



**Bastards and Pretty Boys**

KZ Snow

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Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Devin Govaere

Cover Artist  
Lyn Taylor

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## **Blurb**

Charles Larkin is finally happy with his life...for the most part. He's happy with his new summer getaway—a rustic cottage he just bought on a small Wisconsin lake. He's happy that his ex-wife, whom he divorced because he couldn't play straight anymore, has become one of his best friends. He's happy he can breathe again.

It's only Kenneth, Charlie's boyfriend of five months, who makes this new life less than completely satisfying. Charlie feels they've never been quite right for each other, and Kenneth cements that conviction when he makes a disturbing confession. Charlie knows their time together is quickly coming to an end. Problem is, Kenneth doesn't know it. And he tends to be rather possessive.

Planning to spend a quiet, relaxing two or three weeks at Cloud Lake—fixing up his place, reading, even attempting to overcome his fear of water—Charlie is less than thrilled to discover his next-door neighbor is one hell of a looker. He doesn't need that kind of distraction, especially since his issues with Kenneth haven't yet been resolved. But there's a ninety percent chance the neighbor is straight, has a wife or girlfriend, and could be leaving the next day. Charlie clings to those probabilities.

Only, Booker isn't going anywhere, and he isn't that easily ignored. And neither is his unexpected, none-too-savory baggage. And neither, for that matter, is Charlie's. But when two people care enough about each other, they figure out how to help carry each other's baggage...or cast it aside.

## Chapter One

One soiled, wet sock, frosted with duck squirt. Charred wood. A reeking heap of weeds that served as a bier for two dead fish. More crud, and still more.

I felt like a crime scene investigator.

"Cabo San Lucas it ain't." Kenneth, who'd shuffled through the sand with me, scanned the beach with a disapproving squint.

"Nope." Sighing, I gave a desultory kick to a tangle of Christ-knows-what. Duct tape and monofilament, mostly, although I glimpsed a few feathers and what could've been a chipped lure. "But it's mine."

Kenneth glanced over his shoulder, casting more disapproval. "The house is rather small."

"It's a cottage," I said. "A dwelling on a lake is called a cottage. You should know that. You've lived in Wisconsin long enough."

"Well, those weren't cottages I saw on Lake Geneva."

"For all intents and purposes," I said, "Lake Geneva is a suburb of Chicago."

It was near noon, a Saturday. I'd just gone into town to meet Kenneth, have brunch with him and his son, and then lead the way back to my new summer retreat. I'd driven up yesterday to go to my closing and spent the night in a local motel.

Knowing I'd long wanted a modest piece of vacation property, Kenneth had told me about this place. He'd found out about it through one of his coworkers, who also had a cottage somewhere on Cloud Lake. Now Kenneth seemed to regret having passed along the info. I'm sure he would've liked something more luxurious, but I was satisfied, and he wasn't the one paying the mortgage and property taxes.

Movement far off to the left caught my attention. Caught and momentarily held it. My neighbor immediately to the south, or one of my neighbor's guests, walked to the lake and waded in. A tall, wiry man with tousled dark hair, he wore plain cutoffs. Not Speedos, nothing tight and microscopic. When he was about hip-deep, he gracefully tilted forward and slid beneath the water like a warm knife into butter. Resurfacing, he lapsed into a strong, smooth crawl. I wasn't sure why the sight transfixed me.

Kenneth, of course, was.

I could feel him watching me watch the man. "Something grab your interest?" he asked.

"Seems my neighbors are here this weekend." A casual observation, meant to undercut his archness. I was tired of Kenneth thinking he owned my eyes. Still, good boyfriend that I was, I laid a hand on his lower back.

He stepped away. "Don't do that out here," he muttered under his breath.

"Why? Nobody's watching. And even if someone were—"

"Charlie!"

"See?" Kenneth said.

"Oh, come on. Like Carolyn doesn't know. Besides, my hand was on your back, not your ass."

I turned toward the deck at the rear of my humble cottage. Carolyn was gesturing for me to join her. Kenneth's son hovered at her back. I didn't mind Carolyn being there—

she was one of my best buddies—but the boy, Kris, made me uncomfortable. Kenneth's secrecy was to blame for that. He didn't like his son seeing us together. At all.

Funny that I would prefer the company of my ex-wife to that of my lover's kid. Actually, not so funny. Unfortunate.

"She probably wants me to look at curtains or some damned thing," I said.

As I ambled back to the cottage, Kenneth stayed on the trashy beach. I knew why. He was going to keep scoping out the swimmer, assessing the man's threat level.

I'd never understood that about Kenneth, that prickling suspicion. The odds were heavily in favor of swimmer-guy being straight, with a wife or girlfriend, and even more heavily in favor of him being altogether ordinary. That wasn't a combination to inspire lust. Not in me, anyway. I'd worked long and hard to stop being an ordinary, married, straight guy, so the type didn't interest me in the least.

As soon as I mounted the deck, Kris scurried down to join his dad. I got the impression the poor kid saw me as a rival. He probably still hadn't adjusted to his parents' divorce, and now his father had a new "best buddy." Trying to include him in our activities only seemed to make matters worse. I felt sorry for the boy.

"He was following me around like a shadow," Carolyn said, watching Kris jog awkwardly across patchy grass to littered sand. "I realize the kid has insecurity issues or something, but it still gets on my nerves."

I chuckled. "Where's your maternal instinct?"

"I traded it for objective judgment." She looked at me, eyes shaded with one hand. "And don't laugh. You know I'm not a fan of Daddy Dearest, either."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Can we drop it?" I didn't need to be reminded that I'd been growing disaffected with Kris's father as well. "This is the start of my vacation. No grouching allowed."

"Sorry," Carolyn muttered. "I just think—"

"I know what you think. So I don't need to hear the mantra again. Okay?"

Carolyn had never liked Kenneth. We'd been divorced for nearly two years, but she was still protective of me. It was as if I'd gone from being her husband to her little brother.

I steered Carolyn through the deck's sliding double doors before she had a chance to expound on her opinion. The cottage had a tolerable false-fresh smell. I figured it was a bridge between the sour, musty staleness that had greeted us earlier and the true breath of nature that seeped through the open windows—sluggishly, for it was a hot, humid day.

Although the cottage came furnished, it didn't come in move-in condition. I had to supply all the household accoutrements. Unloading boxes from my minivan was all I'd done after leaving the realtor's office yesterday. It wasn't until early this morning, after Carolyn arrived, that the set-up of my getaway home began in earnest.

"Well? See if you like it." Carolyn swept a hand toward the bedroom I'd claimed as mine, the one closest to the bathroom. I walked into it and made my inspection.

I saw more than I'd anticipated. Not only were the curtains hung, the bed was made, lamps stood on nightstands, and grooming aids dressed the dressers. Everything appropriately understated, with a hint of rustic. A modest, Midwestern version of Adirondack chic.

"Is it masculine enough?" Carolyn asked uncertainly.

Laughing, I turned and gave her a hug. "If it were any more masculine, my voice

would drop an octave.”

My ex could accept my being gay—well, now she could, although it had taken a few months of therapy and countless, tearful conversations with her mother and four sympathetic girlfriends—but I had a feeling she harbored a nagging fear of nellie. Charles Larkin wasn’t going to swish through the world if *she* could help it.

In mock exasperation, she tried to push me away as I gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Now listen,” I said, holding her arms, thinking how lovely she was with her L’Oreal-enhanced red hair in a thick braid and her brown eyes unenhanced by any extra coloration. “I didn’t invite you here to be a scrubwoman. I just wanted you to see the place and get familiar with it. You know it’s at your disposal when I’m not around. You and Joan and Sylvia and what’s-her-name with the ugly tattoo.”

“Zoe. What about Ira?”

“Yeah, her too.”

Carolyn’s eyes and lips compressed simultaneously, as if invisible drawstrings hung from their corners. Ira was her boyfriend. I gave her my best puckish smile. After a second’s resistance, she loosened the strings.

“It’s exactly *because* you’re letting me use the place that I’m cleaning it. ‘Rent-free’ isn’t in my vocabulary.” She flattened a hand on my chest. “Hey, I have to run to the grocery store. I’ll bring Junior along. Give him something to do and get him out of your hair. You call Kenny in here and work your magic. When I get back, I’m doing the kitchen. Then we’re making dinner.”

Kenny. Christ. If he heard that, he’d vaporize her with a look. “I get to do Kenneth and you get to do the kitchen. Doesn’t sound like a fair trade.”

“You’re right.” Carolyn said with a smirk. “I’m making out *way* better than you are.”

\* \* \* \*

“It’s shaping up.” Kenneth palmed the top of the vacuum cleaner handle, as if he were about to run the machine. Of course, he’d never entertain such a notion. He’d just found a place to rest his right hand.

I lifted that hand and laid it on my waist, getting Kenneth to face me. “Carolyn did a good job in the bedroom. It’s all put together now, tidy and earth-toned and totally uncorrupted. Like a monk’s cell.”

That got a smile out of him. Kenneth’s left hand joined his right. He pulled me closer. His gaze covetously ran over my face. “You’re so fucking pretty, Charlie golden-boy.” His fingers gripped my jaw. “So fucking pretty.”

He gave me one of his hard, sloppy kisses, and I noticed how off-center it was, recalled how off-center they always were. Our mouths never quite melded. His lower lip always landed beneath rather than on mine. Irrked, I fractionally drew back, reconnoitered, and tried subtly to reposition our mouths. Same careless slippage. His lips didn’t kiss me; their lining did. Slurping didn’t bother me at the height of passion, but now...

Abruptly I drew back. My reaction made me feel petty, but I couldn’t help it.

Kenneth scowled at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just...” It took effort for me not to wipe the lower half of my clean-shaven face, only a bit less effort not to say *you kiss like a goddamned carp*. “Guess I’m preoccupied.”

*That* he could comprehend. Or maybe he couldn't but was merely indulging me again. Kenneth liked indulging me when I was troubled—even when I didn't need it, even when I didn't want it. I think it made him feel in control to coo in sympathy and ladle on the understanding, although the sympathy and understanding always seemed superficial.

"I know," he said, running a hand down my face. "Between worrying about the business while you're gone and hoping your finances will stretch to cover this place..."

I was tempted to ask *do I have to fail or be in distress for you to feel superior to me? Why do you even need to feel superior to me?* But there was no sense getting into it. This was our last chance to be alone together for at least another week. So, instead of initiating some big, hairy discussion that wouldn't go anywhere, I redirected Kenneth's attention as well as mine.

I took a step back then slowly worked my t-shirt over my head. For good measure, I slipped my shorts down to my pelvis. Kenneth's gaze slid from my chest to my abdomen.

"Maybe we can fix what ails me," I said, "by corrupting that bedroom."

"How long will they be gone?"

"Long enough."

"You sure?" Kenneth looked and sounded dubious.

"Positive."

Kenneth pulled off his polo shirt and undid the fasteners on his Calvin Klein jeans. I turned and headed for the bedroom before he could give me another kiss.

We sat on opposite sides of the neatly made bed and shed the rest of our clothing. The whole cottage felt like a moist wad of heat, and I reminded myself to get the window AC situated while Carolyn "did" the kitchen. After I flung the lone blanket off the queen-size bed, Kenneth and I simultaneously stretched out on the top sheet. Our arms folded around each other. We pulled together in an awkward but familiar tangle—of knobby knees and rebar shins and flexing muscle.

Again I felt the familiar landscape of Kenneth's body, more plains than rises. His skin was dusted with hair in only a few places, and only in two that I ever really felt—his crotch and his calves. The rest of him seemed flat and barren as the steppes of central Asia. I couldn't remember if I'd noticed it before, but I definitely noticed it now. The awareness dismayed me. Instead of losing myself, I was discovering more things I didn't want to know.

I let my attention funnel down to our butting cocks. *That* connection never disappointed. We were both hard, and we were both eager.

Kenneth shoved against me. "Did you like watching that man swim?" he murmured against my neck. He used the heel of his left foot to push my hips into his.

The question perplexed me at first. I didn't know what Kenneth wanted or expected me to say. But the possibility I *did* like it seemed to turn him on as much as vex him. Shit, it could've been his own anger that turned him on.

"Not particularly," I said.

He reached down and gave my cock a gentle squeeze. "You sure?" He squeezed again, more assertively.

I gasped. "Maybe I did like it."

"Maybe?" His mouth hovered over mine, breath hot and quick.

"Okay, yeah, I liked it."

“Him.”

“Yeah. Him.”

“Tell me how much. Tell my why.” Kenneth’s hands ran over my chest, abs, back. He scoured his cock with mine, with my pubic hair. “Tell me,” he whispered against my mouth.

The game was getting exciting. My breath went shallow and choppy as I rocked against Kenneth’s crotch.

“I liked ... his hair. And how well he ... filled out those shorts. I liked his ... strength. And his grace.”

Damned if I wasn’t starting to believe it. A picture of the man formed in my mind. I held it there, painting in the details. I imagined him swimming naked, clear water sluicing over the smooth, pale mounds of his ass. I imagined his cock thickening, responding to the lake’s cool caress.

Kenneth’s hand slid down to our bucking hips and feverishly fondled both our dicks, urging them together, making head nuzzle head. My breath gusted against his hair.

“Do you want to fuck him, Charlie?”

“Yes.”

It was true, in a way. I wanted to fuck my image of that lithe, dark-haired man. I saw him striding out of the lake and onto the sand, his body wet, water trickling over his taut nipples and dripping from the tip of his cock. I saw him lift his face to the sun and squeegee his hair back from his forehead. He smiled as I approached him. “*I thought that would get you over here,*” he said, dropping his hands to his slender hips. He was taunting me ... and I loved it. His cock swelled as I stared at him. Shameless, both of us. And we loved it.

Kenneth had pulled pillows from the head of the bed and coaxed me onto my belly, hips raised. The pillows cradled my hard-on. Realizing he planned on boning me snapped me back to reality.

“Lube,” I said half into the mattress, then tried to push through the haze in my mind and remember where it was.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Kenneth in a gruff mumble. He straddled the lower part of my body and partially encased it, his weight settling down.

The hell I wasn’t going to worry about it. I tried flipping over, but Kenneth pressed a hand to my back, forcing me down again. Before I could do anything further, his cock nestled vertically between my glutes. Immediately he started gliding, up and down instead of in and out. The movements became sharp jerks that nudged his cockhead over my tailbone.

“Go ahead and fuck him, Charlie,” Kenneth said in a rush. “Fuck him until you sweat.”

Jesus, he really got off on that fantasy. Panting, he pumped more furiously. His shaft seemed to carve its own groove between my cheeks. At the end of one stroke, his cock drew back and abruptly angled toward my hole. I felt the bump of his glans.

Just as I flinched, anticipating some hurt, cum began to spurt into my crack. Kenneth let out a wavering little cry with each shot. I relaxed onto the pillows and mourned the loss of my erection, for it had indeed gone south.

Just as Kenneth dropped forward, going limp on my back, a tight ache started gnawing at my groin. I shifted uncomfortably, and Kenneth lifted himself.



