Edwin gave him a light tug. “Come on. I'll buy you a coffee.”

“Don't you want to watch?”

Please let this be the right thing.

“No. I want to buy you a coffee.”

Carson smiled. “Thank you. For the coffee and for...everything.”

“I have a feeling I should be thanking you. I have the feeling I will be thanking you for the rest of my life.”

“You plan to hang around for that long?”

“If you don't get sick of me.”

“I won't.”

Behind them, the weight began to move, compressing the Alfa Romeo Spider into nothing but dust, metal scraps, and memories. *Please. Please let this be the right thing.*

“Edwin?”

“What?”

“I'm pretty sure I love you today.”

Edwin brought Carson's hand up to his mouth. Behind him, the sickening sound of twisted metal and broken glass continued. His prayers ceased. A weight lifted from his shoulders.

“I'm pretty sure I love you too.”

They walked out of the junkyard, hand in hand. Edwin thought of what that thirty thousand represented, then let it go, along with the car, Cooper, and the prayers. It had brought Carson into his life. He could never regret that.

THE END

Pepper Espinoza

Pepper Espinoza works full time as an author and part-time as a college instructor. She has published with Amber Quill Press, Liquid Silver Books, and Samhain Publishing. When she's not writing or teaching, she's spoiling her cats, watching movies with her sister, or playing Rock Band with her husband.