“Finish me,” I said. I pulled the pillows from beneath my hips, tossed them against the headboard, and slid out from under him. I turned and settled back, legs spread. Quickly, I wrapped a hand around my dick and began a gripping glide. “I’ve got some unhappy nuts here.”

“What happened?” Kenneth asked, taking over for me.

I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. There was my neighbor again, sloshing toward the shore. “Fucking my pillows didn’t cut it.”

The gnarled heaviness went from tormenting to exciting as Kenneth drew half my cock into his mouth. Unlike his kisses, his blowjobs were precise and workmanlike, each suck carefully executed. I really didn’t care how he did it, though, as long as he saw it through to the end.

The tightness gave way to tingles as my cock rapidly expanded once more, its core reforming. “Love that,” I exhaled, meaning that *I* did, not that Kenneth had to. My pelvis jerked in response to the suction. I felt at once weak and tense. My muscles seemed to crawl over each other and want to burst out of my skin.

I had to shoot.

The swimmer reappeared in my mind, naked and drenched and sleekly muscled. He held my gaze as he lowered himself to the sand and stretched out, prone, his bare ass to the sky. I knew I could have him if I wanted him. I could bury my cock to the root...

My arousal crested. I grunted as it broke, my dick pulsing cum into Kenneth’s mouth and the rest of me shivering and reeling like a wave-tossed boat. The orgasm was a minor squall, not a major tempest, but it shattered that godawful fullness in my balls.

Kenneth got up. I assumed he was going to get a drink of something, since he didn’t like any residue of cum in his mouth—not even his lover’s. That bothered me, too. We never kissed after one of us gave the other head.

Sighing, I sank into the pillows and draped my arms over my head. There were a lot of things we didn’t do. We never engaged in nipple teasing; for some reason, it made Kenneth self-conscious, as if he thought it was womanish to be aroused in that way. We didn’t laugh during sex. We didn’t play-wrestle or experiment with kink or recite poetry to each other. We took care of business. Predictably.

Although Kenneth and I had never agreed to exclusivity, I hadn’t been with anybody else since we’d met. Tired of come-and-go encounters, which were all I’d had until he came along, I was grateful to have a boyfriend. I could abandon the whole manic club scene and hours of humiliating, dispiriting Internet trawling. I could be queer safely, in private, and be assured of getting my rocks off on a regular basis with someone who actually gave a shit about me.

Advantages, there were many. Or so I’d striven to believe. Therefore, I’d made a subconscious vow to be true to him.

Pairing with Kenneth seemed to legitimize being gay. He was intelligent and articulate, successful and impeccably groomed, and there was nary a whiff of queerness about him. It embarrasses me, profoundly, to realize I’d once thought that way, but not everybody comes bursting out of the closet wrapped in a rainbow flag and slips right into the pride groove. I’d never been mailed a handbook on the Right Things for Gay Men to Think, Feel, Say, and Do. So I just bumbled along, rejoicing in my finally freed, God-given sexuality, and stupidly thought this nice-looking, respectable man could help me erase any lingering traces of shame and self-doubt.

Until I began to realize *he* was the one still soiled with shame. And he'd given up scrubbing at it.

I got out of bed and pulled on my clothes. On my way to the bathroom, just a few steps from my bedroom, I glimpsed Kenneth in the kitchen, a navy-blue bath towel wrapped securely around his waist. His neatly trimmed brown hair was only slightly mussed, short spikes of it skewed at funny angles. Sure enough, he was sipping at a glass of lemonade.

I closed myself in the bathroom and did something I normally only did when I shaved and combed my hair. I stood in front of the mirror. *You're so fucking pretty, Charlie golden-boy. So fucking pretty.* Yeah, I was. I guess. By most people's standards.

I threaded a hand through my hair to put it back in place. A smooth, blonde wave swept from a side-part. Beneath it, a nice cut that wasn't too long or too short, too shaggy or too severe. I pulled down my mouth—a "Christmas-bow mouth," Kenneth called it, which would've given Carolyn the nellie jits for sure—then twisted it left and right. A shadow had formed. My nose, straight and even, was long enough not to look weak or, worse yet, pert. The seasonal freckling along my cheekbones remained a demure, sparse cascade. I had unremarkable blue eyes and tawny lashes.

How very Aryan. Hitler sure as hell would've liked me. Lowering my head, I shook it and laughed through my nose. At least *he* wouldn't be hitting on me anytime soon.

After cleaning myself up, I left the bathroom and looked for Kenneth. I didn't have to look far. Dressed now, he stood in the living room and gazed at the lake. Its corrugated surface tossed brazen winks through the screened doors. I thought of my neighbor, of his intimacy with the water. And my fear of it.

"You know, Charlie," Kenneth said, turning to face me, "I *have* fucked around on you. More than once." Both his face and voice were impassive.

My gaze fixed on the tumbler he still held. The glass was half empty. "No," I said, sinking into a chair. Unconsciously, my tone mimicked his. "I didn't know that."

## Chapter Two

To call the rest of that day “strange” wouldn’t adequately describe it. Carolyn returned and did the kitchen. I vacuumed, then installed the air conditioner with Kenneth’s help and got it cranked up. Kris fished, or pretended to, off the end of the pier, until his father took him out on the lake in my two-seater paddle boat.

Kenneth had been chatty, but I hadn’t absorbed much of anything he’d said. It was weird for him to be so convivial—weird under most circumstances but especially under these. Hell, he’d just confessed to being a cheater or a cock-whore or something equally unsavory, and there he was, acting like he didn’t have a care in the world.

As Carolyn made a summery quiche, I threw together a salad. That finished, I sat at the kitchen table, chin in hand, vacantly watching her efficient movements. How odd that I never missed our peaceful domestic routines, regardless of how much I still enjoyed her company.

She sat across from me after setting the table. “Something seems to be bothering you.”

Of course she’d notice. Women’s intuition and all that. “He told me he’s been fucking around,” I said bluntly, without preface.

She lifted her eyebrows. “Kenneth?”

I dropped my hand to the table. “No. Kris.”

Carolyn made a face at me. “I sure as hell hope you’re using protection.”

“Of course,” I said impatiently. “That’s not the point. *I’ve* never...” I stopped myself. Even for Carolyn and me, pals that we were, this was a little too personal.

She let out one of those I-saw-it-coming sighs. “Well, you know I’ve never thought for a minute that he loves you. Not in any sort of normal way. And certainly not devotedly.”

I merely nodded. How could I *not* know? She’d voiced that opinion at least once a month. “That’s never mattered to me,” I said. “I don’t love him either. But when you’ve been seeing someone steadily for five months, you’d at least like to think—” I shrugged. Think what? That some mutual trust and respect were in order?

Carolyn touched the back of my hand. “I’m sorry, Charlie.”

Her sympathy was genuine, but I didn’t want it. That’s not what I was after. “Don’t be,” I said, “I don’t particularly care, except that I feel like a chump. It was the way he popped off with it, out of the blue. I hadn’t asked. He just told me. And he was so nonchalant about it.”

Actually, I *was* a little wounded—finding out your significant other has strayed always came with a sting—but I left that part out. Admitting to it would’ve made me feel even more like a chump. And one who somehow fell short of the mark.

“Hm.” Carolyn idly fingered the napkin ring near her hand. “You know what I think? I think he wanted to hurt you. And scare you.”

I gave her a befuddled stare. “But ... why?”

Carolyn smiled wanly. “Jesus, Charlie, go stand in front of a mirror.”

“I just did, a little while ago. So what’s your point?”

She leaned toward me. “He tried to hurt you because he resents the way you look.

And he probably resents the way some people, men *and* women, ogle you. I'll guarantee nobody stares at him that way. He's eaten up with insecurity. So he wanted you to know that men find him attractive, too, hoping that would make you cling to him. He wants you to be afraid of losing him." Looking as smug as if she'd solved an age-old riddle, Carolyn sat back and lifted her eyebrows.

"What?" I said.

There was probably some sense in her analysis—there almost always was—but I didn't get a chance to sift through the verbiage and find it. The patio doors hissed open. I'd have to ponder Kenneth's motives in private.

"From now on, shoes off!" Carolyn called out before Kenneth and Kris stepped inside. They obediently shed their footwear.

"Dinner's ready, boys," Carolyn said with brightness so brittle, I was surprised it didn't shatter and fall to the floor.

More small talk as we ate together. Again, I barely paid attention. I did keep watching Kenneth, though, still trying to penetrate the mystery of his behavior. And of Carolyn's explanation for it.

After-dinner cleanup meant good-byes were imminent. I crept out onto the deck while Kris played some handheld video game and Kenneth went to the bathroom.

Within moments, he joined me. The sun, still far above the horizon on this June evening, was practically blinding. I hiked up the patio table's umbrella and tilted it toward the west. Kenneth and I sat facing north. The yellow smudge of another cottage was visible through a line of lilac bushes.

"So," Kenneth said, crossing his legs, "think you'll be able to stay busy this week?"

"Easily." Staying busy certainly wasn't the point of being on a lake, but I didn't know how *not* to stay busy. "I have to clean up that beach, go shopping for equipment and supplies, wait for the satellite-TV guy to show up, get more work done around the house and yard, find some local handymen to do things I can't do."

"Mind if I come up next weekend? Kris is going to be with his grandparents."

I slid Kenneth a glance. "Are you sure you won't be too busy fucking around?"

"Come on, Charlie, I was just being honest with you."

"Why now?" I asked.

"Why not?" His expression got haughty, and he turned his face away from me. "I didn't have to tell you at all, you know."

I kept watching him. I wasn't feeling much of anything, but my mind was clicking along. It kept returning to what Carolyn had said. "Yeah, that's the part that hangs me up."

There was more to Kenneth's sudden, cool confession than a burning need to come clean. Part of the answer seemed to lay in that paradox—burning didn't result in coolness. And since when had Kenneth been so keen on honesty? He worked for an accounting firm. I knew damned well that honesty was only a good thing in his book when it was expedient.

Maybe Carolyn was right. Maybe less honorable and more psychologically tangled motives were at play.

Tired of the whole thing, I got up. Kenneth abruptly sprang from his chair and grabbed my arm. He led me down the deck's steps and off to one side, where we couldn't be seen from indoors.

“Hey, don’t be angry.” Kenneth’s hands swept down either side of my head from hair to neck. “The others don’t mean anything to me.” A kiss followed his smile, and both were mercifully light and brief. “You’re still number one. Nobody moves me like you do.”

These declarations didn’t move me at all, except to leave me a little queasy. “*Why* do I move you, Kenneth?”

His only answer was a foggy smile and another swipe of the hand over my hair and cheek.

I knew the answer to my question. Hell, I’d always known. For Kenneth, having a “pretty” boyfriend took some of the discomfort out of being gay. For me, having a “respectable” boyfriend had once done the same. We’d been like balm to each other. But I’d grown past the need to make my sexuality acceptable, to myself or anybody else, and I’d begun to see that Kenneth and I were two very different people.

I didn’t need a partner who played mind games to hang onto me. I didn’t need one who liked to look at me rather than dig beneath the surface, where all the *real* treasure was hiding ... mingled with all the trash. True appreciation of a person stemmed from understanding, and understanding sprang from intimacy, and intimacy only came about through the excavation Kenneth didn’t want to bother with.

I suspected this week could prove pivotal for us, that I might realize my relationship with Kenneth wasn’t reclaimable. Or that I wasn’t willing to try reclaiming it. There was no escaping the fact that far too many essential elements were missing.

\* \* \* \*

My quaint cottage on Cloud Lake felt empty. No guests, no television to watch, no neighborhood bustle. Just me, a Blackberry, a laptop, and a motley assortment of still-boxed books and skin magazines in a handful of small, clean rooms. I couldn’t remember if I’d brought my iPod and didn’t feel like rummaging through the house or going out to my van to look for it.

As the sun lowered, I turned off the air conditioner. Its hum was annoying, and the closed windows and doors made me feel even more insular than the setting alone made me feel.

I’d been digging through the books when I heard voices outside. Two men, arguing. Words rose and fell. Some were caught and bounced around by air moving over water, their volume boosted and their tone sharpened. Most, though, were unintelligible, muffled by the surrounding stands of trees and shrubs.

I didn’t pay much attention at first ... but soon realized how out of place the sound was. According to my realtor, Cloud Lake was known for its serenity. There was a modest campground on the northwest shore, but the voices weren’t coming from there; they were too close.

Getting up from the floor, I went to my road-facing door and listened, then to the deck doors and listened. What I heard wasn’t a violent altercation. It wasn’t alarming enough to warrant calling the police or dashing outside to investigate. But there was obvious emotion in the voices—tension, obstinacy, frustration, an ominous hint of ultimatum and threat.

“...enough... For God’s sake, let it *go*.”

“...can’t just ditch ... promised...”

“...wrong!...”

“...think twice ... consequences...”

And then, for several minutes, silence. A screen door slammed. *Thwack*. It sounded like one of those old wooden doors with gingerbread brackets at each corner and a spring to keep it closed. A car engine growled to life. No mistaking the location of *that* sound. It came from the next property to the south. When I reached the back door, I glimpsed a silver subcompact spitting up a dusty wake as it headed down the dirt road to the two-lane highway.

\* \* \* \*

The fire of sunset glazed Cloud Lake. Low ripples—occasionally concentric, where submerged mouths snatched at swimming insects—made the surface shiver like a burn victim. I sat on my deck nursing two fingers of Chivas on the rocks. A large fish jumped into the air, made a twisting arc, and slid back into the water.

I felt mellow. And very receptive to the new element that entered this idyllic scene.

My neighbor, the one who liked to swim and quarrel, strode down the low incline that led from his cottage to the water. Without pausing, he walked onto the pier. Not a single plank creaked beneath his weight; not a single screw squealed in the wood. He seemed like an apparition, a brooding, dark swatch laid against the blaze of the setting sun.

He stopped at the end and stood motionless, facing the shimmering lake. A breeze ruffled his slightly curled hair. The sun sank lower and seemed to target him, one bright ray gilding his still form.

I thought of Jay Gatsby, gazing across a Long Island bay at the green light marking Daisy Buchanan’s dock. Maybe my neighbor, too, yearned for a lost love, although she likely wasn’t in Pumpkinseed Campground across *this* expanse of water.

He wore faded jeans and a short, dark jacket. His hands, tucked in the pockets, pulled the jacket snug around his waist. Again, I couldn’t help noticing the mound of his butt. It was in perfect proportion to his slim hips.

A telltale squirming in my groin nearly made me groan in dismay. For crying out loud, I was only looking at a man, and a fully clothed one, from afar. The sight shouldn’t have moved me at all.

“Damn it,” I whispered. Why here? Why now? I had to resolve my shit with Kenneth. The last thing I needed was the daily appearance of a guy with a great ass stirring my hormones.

I wondered vaguely how Bucky the twink would have explained this.

Wise and jaded beyond his years, Bucky was something of a fixture at a certain bathhouse in a certain large Midwestern city. I used to patronize the establishment whenever a business trip took me within ninety miles of it. This was, of course, after my separation from Carolyn and before I met Kenneth.

“You’re still in the candy-store phase,” Bucky had told me offhandedly, after remarking that I looked like a bead of water on a hot skillet—all steamy and skitterish.

But I should’ve been out of that phase. Five months of regular sex with Kenneth should’ve pulled me out. Even Carolyn was starting to treat us like a married couple, as much as she recoiled from that image.

Besides, the odds were in favor of dark-haired dude being a typically homophobic

blue-collar guy who'd come up to do a little fishing. Maybe some buddies or a girlfriend would be joining him. Or maybe they'd already been here and left, and he himself would be leaving tomorrow. Vacationers almost always headed for home on Sunday.

Whatever the case, I had to get a grip and start keeping my eyes to myself. I still had Kenneth to deal with, and even if I didn't, not every perfect chest or ass or dick was mine for the taking.

Just to strengthen my immunity, I reminded myself that those strained, heated voices I'd heard earlier didn't bode well. Conflict, I didn't need.

### Chapter Three

Down to my ghetto beach I went, after having spent my first full night in the cottage. It was a night of restless sleep punctuated by chirping crickets, gulping bullfrogs, and eerily creaking trees. I'd dreamt sporadically, and the dreams were vaguely unsettling.

This new environment would take some getting used to.

After three trips to and from the sandy shore, I thought I had what was necessary to get the day rolling—a lawn chair and some implements from a rickety shed on my property, sunglasses and sunblock, a large trash bag, and a thermal mug full of light coffee. I figured I'd sit for a while and charge my batteries with caffeine, then start cleaning the beach. There was already a fire pit, not too cluttered with debris, so I'd just throw all burnable stuff in there and torch it.

As I settled unsteadily into the chair, I felt like the city boy I was. Not landed gentry, not a work-hardened serf, but some laboratory mutant raised beneath fluorescent lights. My legs were so white they gleamed like amphibian bellies.

All that was about to change. Two rakes, a shovel, a swing-blade, and a grappling hook attached to a length of rope lay in a pile to my right. No gym muscles or tanning booth today. I'd be working my way to he-man the old-fashioned way.

"Excuse me."

I jumped like a jack-in-the-box, the lawn chair creaking and teetering beneath me.

"I'm sorry," said the same voice—a mild, low voice with a sprinkling of gravel.

Hand on chest, I looked up and to the left. A man stood over me. At least, I assumed it was a man. Or a female wrestler. All I could see was a nimbus of sunlight around a broad-shouldered silhouette.

"Uh ... hi." Squinting, I made a brim over my forehead with my hand and got up. Awkwardly. Aluminum lawn chairs sat none too evenly on sand.

My heart jiggled. Definitely a man. And I was almost certain he was my neighbor. A blush heated my face as I remembered yesterday's round of lovemaking with Kenneth, how this stranger had unwittingly been a part of it. A decidedly bizarre part. And I couldn't help remembering, too, how I'd stared at him last evening.

*Hope he isn't psychic.*

The man seemed to want to smile but seemed not to know how. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"That's all right," I said. "I must've been lost in thought. It really is quiet around here."

"Yeah, that's why I like no-wake lakes. The people who get rowdy and stupid go where they can play with their toys." He gestured over his shoulder. "I'm in the place next door."

"Oh." I could've sworn my face looked like a piece of Atomic Fireball candy. "Were you the guy who was swimming yesterday?"

"Yeah, must've been."

I felt a drizzle of relief. He was on the scruffy side and, if he hadn't been my neighbor, could've been a deranged vagrant. As I regarded him, my relief became short-lived. He might be on the scruffy side but was definitely in the handsome neighborhood.



I extended a hand. "I'm Charlie Larkin. I just bought—"

"I know." He gave my hand a firm, brief clasp. His expression didn't change; that incipient smile still seemed locked within his face. "I'm Booker." He glanced at the top of my head. "Why don't you put on your shades? You look like you're in pain."

I felt above my forehead. "I forgot they were there," I said with a nervous laugh.

Once the glasses were in place, I got my first prolonged look at the man. Dark stubble, not too heavy, ran along his jaw and circled his mouth. It matched the clean, tousled black hair that made half-curls on his neck and around his ears. He wore a clingy yellow tank-top that highlighted some of his assets—satiny, sun-browned skin; hard-muscled arms; a well-defined chest topped by nipples that poked the cloth into golden beads.

His unshaded eyes were startling. I didn't even notice their color, just a faceted brightness and clarity overhung by black lashes. I wondered fleetingly if he was one of those Goth types who wore mascara. Only he didn't look all that Goth. He looked like ... I wasn't sure what. An itinerant mesmerist, maybe. The thought was so absurd it almost made me smile. Then I noticed he smelled good. Could've been his shampoo...

Oh boy.

I hoped he *was* leaving today. Booker was way more of a distraction than I'd counted on. In fact, I hadn't counted on any.

He did a half-twist at the waist and pointed at the ground behind him. "May I have that?" he asked.

I tilted to look past him. He was a little taller than I, maybe six-one or six-two. "Have what?" I didn't see anything worth having.

Turning, he took a few steps and snatched up the knot of tape and fishing line I'd earlier kicked aside. "This," he said, holding it up.

A marble also gleamed from the mass. I blinked at it. Maybe that's what he was after. Maybe he collected marbles. A lot of people did.

"I've been meaning to grab it," he said.

"Is that your ... stuff?" I'd almost said *junk*.

"No. That's why I'm asking."

Embarrassment overcame me. The shabbiness of my frontage must've been bugging him. "Hey, I'm sorry about how this looks. I was just going to start clea—"

"No, man, that's not what I meant." The smile finally broke through. An amused, disarming smile. "I don't care what your beach looks like. Hell, this used to be nothing but tall grass and weeds and lily pads. Besides, it's your place, not mine." Booker briefly studied the bundle of flotsam as if it might be the missing piece of a puzzle. "I'm asking because I want it, that's all."

I shrugged and lifted a hand. "Then be my guest. Save me some work."

"Thanks. Sorry I bothered you." Another quick smile, a modest one. "You can sink back into your thoughts now."

Booker turned and headed toward his cottage—a white clapboard structure. I recalled that in front, by the road, hollyhocks bowed and nodded over a white picket fence, their blossoms like the buttons on a clown costume. The wood of both cottage and fence looked like weathered bone.

I realized I didn't know if Booker was the guy's first name or last, and still didn't know if he was alone at the cottage or not. I realized no wedding band glinted from his

left hand and, immediately thereafter, that the lack of one didn't mean anything. I realized his looks strongly appealed to me, and I was again ogling that luscious, rounded ass as if I'd never seen a man's ass before.

Damned if he didn't throw me off-balance more than my tippy lawn chair.

\*

Raking, raking, and more raking. I hadn't even attempted to fling the grappling hook into the water and start pulling out weeds. Truth was, I had a touch of hydrophobia, something I kept secret. I liked looking at water, listening to it, being near it. But ever since I'd fallen through pond ice when I was six, I wasn't comfortable being on or in water.

That was another reason I'd bought a lake cottage. I hated being the victim of a baseless fear, and I intended to conquer that fear without other people around. I didn't want anybody either babying me or ridiculing me. And I sure as hell didn't want to piss away money on some therapist. I'd done enough of that after my separation from Carolyn.

Most of the crap I got off the sand was burnable, so I swept it into the fire pit. The rest went into trash bags, which I'd keep in the shed until I made a dump run.

Three hours later, I was sweaty and gritty and slightly sunburned, but my beach was groomed. The marks left by the rake reminded me of my grandfather's hair, of its sandy color and the parallel, Vitalis-scented ridges carved by the teeth of his comb.

It made me feel better, I decided, to work than to work out. Gym sessions resulted in nothing except bigger muscles and a senselessly inflated ego. Labor was productive.

I leaned on my shovel like a farmhand, wondering which aspect of this chore to tackle next. Two mallards landed on the end of my pier and preened, their feathers gleaming like abalone shell. I wished I had pieces of bread crust to toss their way.

Then Booker appeared. Just strolled over from his place, toting a twelve-pack of Leinenkugel's Red and two can sleeves. He hadn't yet gone for a swim today, so I'd been able to keep his image out of my mind.

Until now.

"Here, take a break." Booker jammed the twelver into the loosened sand then sank down beside it, bare heels dug in, bare legs drawn up and parted. "I wanted to thank you." He lifted the sleeves. "So I'm thanking you."

I still had plenty of clean-up ahead of me, both outdoors and in. Moreover, being around Booker made me uneasy. I hesitated.

"Something wrong?" he asked, looking up at me. He wore sunglasses, so I couldn't see his eyes. I really wanted to see them. His face had beautiful bone structure.

"A twelve-pack isn't a break," I said. "A twelve-pack is an escape."

"So? Escape." Booker smiled.

I liked the way he looked. I liked it more each time I saw him. I liked his high cheekbones and stark, whisker-peppered jaw, a shallow divot marking the center of his chin. I liked his long nose, bent a little out of alignment, and handsome mouth. His lips, delineated by clean, soft lines, were just full enough to be alluring. I wondered how skillfully he used them ... and silently chided myself for wondering.

"I shouldn't," I said in deference to my work ethic, and my common sense, and my conscience.

Booker kept looking at me. Finally, he sighed. "Have you ever walked through the

pine plantation?”

“Which one?”

“The one right across the road.”

“No,” I said uncertainly, as if *no* could be the wrong answer.

“Do it sometime. It’s relaxing.” Booker flattened a hand on the twelve-pack. “Well? Do I open it or take it home?”

I stopped analyzing the situation and dived in. “Yeah, what the hell. Give me one.” I sat on the other side of the beer. I *was* thirsty, and Leinenkugel’s put out a good product.

“Hallelujah,” Booker said. “Type A just took a breath.”

*Smartass*, I thought, but I smiled. Again uncertainly.

Booker opened a neat hole in the cardboard, extracted a can, popped it into a sleeve, and handed it to me. He did the same for himself. “What happened to your company? Looked like you had a small crowd here yesterday.”

I slipped a finger under the key. The can opened with a crack and hiss. Before answering, I poured some beer down my throat. “They left. My ex-wife had a boyfriend and job to get back to. My ... buddy Ken had to take his son to a ballgame today and then back to *his* ex-wife.”

“Lot of exes floating around,” Booker murmured. He tilted the can to his mouth and drank.

I watched how he placed his lips over the opening. A soft press, perfectly centered. I watched the bob of his Adam’s apple on his corded, clean-shaven neck.

“Do *you* have any?” I asked.

Booker lowered his head. Arms resting on knees, he swung the beer can in a short arc between his legs. “Nope.”

“You’re, what, twenty—”

“Six.”

That made him three years my junior. “Still footloose, huh?”

Too deliberately, Booker nodded. Took another drink. Touched the side of his hand to his mouth to daub the moisture.

My throat started feeling tight. “So ... I suppose you’re heading out today.” I sucked more beer. Gradually, the tightness eased.

“No, I’ll be staying for a while.”

I nearly cursed out loud. I’d planned on spending at least two of my three weeks off at the cottage, and I’d just found out Sir Steamy would be right next door for much or all of that time.

My ultimate salvation, if not my comfort, now lay in other probabilities. First, that Booker was indeed a straight guy, and he wouldn’t be alone for long. Second, that I’d get so used to seeing him around, I’d just stop noticing him. Familiarity dulled the novelty of any experience. After a few days, I hoped, I’d start taking his presence for granted.

“Then you must be on vacation, too, huh?”

“Something like that.” Another tilt of the can followed by a long swallow. Booker regarded the tools and implements that leaned against trees or lay on the ground. He must’ve spied the grappling hook, because he said, “You going to try yanking the weeds out of the lake?”

“Yeah, I was planning to. I’d like some kind of swimming area.” *Because, if I have any hope of enjoying this body of water from the inside, I sure as hell don’t want slimy*

*tendrils wrapping around my legs.* I didn't tell Booker that, of course. I didn't tell too many people, period. Everybody seemed scornful of everybody else's phobias, obsessions, compulsions, and addictions. It was only our own we accepted as legitimate.

"Going to be a helluva job," Booker said, standing up. "The lily pads are the biggest bitch. They're pretty well established, so they're really anchored." In one smooth and entirely unexpected motion, Booker pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it near the beer. "My dad used to have an aquatic mower he secured to the side of his boat. Couldn't clear a swimming area, though. Only an herbicide can do that, but I wouldn't mess with those if I were you. DNR isn't crazy about 'em, either."

I barely heard what Booker was saying. His body was every bit as gorgeous as I'd feared.

## Chapter Four

Without any prompting, Booker simply grabbed the sturdiest rake and waded into the lake. I tried to stop him, but he said he needed the exercise and *I* needed to know what I was doing. No arguing the latter. So he laid into the weeds, scraping up the ones that were shallowly rooted and manually tugging at others, occasionally explaining this and suggesting that.

I worked the shore side. Of course. After Booker rounded up the displaced plants and guided them to the water's edge, or tossed the larger ones onto the beach, I gathered them into a pile. I had to keep moving just so I wouldn't freeze in place and stare at him.

I wasn't paralyzed by lust—okay, maybe a little impaired—but the scenery with Booker in it was just *so* damned pleasing, I couldn't help absorbing it into my fantasies. The tough flex and twitch of his chest muscles beneath a fine spray of black hair. His hard, straining arms with their rise of cable-like tendons and ropy veins. The shift and glide of his back muscles, more delicate but no less arresting than a sudden bulge of biceps.

The short stubble on Booker's face glistened faintly in the sunlight as tiny drops of sweat and water became lodged there. Some of his soft curls stuck to his forehead and temples and nape. He worked hard. He was ruggedly handsome and strong and tenacious ... and I, for the time being, had a wallop-crush on him.

Then all fell to dust.

"Come out here, Charlie," Booker called. "I could use your help for a minute."

My stomach seemed to drop into my shoes.

Letting the fan rake fall from my hand, I walked to the edge of the lake. "I ... can't."

Brows knit, Booker stared at me. "What?"

"I'm ... I'm sorry." The water licked at my shoes. Panicked for a second, I scrambled backward. "I can't do that." I felt short of breath.

Booker's expression modulated from confused to curious. He came toward me, stepping high through the water and trailing the rake behind him.

I turned aside and walked over to our stash of beer, now reduced to an eight-pack. Bending over, I plucked out two cans, opened them, and offered him one.

"Why not?" he asked as he took the can from my hand. He held it to his forehead for a moment, obviously cooling his skin.

"We should stop now." I indulged in a long swallow of beer. "I have to go in. I'm expecting a call."

I knew Booker was studying my face from behind the screen of his sunglasses.

"Don't you have a cell phone?"

"Yeah, but I forgot to bring it out here." I tried to lighten things up with a smile.

"Hey, you've busted ass enough. I really appreciate it, but this isn't what you should be doing on your vacation."

Keeping my gaze from sliding below Booker's face required honed concentration. He stood no more than a couple of feet away from me, probably less, and I could feel the sultry heat of his body, could smell the mingled odors of sun-warmed weeds and lake water and clean sweat.

"I feel guilty about it," I added. It was one whale of a Freudian slip.

"Why do you feel guilty?" Booker asked quietly. The question crawled with an undercurrent I couldn't define, but it snaked through my gut. Then a shift took place, and the current was gone. "I don't mind at all," he said with casual good-nature.

"Thanks." I lifted the can I still held. "For the beer *and* the help."

"No problem." Booker handed me the rake and snatched his shirt from the sand. He gave it a vigorous shake and slipped it on. "Keep the brew cold."

This time, I didn't watch him walk away. I felt relieved and regretful and ashamed all at once. Worse yet, I felt nibbled by a longing I couldn't seem to dislodge.

I lifted the remaining beer and grabbed the bag of trash, eager to seek refuge in my cozy cottage. Booker called out my name. I turned in his direction.

He looked indecisive for a moment, then dismissively waved a hand. "Never mind. See ya."

I deposited the bagged garbage in my little shed and hustled into the cottage. After housing the Leinie's Red in my fridge and slamming down some yogurt, I showered and shaved. As good as it felt to be clean again, I was still restless. Maybe a stroll through the pine plantation would relax me. I wondered why Booker thought I needed to relax. Just how transparent *was* I?

Logic dictated that the rear of my cottage should've been the front of my cottage, since it was the side visible from the road. But lake dwellings were often constructed ass backwards, so their faces were turned to the water. I stepped out my back front door and across the trampled yard. My minivan, smears of bug-spatter on the windshield, was parked at an angle to the two-rut driveway. There was no actual parking area, so I and any visitors had to pull into the scrubby, sandy yard. I glanced to my right, where Booker's property lay, but I couldn't see much from here. Old crabapple trees and a hodgepodge of bushes pretty much blocked my view.

Crossing the dirt road, I headed into the green cathedral.

It wasn't a Christmas tree farm, although there were plenty of those in the area, too. The plantation was one colonnade after another of 40-to 50-foot red pines, their lowest branches at least ten feet off the ground. Filtered sunlight patched their trunks.

Cool shade and the mentholated tang of resin greeted me. I paused on the brown-needle carpet and looked around. Every other row of trees had been harvested, leaving squat stumps. Here and there, spindly oaks had sprouted, looking like undernourished dwarves among towering giants. The space was quiet, majestic, and enchanting. At dusk, which was fast approaching, it had a brooding quality. At night, it looked downright spooky.

I walked in farther. Picked up a scaly cone and sniffed it. The sticky residue it left on my fingers was pleasantly fresh and piquant. I was about to sink to the ground and sit there for a while, listening to birdsong and sampling the perfume of pine sap, when I heard a car come down the road. Pivoting, I glimpsed it between the trees.

A silver subcompact, the same one I'd seen yesterday. It pulled into Booker's yard and stopped in front of his small garage. A man got out. I couldn't discern much of anything about him, except that he seemed conservatively dressed and had neatly trimmed, salt-and-pepper hair. As he strode up to Booker's screen door—wood, painted dark green, the kind I'd imagined it to be—the open storm door behind it slammed shut. Virtually in his face. The visitor's insistent knocks echoed down the pine rows.

I heard him say something in a raised voice. He wasn't shouting, exactly, but speaking loudly enough to get the attention of the person within. His words were unclear. I thought I heard "hose" or "hoser." But that couldn't be. Mature men didn't use words like *hoser*.

The little drama transfixed me. I couldn't help but wonder what the hell was going on between this repeat visitor and my neighbor. They obviously didn't get along too well. Maybe the guy was Booker's father or uncle or older brother, and they'd had some sort of falling-out. Maybe Booker didn't have permission to stay in the cottage. He didn't seem like the squatter type, though.

The visitor's knocking became pounding until, abruptly, the inner door swung open. I couldn't see who stood there. Words were exchanged in tight, low voices. Then I did see Booker. He stepped onto the stoop and closed the door behind him. I heard his words quite distinctly, since he was facing in my direction.

"You're not coming in, Karl. Now leave. Please. I'm sick of talking about it. Can't you find—"

Booker's words were apparently cut off by the other man, who grabbed Booker's arm and seemed to speak in a hurried way.

"No!" Booker barked, simultaneously yanking his arm away. He spun around and went back into the cottage, closing the door with a conclusive thud. I heard the click of its lock.

The other man rapped on the storm door like a frenzied woodpecker as he repeated a string of imploring words. His ruckus elicited no response. Apparently conceding defeat, he turned away and let the screen door, which he'd held ajar with his body, slap back into place. Right after stepping off the small concrete stoop, he whipped around and jabbed a forefinger toward the sealed cottage.

"This isn't over, my friend!" he shouted.

I stared, frowning in bewilderment. None of this was any of my business, of course, but I liked Booker. The man named Karl went back to his car and just sat there for a few minutes. I was afraid he wouldn't leave, that he'd camp out in Booker's driveway until some really nasty confrontation ensued. But that wasn't his intention. Instead, he got out, went back to the cottage, and seemed to place something between both doors. Then he simply returned to his vehicle and drove away.

There was nothing more to see. I resumed my ramble. My mind drifted.

I soon heard soft, crunching footsteps some distance behind me. They accelerated into a jog. The strange goings-on at my neighbor's place had made me edgy enough to turn and see who was coming.

"Booker," I said, more or less relieved.

"Hi." He slowed to a stroll as he approached me.

"I took your advice," I said. "Did you know I was out here?"

He shook his head. "No. No, I just felt like taking a walk. Then I saw you." His eyes were lowered. He seemed troubled, distracted.

I couldn't help but notice that he, too, had showered and changed clothes. My gaze tripped along one of his bare arms, from the smooth knoll of his shoulder to the arch of his biceps to the silky flow of dark hair that thinned toward the prominent bones of his wrist.

"You all right?" I asked.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Hands shoved in his pockets, he twisted at the waist and cast a quick look at his yard.

I glanced at it too. Empty, thank God. “I’m not trying to pry, but ... who’s that guy who keeps showing up at your place?”

His eyes flickered up to my face—lucid gray-green irises rimmed in black. Instantly, they took my breath away.

“Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “It’s just that, you know, there seems to be some ... contention there. I hope he’s not harassing you or anything.”

One corner of his mouth jerked into a smile. “I’m a big boy, Charlie. I can take care of it. Don’t worry; no shit’s going to splash your way.”

I felt a blush rise beneath my freckles. “No, that’s not what I... No.”

Booker’s one-sided smile shrank, but it didn’t entirely disappear. He held my gaze. I don’t know how long we stood there looking at each other—five seconds, maybe, which felt like five minutes—before one of us spoke.

“Do you have some kind of phobia about water?” Booker asked.

“Yes,” I answered without bothering to think.

He nodded. “I had a feeling.” His tongue crept out to moisten his lips. “Maybe I could help. I love the water. Practically grew up on it.”

This budding friendship was increasingly perplexing. More and more Booker seemed like a standup guy, a bit reserved but good-hearted. I’d never had a straight male friend to whom I was strongly attracted, and I wasn’t sure how to handle it. A small voice at the back of my mind nagged at me to come clean with him; another said my sexuality was none of his damned business, because I wasn’t some out-of-control sex maniac who was going to jump him on the beach. Ergo, if I kept my mouth shut, he’d never be any the wiser.

Then there was the faint echo of a third voice, my ex-wife’s voice, saying, “*Jesus, Charlie, why do you have to overanalyze everything?*”

“That friend of yours,” Booker said, interrupting my thoughts. “Ken?”

A worm uncoiled in my belly. “What about him?”

“I saw the two of you standing beside your deck yesterday.”

My pulse began a rapid tapping at the skin of my throat. “And?”

“Are you ... in a relationship?”

No answer came out at first. For one thing, I was afraid my voice would crack. For another, I didn’t know why he’d brought it up.

After a hard swallow, I said, “Yes.”

Looking down, Booker nodded thoughtfully. After a moment he turned up those mirror-bright eyes without lifting his head. “Committed?”

I didn’t feel like the same man I was ten minutes ago. I felt reduced to a pair of stuck-open eyelids perched on a thudding heart. “No,” I whispered.

*Signed.*

Booker took two steps forward, backing me against one of the red pines. His gaze never left my face. Maybe, I thought, he *is* a mesmerist. Or maybe he’s some redneck who hates “fags,” and he’s fixing to pound me to a pulp. Then I stopped thinking. His arms rose on either side of my head, making a loose vise. I heard a dry crackle of bark as his hands flattened on the trunk above me.



Deepening shadows seemed to enfold us.

"I'm really attracted to you," Booker said.

His nearness weighted my limbs and filled my head with air. Damp heat scented with bath soap radiated from his body and lapped against mine. Had we been breathing more deeply, our chests would've touched. But our respiration was shallow, a rapid counterpoint of intake and outflow between slack, parted lips.

Booker wasn't trying to intimidate me; he was letting me gauge the depth of my desire for him. The openness of his invitation stunned me. I accepted it, exploring him with my senses.

Close up, he was both more feminine and more masculine than at a distance. I noticed the intricate facets of his irises, like a luminous ivory and jade mosaic; the sweep and thickness of his jet-black lashes; the pale blush and delicate texture of his lips. But I also saw the lightning line of a scar through one eyebrow, a chipped tooth, a few bristles of nose hair. Beneath the soap he smelled thoroughly masculine, too, and the tight stretch of coarse-grained skin over chiseled bone was worthy of a superhero.

"Do you want this?" he asked without a hint of pressure. Even his balmy breath felt tentative as it touched my mouth. But his voice, barely above a whisper, was roughened.

*Do you want this? Do you want me?* Holy Mother of Unexpected Blessings.

I knew he'd back off and apologize if I said no. I knew that as surely as I knew my name. But I knew something else far more important.

I'd sealed up many a font of need throughout my life, and especially throughout my four-year marriage. I'd stitched each gaping mouth as it appeared and made its raw interior invisible to the world. When I finally gave up the marriage, I thought I was giving up this desperate exercise along with it. But I wasn't. I was still drawing taut those meticulous loops while I was with Kenneth, or *any* time I merely settled for something or somebody, because I figured settling was the best I could do.

It was the settling that put needle and thread in my hand, not the pretense of straightness.

"Yes, I do. Very much."

Booker closed the small space between us. The press of his mouth was slow and sure and exquisite.

*Sealed.*

At the first touch of his chest, the first perfect molding of his lips to mine, the sutures split and heat rolled through me. Our mouths opened in mutual invitation. Ardor sent our breath sawing through the air. I let my hands get lost in Booker's hair, clutching it, holding his face close against my face as he leaned into me. His mouth was a small, humid cavern, delicately sweet. I wondered vaguely what he'd eaten to put that sugar there. Our tongues slid over and around each other more boldly; our lips flexed, finding new touch points. The light rasp of whiskers skated beneath my nose, across my chin.

"More?" He exhaled the question against my cheek.

"Much more. Please."

Booker didn't tease me with his hard-on. Unabashedly, he told me what he wanted. It pushed and slid against my rigid cock. No misinterpreting *that* message. His hands lowered to cradle my face as we continued to kiss, his fingers stroking down my temples, my sideburns, caressing my ears.

"Maybe we should take this inside," I said, my voice nearly anaerobic.

I kissed him again. Didn't want to stop kissing him. But that ridge in his jeans was long and solid and made a persuasive argument for doing something else with my mouth.  
*Delivered.*

## Chapter Five

We charged back to my place and tumbled, already half undressed, onto the bed. Clothing flew around the room. I could've come as soon as our bodies locked together. At the first crush of Booker's hard-muscled heat, I held on tight and poked my cock against any part of him it would reach.

We groped and rolled, bunching the sheets—me on top, him on top, flipping back and forth. I kept clutching Booker's ass, the delectable hunk of candy that had been tormenting me. Our kisses swung between tender and wild. We were sweating and panting and murmuring things without censoring ourselves. No matter how outrageous the praise or how raunchy the promise, they were momentarily sincere.

Finally, I knelt over Booker on all fours as he lay on his back. He lazily stroked his dick and looked at me from beneath lowered eyelids. I sat back on his legs and started touching his cock as his hand slid over it, my fingers moving over his fingers to feel him feel himself.

I'd always loved the unique satin of erection skin. I loved making it slide over its heartwood, loved feeling the soft resilience of its pale blue veins. I fingered the head of Booker's cock and gently pinched it now and then, just to hear the low, gritty moan that came from his throat.

He had a beautiful cock, tall and straight and flushed. My mind spun at the possibilities it presented. Just as I curled forward to draw that pole into my mouth, Booker stopped me.

"No, Charlie, I'll come. I don't want to come yet." He curled a callused hand around my wrist. "Bring yourself back up here."

A little reluctantly, I leaned forward again, caging his body, gazing down at him.

His hands swept over my chest, thumbs nudging the nipples.

My back bowed to his touch.

"You like that?"

All I could manage was, "Mmm." After being with Kenneth, I wasn't used to a man touching me there.

His thumbnails scraped from areoles to peaks. He rolled and pulled them. My dick jumped as a radiant tingle splintered through my groin.

Reaching down between us, Booker swiped a forefinger over the hole of my cock. I felt light moisture; my body must've freed a drop. He lifted his finger to his mouth and languidly cleaned it with his lips and tongue.

I couldn't just kneel there. I had to touch him, had to explore his chest with my mouth. His nipples were stiff and just as tantalizing as his ass. I slowly licked each one, aroused even further by the feel of those hard, rosy nubs against my tongue. Booker squirmed and whimpered beneath me. I began sucking and biting. He writhed, hips arching, and made more desperate sounds.

"Fuck me, Charlie. Christ, I need you to fuck me." Forcing my lowered head up and forward, he kissed me, his lips full and hot and hungry.

I sure as hell wasn't going to argue. "Kneel," I told him. "Brace yourself against the wall." I wanted to see the inverted triangle of his back and the beckoning globes of his

ass while he was upright. I wanted to see his arm muscles strain, and see the dark fans of his underarm hair. I wanted to caress his torso and pump his cock while I fucked him.

Lube, condoms, wipes, and hand towels were all tucked in my nightstand drawer, along with some other sex-related things. I hastily pulled them out.

“Roll a skin onto me, too,” Booker said as I tore open a packet. “I don’t want to mess up—”

“Forget it,” I said. “You’re going to come on my hand.”

At first I sat cross-legged behind him. Getting the condom on wasn’t easy; I was trembling with excitement. Once it was securely in place, I lubed my fingers and eased apart his cheeks. They were so smooth, smooth as the skin of my inner arms. I kissed them, over and over, and poked my tongue at his hole, skated my tongue around it. I poked again and gave it a tender suck. Booker’s breath came out in low, shuddering vowels.

Then I ran my thumbs over the rim, making small semicircles, probing gently. Booker’s head hung between his shoulders, the dark hair falling in a ragged veil around his face. Inch by inch I began fingering the inside of him, that hot, snug burrow. Dainty spasms made his muscles grip my fingers.

“Now the real thing,” he said on a breath.

I gave my stiff dick a few desultory tugs, readying it, before I boosted myself onto my knees. This wasn’t going to last long.

As soon as my cockhead slipped between those cheeks, I was ready to shoot. I pressed in farther, past that divine ring of muscle. My cock relentlessly swelled. I paused, trying to muster some control, then pushed in farther. As I stroked back and forth, I made small adjustments in the angle. Booker stiffened and quivered.

“That’s it,” he whispered ... and hitched in a breath as I again swiped over his prostate.

Reaching around Booker’s loin, I grabbed his cock and pumped it in concert with my own pumping. I put my other hand on his back, fingers digging into a tough plane of muscle. My balls jiggled slightly as I thrust. Booker uttered a weak, wavering grunt, and his cock began to throb in my hand. Cum drizzled down my knuckles.

That was it, the pulling of the trigger. There was no more holding out. At the first shimmying hint of my release, I pulled my cock back to Booker’s sphincter and let it tighten beneath the head. And the pulsing started, that uncurling of the fist that held the most incomparable pleasure in the world. It spilled all through me and kept spilling—the deepest, longest orgasm I’d ever had. Or so it seemed.

Booker collapsed forward, doubling over. After I peeled off and dropped my condom in the wastebasket, I fell like a boiled noodle onto the mattress.

“I’ll be right back,” Booker said, rising sluggishly from the bed. “Bathroom break.”

I sent him a wolf whistle as I watched him leave the room. “Nice ass.”

Shit, nice everything. Booker teasingly rubbed a cheek as he disappeared out the door. The smile that spread across my face felt silly and lopsided. Yeah, I was crushing on him. Bad.

I used wet wipes to clean my hand, sorry that I hadn’t had the presence of mind to lick off his cum before it had begun to dry, then freshened up some other parts of my body. When Booker returned to the bedroom, he crawled in beside me. We pulled the blanket over ourselves and lay facing each other. Booker traced my features and stroked

my hair. I rested a hand on his chest and fingered *its* hair. I was unaccountably happy.

It was obvious we were both ready to crash. This long, strange day was winding down, and we'd been drugged by the narcotic called sex. I studied Booker's face, intrigued by its blending of youth and maturity. He was a rough kind of handsome, and anything but ordinary.

"Are you bi?" I asked. I'd all but convinced myself he was straight, and I was still adjusting my perception of him.

Booker chuckled as he drew two fingers over his eyes. "There's nothing 'bi' about me. You?"

"The same," I said, oddly relieved. "It just took me a while to admit it to myself."

Growing pensive, Booker touched the cleft of my upper lip. "Happens that way a lot. Not as much as it used to, but still more than it should. I'm sorry you had to go through that part. I've known about myself since I hit puberty."

His compassion touched me. It was all the more genuine for not being mawkish. I liked this man. I liked his lack of pretense.

"How did you manage to see me with Kenneth?" I asked. "I thought we were pretty well concealed out there."

Booker shrugged the shoulder he wasn't lying on. "I was at my work table and just happened to glance out the window. There you were. Kissing." A hint of a smile. "Save the blush. I kind of like kissing men myself."

Well, I figured, if he could poke around in my life, I could poke around in his. "What's the rest of your name?" More questions stood in line, but that one seemed the most important at the moment.

Sighing, he rolled up his eyes. "Can't you just call me Booker?"

"Yeah, I can do that. But I still want to know the rest. So, is Booker your first name or last?"

"Last. Fuck, why do you have to look so good?"

I frowned at him. "Why do *you*? And what does that have to do with anything? Why are we talking about—?"

"Hosea," he said.

*Hose. Hoser.* No. It was Hosea.

"And don't tell me how 'biblical' it sounds," Booker added. "I'm well aware."

Oh, touchy. "You're not Amish, are you?"

After a second of stupefied silence, Booker spluttered into laughter. It was the first time I'd seen or heard him laugh. A joyful noise. Infected by it, I joined in. We ended our comic interlude with a long, joyful, savoring kiss.

"I could get real used to this," I said, spearing my fingers into his hair. It was thick and silky and subtly fragrant.

"Before you do," he said, "there's something you need to know about me."

"You're gay."

Booker snorted. "I didn't think you'd have a sense of humor, Charlie."

"Why?"

"You look like you walked straight from Yale to yuppiedom."

"I didn't."

"What do you for a living, anyway?" Booker asked.

"I own a brew pub. You know, like a mini-microbrewery attached to a—"

“Fern bar,” he said with a grin.

“No, not a fucking fern bar.”

Gradually, the amusement drained out of Booker’s face and he turned down his eyes. I wasn’t sure why, but I immediately thought of that man who kept showing up. Karl.

“So,” I said, “what is it I need to know about you?”

Booker hesitated. My hand was on his chest again, and I felt his heart thumping against my palm. “I just got out of prison,” he said.

Blinking, I gaped at him. That warm bunting of passion in which I’d been wrapped began to disintegrate. I sat up. Letting out a long breath, Booker flipped onto his belly. He set his elbows into the mattress and covered his face with his hands.

“Here we go,” he muttered.

I didn’t know what to say. *You gotta tell a guy these things before his dick gets lost in your ass.* No, that wouldn’t do ... although, in a crude way, it summed up how I felt. Jesus. I’d just fucked an ex-con. What was worse, I’d been getting all moony over him.

“Don’t break into a cold sweat,” Booker said wearily. “I didn’t do anything violent. And I’m not a thief. Or an arsonist. Or a pedophile.” He cocked his head to face me, and his tone became acerbic. “Oh ... and I wasn’t anybody’s ‘bitch’ while I was in there, either. I kept a low profile, minded my own business, and did my time. So don’t start assuming I’m filthy with felon germs.”

That *was* something of a relief, petty as my relief made me, but I still didn’t know how to follow up on this revelation. Should I ask what he was in for? And how long a sentence he’d served? Did I even want to know?

Before I could formulate a sensible question, Booker dragged himself out of bed and started getting dressed. He shook his head and muttered, “Zander told me to avoid pretty boys and bastards.”

That prompted me to speak, finally, but I sounded stupider than I probably looked. “What are you doing? And who’s Zander?”

“You know, Charlie, you’re the first guy I’ve risked telling this to. Hell, you’re the first guy I’ve been attracted to.”

“Ever?” *Oh, Christ, somebody slap me!*

Booker gave me a snotty look. “No, not fucking *ever*. Since I got out.”

I knew what he’d meant, of course, but his implication made me feel like a jackass and only compounded my confusion. I’d let him down. He’d taken a chance on me and trusted me, and I’d turned into the uptight, upscale, prissy little white boy who’d never set foot on the other side of the tracks.

Shit, I’d turned into Kenneth.

Tossing me a glance, Booker snapped and zipped his jeans. It was a simple but conclusive act that infused me with longing. I still wanted him. Only I didn’t *want* to want him.

“I gotta leave,” Booker said. “I don’t need you looking at me like that. Thanks for a nice time, Charlie. I won’t bother you anymore.”

He wheeled out of the bedroom. I heard his footsteps move through the living room. One of the double screen doors leading to the deck whisked open and whisked shut. The end.

I numbly got out of bed. After a stop at the bathroom, I shuffled into the kitchen, flipped on the light, and grabbed one of Booker’s beers out of the refrigerator. Still

naked, I sat at the table and drank.

I'd found and lost the perfect lover in a matter of hours. Wasn't life grand?

My vacant gaze lit on the floor tiles. They'd been sparkling clean after Carolyn's Kitchen Coddling yesterday—so clean, I'd even stopped on my way in with Booker and kicked off my shoes. Following my lead, he'd done the same. That could've been a common practice around here, since it was easy to track sand and mud and bits of vegetation indoors.

I went to the door and looked outside. Sure enough, my shoes and his still laid in a scattershot pattern around the threshold. Booker had gone home barefoot.

A chill shot down my arms and back, lifting the hair at the nape of my neck.

So why the hell were there large, dusty shoeprints on my otherwise spotless kitchen floor?

## Chapter Six

Even with the doors locked, I slept worse that night than I had the night before. Before the sun rose, I got up and showered and made breakfast. I stepped carefully around the footprints I couldn't explain, as if they were evidence I couldn't destroy. But evidence of what, if anything, I had no idea.

I'd have to tackle the mystery later. Paying Booker a visit topped my agenda.

Whether or not we stood a chance of becoming lovers, I couldn't let that final scene last night determine the course of my relationship with him. Booker deserved better from me. He'd done absolutely nothing to arouse my suspicion or earn my disrespect. Just the opposite, in fact. He'd made all the first moves, as a neighbor *and* a suitor. He'd been courageous and forthright but never pushy. At the very least, I owed him an apology and an open mind.

My wits securely gathered and Booker's shoes in hand, I made the short journey to his house just as the sun rose. The day promised to be another scorcher. I approached the front and entered the screen porch that faced the lake.

It was tempting to snoop around. Old metal hooks attached to the outer wall of the house supported fishing gear, binoculars, a few soiled orange lifejackets, faded overalls, battered sunhats, and a rain poncho or two. All kinds of other lake-cottage necessities hunkered in corners, leaned against walls, or huddled together on a shelving unit with a noticeable starboard list. The porch had an outdoorsy tapestry of scents—oilcloth and bait buckets, yellowing paper and dust—and seemed like a small, rustic museum.

I rapped on the inner door. "Booker? It's me, Charlie. May I—"

The door swung open. Immediately, an internal shower of hormones made me lightheaded. The lord of the manor wore nothing but black boxer-briefs, snug in all the right places. The rest of him was every bit as inviting. Tall, dark, and just-got-out-of-bed sultry gorgeous. I wanted to nuzzle his neck and inhale the sleep smell.

"*Damn*, you look good," I whispered, unable to control my eyes.

"So do you," Booker said flatly, without a wisp of feeling. He lifted his shoes from my hand. "Thanks. I was going to come over and get them."

The door began to close. I put a hand against it. Booker coolly regarded me. Those eyes...

"I need to talk to you," I said. "If you don't mind."

He pulled his lower lip between his teeth, tapped the shoes against his thigh. Everything he did was seductive. To me, anyway. My dick stirred helplessly, wanting to get at him. I imagined it pouting, fixing to throw a tantrum within its denim straitjacket.

"No, I don't mind." Booker motioned toward the space behind me. "Have a seat. Want some coffee?"

"Yes, please. With a little milk or creamer or ... whatever."

Nodding, he turned and went back into the house. I sat at a round wood table draped in a faded, checkered cloth. A citronella candle and gnarled piece of driftwood sat in its center. When Booker returned, he set down two mugs and sat across from me. I was sorry to see he'd put on a short terrycloth bathrobe.

"I apologize for last night," I said straightaway. "You caught me off guard." I drank



some coffee. It was strong, the way I liked it, and lightened with real cream.

Booker lowered his head for a moment and fingered his coffee mug. "Yeah, I suppose I did. But I haven't really had any practice bringing up that subject."

Shit, I felt like a heel. "I didn't mean to be unkind."

"I know," he said quietly.

"It's just that ... whenever I see or hear something that stuns me, or maybe hurts me, I tend to seize up. Like the other day, when Kenneth told me he's been sleeping around."

Booker's eyebrows shot up. "Sleeping around on *you*?"

I smiled. Apparently I wasn't the only one who asked stupid questions. "Who else but me?"

"No, I meant ... you know." Booker suddenly seemed self-conscious. He again turned his eyes down. There were matching pink swatches on his cheekbones, although the color could've been from sunburn. "Why would anybody want to?" he mumbled, as if to himself.

I assumed I'd just been complimented, and it made me feel like I'd gotten an award. "I guess one dick isn't enough for him. Or two, if you count his own."

"I don't get it."

We both drank our coffee, trying studiously to ignore our attraction. An unresolved issue still hung between us. I felt it was up to me to resolve it. After all, that's why I'd come over.

"So what were you in for?" I asked.

Booker finally looked at me again. "Possession with intent." He gave the answer in a matter-of-fact way, as if he were telling me his birth date. No shame or swaggering pride, no self-pity or anger.

"Possession of what?"

"Marijuana. I sold it to my friends, people I'd known at Holyard."

"Wait," I said. "You mean, Holyard as in the Holyard School of—"

"Art and Design. Yeah. I have a degree from there."

"No kidding." I was thunderstruck. Mere dabblers couldn't get into Holyard. It had a reputation for taking in and turning out only top-notch, innovative talent.

"When I lost my job," Booker said, "selling pot helped keep me in school and throw some money my dad's way. After I graduated, I still had a shitload of expenses. Loans to pay off, supplies to buy, a household to keep running, a sick parent to take care of. It'd gotten easy by then just to keep dealing. Believe me, it isn't something I'm proud of." Taking a deep breath, he lifted his hands and dropped them. "So there you have it. I spent thirty months of my life at Reese-Houghton for being the Druglord of Ditchweed. If you don't believe me, look it up online."

"Yeah, I suppose it's a matter of public record."

"Probably. Hosea Booker. One case, one conviction." He dropped the side of his left fist into his right palm, as if stamping a document. "Debt to society paid in full. Or it will be, when I'm off paper."

Again, the lingo had me stumped. Booker could probably tell from my befuddled expression.

"I'm still on parole," he said.

"Oh."

"See? You can rest easy now. You don't have a psychopath living next door."

"I'm really sorry, Booker." I gave him a sheepish glance. "I've never understood why pot's illegal. Hell, I've smoked my share."

According to some documentary I'd seen, its criminalization in the 1930s was spurred by racist sentiment toward African-Americans and Mexicans. Until then, weed was widely available both for medicinal and recreational purposes. Its medicinal uses, in particular, were significant.

"I can tell you this much," Booker said. "There'd be no problem with prison overcrowding in this country if the drug laws were revamped."

I didn't doubt he was right. The rate of violent crime would take a dive, too, along with national and state budget deficits. And people suffering from a host of illnesses would have their conditions eased in a safe and inexpensive way.

"When did you get out?" I asked.

"About two months ago. I came straight here. The institution's only forty miles away, so at least I didn't have to travel far to be in a place that felt like home. I've spent a good part of every summer on Cloud Lake since I was born."

"For what it's worth," I said, "I'm *glad* you're here." Anyway, I was pretty sure I was glad. I'd probably still have Carolyn check him out—she was a sheriff's department dispatcher in the county where we both lived—but I didn't anticipate any nasty surprises. From all indications, Booker had been truthful with me.

"So ... what does that mean?" he asked tentatively. "That you're glad I'm around."

"It means I like being with you."

Again, he seemed to want to smile but not know how. "Care to tell me more about your fuck-around boyfriend?"

"There isn't much to tell," I said, "considering he'll be out of my life before next weekend."

"Really?"

The decision had just come to me, solid and irreversible. "Yeah. I'm going to call him as soon as I get a chance. We'll have a longer talk when I get home, and that'll be that. The whole thing's been a sham pretty much from the start. There's no sense in prolonging it."

I knew beyond a doubt I didn't want Kenneth at Cloud Lake next weekend. Or ever again. Chances were I'd never want to see him anywhere. I would've felt bad if it hadn't been for his impromptu confession, or at least felt worse than I did, but now I just wanted to make a clean break and have done with it.

"So who's Zander?" I asked.

The question left Booker stymied for a moment. He must have forgotten last night's mumbled comment. And then he remembered. "Irving Alexander, an older guy I met at R-H," he said. "A gay guy. He sort of took me under his wing."

"Which wing?"

Booker's brows drew together. "Are you being facetious again?"

"Not entirely."

"We talked," Booker said. "That's all. I meant it when I said nobody made me there."

I got off my chair and knelt in front of Booker's chair, which he'd angled away from the table. Somberly, he gazed at me and said nothing.

"May I touch you again?" I asked.

My attitude made him uncomfortable. “For chrissake, Charlie, get off your knees.”

The poured concrete floor *was* hard, but I had a point to make. “May I?” Slowly pulling both sides of Booker’s robe away from his body, I was careful not to let my fingers graze his skin. His boxers had begun to tent out. “Booker, may I?”

His buff chest more noticeably expanded and contracted. Molding my fingers to the rounded ridge in my jeans, I stroked it—a leisurely, indulgent stroke, down and up and down, so Booker’s gaze could enjoy it as much as my cock did. Then I lowered my zipper and reached inside. Booker not only followed the movement of my hidden hand, he occasionally glanced at my eyes. It excited him to see me caressing my hard-on as I stared at his.

“Yes,” he said thinly, “you can touch me.”

I gave him a coy look. “I’m not sure I heard that.”

Booker’s hand finally moved to his crotch. Straining against the black cloth, his erection lit a sparkler inside me. Bright slivers of heat showered from my groin to my thighs.

“Are you going to make me beg?” Booker asked, his voice thickening, getting husky.

“I can’t ‘make’ you do anything. And I wouldn’t want to. And I’d never, *ever* expect you to beg.” I rose from my haunches, pulled the jeans down my hips, and freed my dick. Its head caught for a second on the elastic of my briefs, and the feel of that resistance stimulated another surge of excitement. I was hard, ready. “I’ve always been impressed by manners, though.”

“Please touch me again, Charlie.” Booker pulled his tall, stiff cock over the waistband of his boxers.

I scooted closer to his crotch. “No pretty please with sugar on top?”

“Now you’re pushing your luck.”

“Oh that’s right.” I simultaneously grasped his solid shaft and my own. “You were told to avoid ‘pretty.’” I leaned forward and made that delicious length of manflesh disappear between my lips.

“Thank you,” Booker gasped.

It was glorious, having cock fill my mouth again. Having *Booker’s* cock fill my mouth. Cradling it with my tongue, I gave it a protracted, welcoming suck. Booker responded with a protracted, grateful moan. His hips swayed forward.

The slow pump began. My fingers tightened and did their part of the job. The thumb of my fisted hand drew along the underside cylinder of that beautiful rod as my tongue tripped over it. Booker clutched my hair. I paused at the succulent head, taking time to appreciate it—its summit and smooth slopes and low ring of foothills, and the tender band of skin that lay in their shadow.

Spasms rocked Booker’s hips to and fro. Each coarse exhalation terminated in a muted whimper. A bead of precum fell onto my tongue. I took in the length of him again, drawing deep, and pumped my own cock more forcefully.

After a sharp intake of breath, Booker let go, his release accompanied by choppy, guttural groans. I loved feeling the pulsations of cock in my mouth. I loved the results even more.

As soon as the mild tang of Booker’s cream hit my tongue, I bucked into orgasm, blissfully unaware of how much cum I was swallowing or how much I was shooting or where it was landing. When Booker’s jerking subsided and my own tide of pleasure

began to ebb, I swiped my wet hand against my mouth, reached for my lover, and pulled him toward me.

He didn't need any prompting. Our lips met in an eager, open-mouthed kiss, an exchange of passion and affection and each other's sticky essence. We tasted wonderful together. We tasted like a reduction of salt and lime and margarita.

"Would you like ... to see ... some of my work?" Booker asked, holding my face and tonguing my ear.

Although I wasn't entirely sure what he meant—my mind was still filled with climax lint—I said, "I'd be honored."

With both stood and hiked up the clothing we'd lowered. Booker left his robe hanging open, which added a compelling element to the porch's décor. He led me to the inner door. Like everything else in this place, except the resident himself, it was older. The varnish layered over its solid wood had bubbled. A short, plaid curtain, faded on one side, hung over its window. Booker opened the door with a gentle shove. The heat and humidity must've made it swell.

I had a fleeting vision of Booker's cock in my mouth. Damn. When opening an old door made me think of giving head, I knew I had it bad.

## Chapter Seven

An impression registered as my eyes adjusted to the cottage's dim interior. The room we entered wasn't set up like any garden-variety, contemporary living room. Parts of it seemed lifted straight from the 1950s. The rest looked like a warehouse loft. A spiffy iMac flanked by rows of books sat on an old walnut office desk against one wall. Papers, many covered with fanciful drawings, littered its top.

"My dad and I built a shop onto the south side of the cottage," Booker said. "You can't see it from your place, and I doubt you've driven past it."

"No, I haven't," I admitted. I'd only come down the dirt road three times, including this weekend, and only as far as my own property. All I could really see when I pulled into my driveway was three-quarters of the front of his place. If I *had* glimpsed the addition Booker was referring to, I'd probably just assumed it was part of the house.

"The shop is where I do my 'dirty' work," he explained. "Hoisting, cutting, welding, securing. And painting, if I decide to color a piece." He motioned to one side of the living room. "This table's for finishing touches, the more delicate work."

The table. Okay, he obviously meant the long worktable opposite his desk. It was situated beneath a wide, north-facing window. I realized it was the window from which he must've seen Kenneth and me standing beside my deck. I scanned the table's surface. It was littered with hand tools and soldering irons, as well as terra cotta flowerpots full of all kinds of crap Booker obviously found useful—broken toys and broken jewelry, glass and pottery shards, pieces of hardware, spools of wire and twine, lengths of rope and other binding materials. In one corner stood the knotted mass he'd scavenged from my beach. Seeing it made me smile.

Little by little, I began to understand what I was being told. Hosea Booker, my handsome parolee lover, wasn't just an artist; he was a *builder* of art.

"You create things out of this stuff?" I asked, just to make sure.

"Yep. But what you see is only a fraction of my stash." Booker slipped his hands into the pockets of his bathrobe. "I call the finished pieces 'junktures.' I've done more traditional sculpture, too, although the process kind of bores me. Besides, I'm not set up to work with the usual metals. My only bronzes were done at Holyard."

"Where *are* your finished pieces?" I hadn't seen any, just the raw materials.

"There's one in the kitchen," Booker said, leading me toward the rear of the cottage. "But I keep most of the completed work covered up in a spare bedroom. It's all spoken for. Either sold already, or headed for a gallery or auction."

"A gallery where?"

"I sell through a few places. In Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Wow, Booker. I'm impressed."

He glanced at me with a pleased, self-conscious smile as we entered the kitchen. "There it is," he said motioning toward the table. "It's not my best, but it's my personal favorite."

"It" was a merciless, tight tornado of wire, all kinds of wire, and witch-finger twigs and different kinds of screws. The twisting funnel, an artful chaos, looked like it was about to spin off the table and drill right through the roof. It had a stark, brutal beauty.

"I did a whole cyclone series," Booker said. "That piece and the wreck on the wall are the only ones left."

I followed his gaze to the erupting waste bin beside the stove. At least, it looked like it was erupting. Just above it, hanging from the faded wallpaper, was a compound fracture of beaten, broken fencepost and rusty barbed wire, wound with red ribbon and white gauze. I looked closer. A luminous, multicolored glass butterfly was tucked within the splintered wood.

"You made the butterfly, too?" I asked incredulously.

Booker nodded. "Go back to the table and reach inside the funnel," he said. "Don't look first, just carefully stick your hand inside and *then* look."

Walking back to the table, I let the tornado swallow my hand. I did feel something inside. As I began to smile, I withdrew my hand and peered into the interior. Near the bottom, a bird's nest with three eggs.

"I didn't filch the eggs," Booker said. "I made those, too."

"Incredible." I was starting to see him in a whole different way, as if I were rotating a multifaceted gemstone. "May I see what's in the spare room?"

"Sure."

Booker led the way and I traipsed after him like the fan-boy I was fast becoming. I resolved to buy one of his creations. But as I watched Booker and thought about our time together, I suspected the man himself was his own greatest work.

My respect and affection for him swelled.

The storage room contained five or six humped forms covered in white sheets. The smaller ones sat on makeshift tables.

"I'll show you the two I've sold." Booker carefully unveiled one piece. "This is one of my bronzes. It's called Atlas Shrugged." He gave me an impish look. "You should find it appealing."

It featured a stylized, nearly abstract male figure, beautifully executed, with a globe balancing on...

"Is that his *dick*?" I asked, glancing at Booker.

"It's a phallus, Charlie," he said with mock hauteur. "On a bronze or marble sculpture, a dick automatically becomes a phallus."

"I stand corrected," I said with a snicker.

Something seemed to be dangling from the foreskin of the titan's titanic penis. I leaned over to have a closer look. A miniature human form—female, judging by the looks of it—hanging on for dear life. I pointed at it.

"Ayn Rand," Booker said. "It actually does look like her, too."

I burst out laughing as Booker recovered the figure and then pulled the sheet off another. It was one of his junkturs, about six feet tall, and it looked like a cross between Neptune and a sturgeon ... with a bit of Jeff Goldblum from the end of *The Fly*. It was both hideous and delightful, a fairy tale monster in scrap metal, and intricately constructed.

"Manfish here," Booker said, fondly patting the mutant, "allowed me to pay off my legal fees, fines included, *and* gave me a year's income. Of course, I don't need much to live on." He draped the sheet over it and turned off the light.

I ambled into the living room and dropped onto the lumpy, worn couch. "Wow," I said in wonderment, watching him as he closed the door.

“Wow what?”

“You’re really full of surprises.”

He smiled. “You’re just easily surprised, that’s all. I think you’ve led a sheltered life.”

Still, something wasn’t jibing. I pondered the issue before I opened my mouth, because I didn’t want to offend him again. “There are still a few things I don’t understand,” I said.

Booker sat down beside me. “Like what?”

I could tell from the look on his face and the sound of his voice that he took my concerns seriously.

“First, how did you manage to sell your art and build a reputation while you were in prison? I mean, you just got out two months ago. And second, if your work commands such high prices, why did you have to sell pot to make money?”

“My pieces didn’t start commanding high prices until I was *in* prison,” Booker said. He didn’t sound offended, just resigned to answering my questions. “I can thank my older sister for getting my career off the ground. Rachel always believed in me. And she happens to have a lot of PR savvy. That’s the business she’s in. When I got sent up, she took care of our dad *and* put my work out there. Had to postpone her wedding to do both.” Booker got up. “She finally got married last month and moved with her husband to Vermont. And my dad has a live-in girlfriend now, an LPN named Lana, who looks after him. God bless ‘em, they both got their happily-ever-after.”

Staring at Booker, I realized how deeply he loved his father and sister. And I wondered if he felt he had *his* “happily-ever-after.”

Shucking off his robe, Booker tossed it onto the couch beside me. I was tempted to pick it up and bury my face in it, inhale the scent woven through its fibers.

He leaned over me and tugged at the waistband of my jeans. “Strip down to your underwear, Charlie lark. We’re getting you acquainted with the lake today.”

It was as if showing off his art, and seeing my awe, had somehow empowered Booker. Maybe my apology and his revelation of his past had something to do with it, too. He was relaxed and confident. And that made me ready to face my phobia.

We walked over to my beach, since it would be my usual point of entry into Cloud Lake. I needed to feel comfortable with the look of the lake from here, the feel of the bottom.

“Sit down facing the lake,” Booker said, “with your legs stretched out.”

He was certainly winging it, since he surely wasn’t a trained psychotherapist, but I trusted him. Or maybe I was desperate enough to trust anybody willing to help me. So I did what he told me to do.

“Closer,” Booker said.

I slid toward the line of pale foam.

“Closer.”

I looked over my shoulder at him. “I hope you realize I’m not going to slide my ass into the lake just because you keep saying ‘closer.’ You’re not a hypnotist, Booker, even though you have eyes like one.”

“You think so?” he asked curiously. “You think I have creepy woo-woo eyes?”

“I think you have breathtaking woo-woo eyes, but that’s not the point.” Shit. What *was* the point? Now I was thinking about his eyes.

“No one’s ever told me that,” Booker said, sounding touched by my opinion. He laid a hand on my right shoulderblade. “Come on, at least get your feet near the waterline. Say, six or eight inches away. The lake’s like glass today. You won’t be swept away by a rogue wave or anything.”

My heart revved into the tap dance that often presaged a panic attack. Fear slowly shredded my trust in Booker. Anybody who’s never experienced intense, uncontrollable anxiety can’t begin to imagine how horrible it is. The hyperventilation and dizziness. The cold sweat and nausea and loose bowels. It’s like lying crippled on death’s doorstep.

“Don’t worry, Charlie,” he said gently. “I’m right here.”

It was enough, for the moment. I crept toward the water, reminding myself that the man who stood over me had made it through thirty months in a county jail and state prison. Moreover, he’d had the balls to risk a humiliating slapdown by coming on to a near-stranger.

Booker sat behind me, his bare legs crossed over mine and his arms twined loosely around my torso. I felt the press of his chest against my back. One of his hands played idly over my left nipple; the other caressed my abdomen. He rested his chin on my shoulder, its scruff poking at my pores.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” he murmured.

His voice sent a gentle vibration into my back. When he turned his face and kissed my neck, I leaned my head into his soft storm of hair.

“Scoot forward. I’ve got you.”

Shifting from one butt cheek to the other, I inched toward the water. Booker didn’t let go. He shifted along with me.

“Imagine us being in it together, facing each other, hugging. The water moving like silk against our cocks. Imagine kissing with water-slick lips.”

While running the tip of his tongue from my shoulder to my ear, Booker nudged me forward. My heels touched liquid. I flinched ... then relaxed as Booker’s lips feathered over my earlobe.

“Go ahead, get your feet in. I won’t let go, but I won’t shove you, either. Set your own pace.”

His voice was low and molten—every bit as persuasive as a hypnotist’s voice. I held the hands that held me and felt secure. Into the lake I eased, watching Booker’s feet get swallowed along with mine. Twenty toes broke the surface, ten stitched with blonde hair and ten with black.

I grinned. I felt good.

“Want to keep going?” Booker asked.

“A little farther,” I said. If we continued to move as one, I felt I could scuttle to the center of the lake like a crawfish.

This close to shore, the water was bathtub warm. I didn’t mind bath or spa water. It wasn’t cold and murky. It didn’t harbor dark, mysterious depths where muck swirled and fish burbled. It wasn’t writhing with hidden currents that could snatch me like octopus tentacles.

It couldn’t drag me down and fill my lungs. Or throw a sheet of blue ice over my flailing limbs and burning eyes.

Cloud Lake’s warmth was almost as soothing as Booker’s voice. Soon, we both had wet asses. Sand worked its way into my briefs. I didn’t care. The sun poured over me and



my lover's tenderness and strength trickled through me, both like a benediction. I hadn't gone far, but I was in.

Then something attacked me. I jumped and yelped, my knees jerking out of the water. Booker chortled against my skin.

"Those big, bad, two-inch fish nibbling your toes?" Booker asked. "Look. They're just little guys. They don't have teeth, sweetie."

*Sweetie.* That diverted my attention. I peered into the water. There they were, a small school of small fry, darting at our tantalizing feet.

My coach and I sat there for a while, up to our waists in Cloud Lake, and let the baby bluegills or whatever they were think they were feeding. As I watched, I suddenly thought of the shoeprints still on my kitchen floor.

"Let's stand up," Booker said. "Want me to keep holding you?"

"No, that's all right."

I would've felt like a freakin' invalid. Phobia or no phobia, it was time I started disengaging myself from Booker's comforting embrace. But I was undeniably apprehensive. Booker slid his hands to my waist and lightly rested them there as we rose to our feet. The reassuring touch was all I needed. No more, no less.

Standing in the lake felt strange and unnerving. A prickling sensation shot down my legs, threatening to weaken my muscles and unlock my knees. Booker must've read the anxiety in my face.

"Touch me," he said quietly. "Please touch me, Charlie."

At that moment, it was his face and voice and near-naked body that made me weak, not fear. I held him close, reveling in everything about him. At least, everything I'd so far had the privilege of getting to know. We swayed in short arcs as we embraced ... and, before I knew it, had moved into deeper water. It was level with my lower ribs.

"You're smooth," I murmured against Booker's mouth.

"No. Selfish." His lips flexed against mine. "I wanted to feel your arms around me."

I began to realize, just a little bit, how it must feel not only to make love with a man but to fall in love with one. A whole new prickling went through me. Not good. I silently warned myself not to fall prey to romantic delusions. It was way too early for me to have a realistic fix on my feelings.

We made our way back to shore with our arms around each other's waist. Had I been out there alone, I probably would've frozen up by now. Even better than Booker's calm patience was the fact he'd never once seemed self-conscious, or concerned about somebody seeing us. Not for a second had he ever quailed from touching me. He'd been completely at ease with our closeness.

"Tomorrow we'll go farther," he said. "All right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'd like that. I don't know how to thank you. You've been wonderful. Most people don't know how to deal with this kind of crazy shit. Most wouldn't want to bother."

"I don't mind at all."

We looked into each other's eyes, touched each other's face.

I was smitten. I couldn't have played Happy Couple with Kenneth if my life had depended on it.

"I saw something in my kitchen last night," I said. The prints had been bobbing in the back of my mind since those man-eating fish had started swarming around our feet.

“And please don’t be offended that I’m mentioning it. Just try to understand *why* I’m mentioning it. Okay?”

His expression immediately sobered. He looked worried.

I took his hand and led him to my cottage. Better to show *and* tell. We entered through the deck doors and crossed the living room to the kitchen. Both rooms essentially flowed together as one open space.

“See that?” I asked, pointing at the prints.

Booker slid me a tense glance. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Nobody’s worn shoes in this place since my ex washed the floor on Saturday. Nobody. Maybe I’m making something out of nothing, but I can’t explain how those footprints got there. I just know this floor was spotless when I headed out for the pine plantation yesterday. You and I kicked off our shoes before we came in later. Both pair were still out there this morning.”

Booker stared at the dusty tracks, running his thumb and fingers back and forth on either side of his mouth. “Could your squeeze have showed up?” he asked, angling a look at me.

“No. I told you, Kenneth took his boy to a Brewers game yesterday and then back to his mother’s.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Booker drew in a long breath and expelled it. “And you’re sure nobody else—”

“Positive. Judging by the size, those are a man’s footprints. But they don’t go all the way to the living room carpet. It’s like someone walked in and turned around and left.”

“Or stood there for a while before leaving.” Booker pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. “Could’ve been anybody, really. The satellite TV guy, your realtor, your insurance agent, another neighbor wanting to meet you. A tourist trying to get directions. A guy whose dog ran away. Anybody.”

I sat kitty-corner from him. “Come on, Booker, how rude is it to waltz into someone’s house uninvited? And without leaving a note, a business card; without making a follow-up phone call. That’s fuckin’ creepy, man. It also constitutes trespassing.”

Dropping his face to his hands, Booker nodded. At least he wasn’t brushing my hinkiness aside. Not totally, anyway. He wasn’t scoffing at me and treating this like a case of *Imagination Runs Wild in Outback; City Boy Needs Mommy*.

I scratched at my forehead. *Was* I being a nervous Nellie?

“Shit, I don’t know,” I said, dropping my hand to the table. “I guess it’s possible somebody wandered into the wrong cottage and wandered out again. While I was at the beach. Or across the road.”

Booker crossed his arms on the table and stared vacantly at nothing. “Or while we were making love,” he murmured.

Instantly, I felt a body-wide chill. “What?”

A troubled look came over Booker’s face. He gave me a guilt-ridden glance.

“There’s more I need to tell you, Charlie.”

My heart sank. That had been my fear from the start—that I hadn’t gotten the whole story from him.

“Is it about Karl?” I asked tonelessly.

One word opened Pandora’s box. “Yes.”

## Chapter Eight

I figured it had to do with an old drug connection. A deal that hadn't been fulfilled, a delivery that hadn't been made, a debt that hadn't been paid. Some unresolved illicit business that was rapidly turning ugly.

Booker went back to his place to get dressed and retrieve my clothes for me. Hanging out in our underwear didn't seem wise under the circumstances, since a person or people kept showing up unexpectedly at both our places. Carrying two glasses of ice water, I met him on my deck, where I popped up the patio table's umbrella.

Booker took a long drink while I slipped into my jeans and t-shirt. We sat down at the table.

"It started at R-H," he said without preface. "A staff member ... took a liking to me."

So much for assumptions. R-H was the correctional facility. My breath stopped for a beat. "You mean an inappropriate kind of—"

"Yeah, that kind." Booker's mouth pulled into and out of a cheerless smile, like a rubberband stretching and snapping back into place.

"A guard?" I'd heard about guards taking liberties with inmates.

Booker shook his head. "No, Karl. He's some sort of shrink. He told me later on that he was working *pro bono* at Reese."

*A head doctor. Okay, don't assume...* "Why were you seeing a shrink?"

"It isn't uncommon," Booker said wearily, "for inmates to be in therapy groups. Karl ran one. It was supposed to help gays adjust to prison life. After a couple of months, I was seeing him one-on-one. To this day I don't know how he engineered it. There wasn't anything unusual about me."

*Ah, but that's where you're wrong.* My throat had gone dry, so I swallowed some water. Booker sat with his forearms on his knees, interlinked fingers moving against and around each other as if he were trying to work a magic trick. And failing.

I leaned forward and grasped his hands with mine, enclosing and stilling them. He turned up those lovely eyes to me, and I knew I couldn't let him down. I had to keep an open mind.

"Do you think he falsified your records?" I asked.

"Could be," Booker said. "He had to dream up something that would justify private meetings. Ordinary inmates don't get special treatment."

"What reason did he give *you*?"

"He didn't give me one," Booker said sourly. "He hedged. I didn't press the issue, because I wasn't familiar enough with psychology *or* the penal system to ask the right questions. Besides, it was nice to get out of population and have some peace and quiet once in a while. I didn't see the point of kicking up a fuss."

And this shrink claimed to be working *pro bono*. Hm. Maybe the "for free" services only applied to these private sessions with Hosea Booker. "So, uh ... how did he treat you?"

Booker's face began to pull ever so slightly into a sneer. "Oh, he acted all fatherly at first, got me to talk about myself, was *so* supportive and encouraging. And then, little by little, he started crying on my shoulder, like I was supposed to give some of that caring

back to him.”

So far, it didn’t sound like any egregious breach of conduct on Karl’s part. A little unprofessional, maybe, but not lecherous.

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Early to mid fifties, I’d say.”

“And all he did was—”

Booker fixed his startling gaze on me again. Both it and his voice took on a defensive quality. “No, that’s not all he did.”

I watched Booker, wishing I had Carolyn’s intuition, her certainty of insight. “Then tell me what else,” I said gently. “I can’t read your mind, Booker.”

He sighed, releasing his defensiveness. “Insinuating comments. Flattery. Personal stuff—too personal for that kind of situation. Then the touching started.” Booker slid his hands out of mine. His voice dwindled, became distant. “Karl worked it. He worked it good.”

“What ... what kind of touching?” I asked, and then hastened to add, “You don’t have to tell me. I’m just not sure...”

Booker’s face softened with sympathy, and he gave me a sad smile. “I know. Fuck, Charlie, I’m sorry. This shouldn’t be any of your concern. It’s selfish of me to get involved with *anyone* while that parasite is still on my back.”

He started getting up. I immediately grabbed his wrist. This wasn’t going to be a repeat of last night.

“Don’t take off again,” I said, looking him straight in the eye. “I’m afraid of asking the wrong questions, that’s all, because I don’t know what the right ones are.” I slid my hand up his arm and smiled, trying to reassure him. “So you just talk, okay? Say as much or as little as you want.”

Booker sank back down to the chair. “Some experiences are as hard to describe as they are to understand.”

What he ended up telling me was reminiscent of investigative reports and exposés that were splattered regularly throughout the media. Stories of psychological and emotional manipulation of vulnerable people. Cult leaders molding the minds of their followers; teachers preying on students and doctors preying on patients; husbands controlling wives.

Booker hadn’t been, strictly speaking, raped or even seduced. But as he spoke, I realized there are other kinds of rape and seduction—much less obvious and more insidious. Some intimacy doesn’t have to be forced to be invasive.

He’d been violated. By the time he finished talking, I was convinced of it. An unethical and dysfunctional man with letters after his name had become infatuated with Booker, conned him into a sick mutual dependency and, worse yet, secured his silence.

“He actually had me believing for a while that we were helping each other,” Booker said. “And that it was nobody’s business but ours, a precious little secret. I kept wondering why it felt so wrong if it was supposed to be so right, why I was sickened by it.”

“It” consisted of Karl fondling Booker and ultimately getting them involved in mutual masturbation. No kissing and no penetration, thank God, but the groping was bad enough.

“Did you ever tell him how you felt about it?” I asked.

“Yeah, finally I did. It took me a while, though. I was convinced I was partially responsible for the whole business. I sure as hell didn’t initiate it, but I went along with it.”

“Why *did* you go along with it?” I asked. The answer was easily enough inferred, but I’d given up making inferences along with making assumptions. From now on, I’d let Booker speak for himself.

Immediately, he blushed. “First, because my self-esteem wasn’t exactly at its peak. Being a first-timer in prison can be pretty damned humbling. I figured I was just another lowly inmate who didn’t have the right to question *anybody* in authority. And second, because Karl had credentials and I figured he knew what he was doing. And third, because—” Booker paused. He cast me an embarrassed glance. “It excited me at first. Nobody had touched me in months—not in that kind of way—and my body responded. It took a while for my mind to catch up.”

I smiled wanly, remembering how I’d felt when I first came out. The “candy store phase” had led me into plenty of ill-advised hookups. Sexual deprivation will do that to a man in his twenties—hell, to older guys, too—and Karl was certainly shrewd enough to use that to his advantage.

“I’m sure it was the combination of your flagging ego and forced celibacy that gave him the guts to do what he did,” I told Booker. “He was certainly aware of how needful you were.”

Booker nodded and tried to return my smile. “I know that now. I realized it then, too, especially after I’d talked to Zander about it. That’s why the whole setup started making me real squeamish real fast. So I finally told Karl I wouldn’t feel comfortable seeing him alone unless the physical contact ended.”

By now our hands were joined again, fingers slipping between and over each other. “I’m guessing he didn’t take it too well,” I said.

Booker huffed a laugh through his nose. “That’s an understatement. First he tried blaming my reaction on my ‘sexuality and intimacy issues’. But I’d never *had* any issues—I mean, aside from being incarcerated and horny—until I ran into Karl. And I told him so. When he saw he was losing his hold on me, the threats started.”

“I guess that was predictable,” I said, looking at our twining fingers. Booker’s were longer than mine and struck me as more graceful. “What kinds of threats?”

“He told me he was the professional, and I didn’t know what I was talking about when it came to diagnosis and therapy. And I could forget about ‘whining’ to anybody, because I’d been a willing participant. If I tried to play the victim, it would be my word against his ... and I’d lose.”

Nodding, I felt the beginning of a headache. It made sense for an inmate to keep his trap shut under those circumstances. “Do you think he might’ve even accused you of sexually assaulting *him*?”

“I wouldn’t have put it past him,” Booker said. “Especially considering his other threats.”

“Which were?”

“*Are*,” Booker said. He swirled and rattled the ice cubes in his glass then took another drink. “That shit didn’t end with my release. Karl wants to keep seeing me. I’ve been trying to get rid of him—”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” I murmured. I lifted Booker’s free hand and kissed it.

“But he won’t leave me alone.” Booker flicked a glance at me. The worry had returned to his eyes. “I’m afraid he’ll do or say something to get my parole revoked, get me locked up again. He’s part of the system, Charlie. Has been for years. He’s in a position of power; I’m not. And I sure can’t afford a team of high-powered lawyers to defend me.”

I realized how right Booker was. A mere accusation would, at the very least, get him hauled in again for questioning or land him in the county lockup for a while. It depended on how far Karl was willing to go, how vindictive he was capable of being.

“I haven’t done a single thing that would constitute a violation,” Booker said ardently. “I haven’t been *near* drugs, not even prescription meds. I haven’t been in touch with any of the people involved in my old business. I haven’t so much as gone near a place that serves alcohol. I report to my PO when I’m supposed to and take my piss tests and hang out here at the lake. But if Karl wanted to make me look bad, there are all kinds of ways he could do it. I’m afraid if he knows I’m involved with you, it’s gonna push him over the edge.”

There it was: Booker’s tacit admission that he shared my fear. My fear that it was this crazed, tenacious Karl person who’d crept into my cottage yesterday. After his confrontation with Booker, he’d probably pulled down the road and parked where he couldn’t be seen, watched Booker head into the pine plantation, and maybe even witnessed that long, passionate kiss we’d shared. Then he’d seen us go back to my cottage. And his perverse fixation had led him through my back door and a few feet into my kitchen, where’d stood and listened to us while we made love.

“Oh, Jesus,” I whispered. “You *do* think it was him.”

“I think it’s a good possibility,” Booker said dourly.

“That note he left in your door, what did it say?”

Booker looked bewildered. “What note?”

“Yesterday, after you sent him away, he sat in his car for a minute and then got out and walked back to your house. It looked like he slipped a note or something inside the screen door.”

Without a word, Booker bolted up from his chair and nearly flew down the deck stairs. He sprinted across my yard and toward the rear of his cottage. I forced my mind into gear. There *had* to be a solution to this. We lived in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, for shit’s sake, where there was Liberty and Justice for All. Some asshole with a degree or two shouldn’t be able to extort sexual favors and silence from a fellow citizen. Hiring pricey attorneys shouldn’t be the only way to battle a bully.

Booker ran back to the deck, slapping something on the table as he dropped into his chair. “I didn’t see it when I left the house yesterday. It was on the ground, between the doors.” He lifted his hand.

A piece of memo pad paper, bearing a scrawl done in fountain pen. *Hosea, I’ll leave you alone for a few days so you’ll have time to reconsider. I can help you find fulfillment, Hosea. I can bring happiness to this new beginning of yours. Don’t doubt that. And don’t doubt, as well, that I always make good on my promises. All my promises.*

I read the note two more times. No signature. Of course. And no specific threats. But the last two lines carried an unmistakable assurance of retribution. This crazy prick was determined to have his way.

I rubbed my eyes and then my whole face. “Okay, listen. How do you feel about

your parole officer?"

Booker pulled down the corners of his mouth and shrugged. "Fine, I guess. She seems decent enough. Hasn't given me any crap."

"How would you feel about confiding in her, telling her all the stuff you just told me?"

"Fuck." Booker swayed backward, tilting the chair. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I know. You're wary of her too. But shit, Booker, you've got to let someone know what's been going on, make a preemptive strike. If you have good rapport with this woman, she could become your first advocate within the system. You *need* one, man."

"But how do I prove my story? I can't just start"—flustered, Booker waved an arm—"firing off accusations. Like Karl said, it would be my word against his. He'll just say that I knew he was going to turn me in for some infraction, so I tried to get the jump on him and undermine his credibility."

I sighed. Yup, he was right again. We had to come up with evidence. I focused on that dilemma.

"First thing you do," I said, "is record the whole progression of events with Karl, every single thing you can remember about your interaction. Be as detailed as possible, no matter how embarrassing the stuff is. Date the meetings if you can, starting with your first day in that therapy group. Include your conversations with that Zander character. And detail every visit Karl has made here." I picked up the note. "Hang on to this. Maybe put it in a safe deposit box. And all your written recollections, too. Doesn't matter if they're on paper or on a CD. Just make sure nobody can get at the stuff. I'm going to take some pictures of those shoeprints to put with everything else."

"I'll do it. But we need more, Charlie."

I tapped my fingers on the table. "I have some ideas. What's the bastard's full name?"

"Karl Bollinger."

My mouth hung open as I froze, staring at Booker. "Spell that," I said in a dead voice.

He did. Karl with a K, and Bollinger with a double L.

It was Kenneth's father who'd ensnared my new lover.

## Chapter Nine

I didn't tell Booker that. Not yet. I had to make sure. So I suggested he go home and start writing while I worked on some other angles. We'd get together later.

After taking several pictures of the prints on my floor, I steeled myself to call Kenneth. First I tried to remember everything he'd ever told me about his family, which wasn't much.

His parents had gotten divorced in Colorado when Kenneth was in his mid teens. Custody of him and his sister had been divided along gender lines. Then his father, whom Kenneth had described as a "mental health professional," moved to Wisconsin with his son.

I'd never met Karl Bollinger—in fact, I doubted he was even aware of my existence—but I'd heard the name, had a vague idea of his age, and knew he occasionally practiced at a state prison. Those few facts had come up when Kenneth and I were in the process of getting to know one another. For the most part, though, he didn't like talking about his family.

When I'd asked if his father knew he was gay, Kenneth had said, "I suspect so. After my divorce, anyway." I found the answer odd. Having a parent in the mental health field seemed like a dream come true for a non-heterosexual, and it baffled me that Kenneth had never openly discussed his homosexuality with his dad. Hell, it baffled me that he still didn't seem entirely comfortable with it and remained closeted in so many ways.

Tactless nincompoop that I am, I'd asked about this incomprehensible lack of communication. Kenneth hadn't been too pleased by my probing, but he could hardly dodge the question. His answer had something to do with a "don't ask, don't tell policy" in his family when it came to personal matters. Karl Bollinger apparently considered it bad form to put such things on the table and force other people, especially loved ones, to stare at them. "My father deals with enough of his patients' *sturm und drang*," Kenneth had said. "When he leaves work, he wants to put that crap behind him and enjoy some normalcy."

Normalcy. Yeah, he sure did need some. Holy triple-crowned shit.

My insides felt like they were being tumbled around in a bingo-ball cage. Trying to keep my hands steady, I sat in the recliner with my cell phone and hit the button for Kenneth's work number.

Whether he was conversing with his favorite lay or with a client, his professional voice was always the same—starched with an insincere geniality that always made me want to start talking dirty. *Hey, hot stuff, I was just thinking about that full sac of yours and how good it feels perched on my lips like a fuzzy little bag stuffed with Easter eggs.* Only I wouldn't have meant it. Just the notion of talking dirty brought Booker to mind, not Kenneth.

This couldn't be a kiss-off call. Hell, I couldn't even broach the subject. I'd have to wait until later in the week to tell Kenneth I'd rather he not come back to the cottage. The actual, official breakup would have to take place in person, once I got back home. Such things just aren't done over the phone. So we simply chatted about what how we'd spent our time since Saturday—*sans* any mention of my neighbor, of course—as I eased my



way toward the Big Question.

“Oh,” I said, as if a cartoon lightbulb had just appeared over my head, “I went to the hardware store in town this morning, and I started talking with a local couple. Retirees. The guy used to be a guard at Reese-Houghton Correctional. Didn’t you say your father does some work at a prison?”

“Yes, at that one,” Kenneth said in his office voice. “Half a day every couple of weeks, as I recall. He conducts groups or something.”

“Small world, huh?” I said blithely. “So, does he work *pro bono*?”

Kenneth coughed out a sardonic laugh. “You must be joking. There’d have to be some damned good incentive for him to forgo his hourly fee.”

And, I thought, Hosea Booker was damned good incentive in anyone’s book. “Hey, did you tell your dad about coming to Cloud Lake? I’ll bet he’s heard of it.”

“In a word,” Kenneth said, “no. Why would I?”

“I don’t know. Just thought you might’ve mentioned it.”

“He lives thirty miles away, Charlie, in a different county. And there are lakes all over the flippin’ place.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. Anyway...”

I breezed through a couple more topics, so that one wouldn’t seem significant, and then went into my sign-off. Kenneth asked if we were still on for the upcoming weekend. I hesitated, sorely tempted to come clean with him. It made me feel like a deceitful schmuck, acting like nothing was any different between us, like I’d never felt dissatisfied or he’d never made that surprise confession or I’d never laid a single lustful finger on the gorgeous man next door. But I had to do it this way for Booker.

I told him I’d be calling again soon and hinted there were certain things we needed to talk about. When he wanted to know what things, my answer was vague. But at least I’d thrown down a little paving. I truly had no desire to see him anymore. Certainly not in a romantic context, and certainly not at my cottage.

Once I’d nailed the identity of Booker’s stalker, I called Carolyn. She worked second shift so, I figured, would be at home. I hoped she’d be awake.

Oops, not quite. She was still in bed. With Ira. I apologized profusely, waited until she grabbed some coffee, then hit her up with my list of strange requests.

“Hon, I really need a favor from you. I have to get information on someone. Academic credentials, arrest record, even allegation-type stuff that’s been thrown out or swept under a carpet somewhere. And I need it emailed to me ASAP. Trust me, this is important.”

I walked around my living room, hoping I was asking for the right things. If Karl was playing these games with Booker, chances were he’d played them before, maybe elsewhere.

“Trying to find out if Ken has a past?” Carolyn asked archly, then nearly knocked me over with a revelation. “He doesn’t. I checked a few months ago.” She sounded disappointed.

“Actually,” I said, “I need to know if Kenneth’s father has a past. Please don’t ask why. I’ll tell you another time. Are you still friends with that PI in Chicago?”

“Liza. Yeah. Charlie, what—” She sounded utterly bewildered.

“Can Liza do this? Or can someone else you might know? I’m sorry I can’t explain my reasons just yet.”

Carolyn had a lot of friends and acquaintances in law enforcement. Four years older than I, she'd been a dispatcher for eleven years. Her favorite uncle was a cop. Ira, her boyfriend, was a criminologist. How she'd ever fallen for me, I still couldn't figure.

She sighed in a way that telegraphed her resignation. She'd accepted my terms. "Tell me what you can about him."

I told Carolyn everything I knew. As an afterthought, and one tinged with guilt, I added, "I could use a search on a guy named Hosea Booker, too." I couldn't offer much more than physical stats, which I'm surprised didn't register on Carolyn's radar. At least she didn't make any snarky comments.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," I said. "I owe you, Carrie. You and Ira are welcome to spend a week or two up here anytime. I'll even throw in a bottle of champagne and a gift certificate for dinner. Somewhere."

"How about New Orleans?" She chuckled. "Just kidding. You know the best way you can repay me—by finding a new partner."

It used to irk me when she fiddled on that string. Now, with Booker in the wings, the fiddling made me wistful. I couldn't wait to see him again. Just thinking about how close he was messed with me in a way I hadn't experienced since high school, when I'd wait at my locker for Ethan Hammersmith to stop at *his* locker. I was sure Satan had placed it next to mine just to taunt and torment me, because it was wicked for a boy to like boys the way other boys liked girls.

Christ. A year shy of thirty, and a guy had again loosed butterflies in my stomach.

I fired up my wireless laptop once I was finished talking with Carolyn and cruised sites that sold surveillance equipment. In under an hour, I'd found some useful pieces that would set me back less than a grand, overnight delivery included. It didn't seem like a high price to pay to help somebody. I'd donated way more to various causes and charities over the years, even when I could barely afford to.

Lackadaisically, I slapped some sandwiches together and stared at those footprints while I ate. Did *they* explain why I was doing this? Why I was bending over backward to help a man I hardly knew? Maybe. The prints on my kitchen floor meant Booker's problem had become my problem. Some stalker type had invaded *my* home and intruded on *my* privacy. And now it was my responsibility, at least in part, to get rid of him.

Someone rapped loudly on my kitchen door, startling me. My heart lodged in my throat. What if I saw a gun staring at me when I opened the door? What if I caught a momentary glimpse of a scowling, fifty-something man before the crack of a gunshot deafened me and my world faded to black?

"Stop it," I whispered to myself.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I got up to answer the door. The man who stood there was neither scowling nor fifty-something. He wore a blandly pleasant expression and was probably in his thirties. He was the satellite-TV installer. I'd forgotten about the appointment I'd made.

As he went about doing whatever he had to do, I considered going next door. No, I had to leave Booker alone for a while. I was about to retreat to the beach when my phone trilled. Grabbing it, I went out to the deck and sat down.

"Charlie, what were you getting at before?"

It was Kenneth. He sounded wary, suspicious. I silently cursed myself for not having checked the number before I answered. But what good would that have done, really? I

couldn't avoid his calls for the rest of the week—not if he was persistent enough. And Kenneth could be damned persistent.

"What do you mean?" I asked, buying time while I tried to formulate an answer.

"You said we needed to talk about some things. What things? I really don't appreciate being left hanging like that."

*Fuck.* I hunched over the patio table as I prepared to speak, although there was nobody around to eavesdrop. "I just think we might need to ... reevaluate our relationship. Wouldn't you agree? I mean, your little bombshell about—"

"God damn it," he snapped, "I should've known you'd read too much into that. I *told* you the others don't mean anything to me. What more do you want? You want me to swear I'll be faithful?"

That wasn't what I wanted. In fact, it was the last thing I wanted. But before I could answer, his tone moderated and he cannily erected his first roadblock.

"Okay, I'll be faithful."

*Fuck. Double fuck.* "Kenneth, there's more to it than that."

"What more? You think I don't mean it, or I won't stick to it?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Well, sort of. Maybe what you said just brought to light—"

At that moment, Booker emerged from his screened porch, a notebook tucked under his arm. He strolled onto his dock and sat down, legs dangling over the side. He was facing north, the direction of my cottage.

My insides felt all runny at the sight of him. I lost my voice, my train of thought, even my tenuous desire to keep talking to Kenneth. The interruption didn't last long, but it told me a lot about my state of mind. More, probably, than I wanted to know.

"Brought to light what?" Kenneth asked a bit stridently. "What else *is* there?"

I tore my gaze away from Booker. "Certain doubts," I said. "I've probably had them for a while but just wasn't confronting them." Uncontrollably, my eyes shifted back to Booker. "Maybe ... maybe *I'd* like to see other guys, too. Maybe it's something we *both* need."

An annoying, telltale crackle came through the phone. Aside from that, silence met my statement—the silence of a disintegrating connection. It unsettled me. Cold solidified in the pit of my stomach.

"You don't mean that," Kenneth finally said, his voice low and smooth and persuasive ... but with a barely perceptible, serrated edge of desperation.

The tone was familiar. It was the kind of voice that's supposed to coax people out of self-delusion. Carolyn had used it when I first told her I thought I was gay.

Hesitantly, I asked, "What makes you think I don't mean it?"

"Because when I swear something, you know you can trust me. Don't you, Charlie? Because you know I love you."

I almost toppled off my chair. "I have to go. The TV guy is here. Don't come up this weekend, Kenneth. Okay? I need to collect my thoughts. I think you do, too. We'll talk more when I get back."

The word *love* had never once passed between us, and for good reason. We didn't love each other. And I knew damned well that if I hadn't raised the issue of needing to "talk," the word would have remained unspoken. Just as the emotion would have remained unfelt.

Laying down the phone, I looked in Booker's direction.  
*Double fuck squared.*

## Chapter Ten

Funny how things happen, as my father used to say. Despite its inauspicious start, the rest of that week turned out to be the loveliest I'd ever spent anywhere doing anything with anybody.

Kenneth didn't call me, and Karl stayed away. There was only spectral evidence, so to speak, of their presence on this earth. As hard as it was to let Booker know my "fuck-around boyfriend" was Karl Bollinger's son, I told him as soon as we got together later that same day. He was incredulous at first, just as I had been, but there was no disputing the facts.

After I clued Booker in about the father-son relationship, I asked him, "Haven't you told *anybody* about the crap Bollinger's been pulling? Haven't you mentioned it to your family?"

"No," he said emphatically. "Hell, no. My father and sister went through enough while I was incarcerated. There's only so much a family can handle, Charlie. Zander's the only person I told. And what could *he* do?"

"But now that you're out and your dad is better and your sister is married—"

"That's all the more reason not to bring it up," Booker said. "They've finally found some peace and happiness. I'm not gonna say, 'Oh by the way, Pa and Rachel, my connection to R-H isn't over. Some messed-up shrink keeps dogging me because he wants to get in my pants. And if I try to turn him in, he'll get me busted again.'" At this point, Booker seamed his lips and shook his head. "Uh-uh. They're not going to find out if I can help it."

The second reminder of Karl and Kenneth came when the surveillance equipment arrived. Booker and I had to discuss its use and placement, and figure out how to download and store the data it might record. Then we had to set the stuff up. But to test the equipment as well as neutralize its negative associations, we recorded ourselves getting each other off. It was freakishly exciting. Acutely exciting. When we played back the results, we got off again. The next time we got hot in front of the camera, we decided, we'd use some props. The prospect excited us even more.

Most of the time, though, we didn't think about the Bollinger boys. We put the whole mess aside. Our focus was elsewhere, and blissfully so, as we concentrated on getting to know each other and enjoying our time together.

Booker and I seemed like the only two people on earth, at least while we were at the lake. Most of the other property owners—and there probably weren't more than a couple dozen—were nowhere to be seen. They normally came up on weekends only. There was some activity at Pumpkinseed Campground, but it never made its way over to our side.

We went into town on Wednesday. Shopped, had lunch, even took in a movie at a little theater redolent of popcorn and musty velvet. But mostly we shuttled to and from our own hideaways. I helped Booker with one of his works in progress. He helped me spruce up the shed and clean rain gutters. Every day we spent time at the beach and time making love, and evenings were given over to talking.

God, we talked. Over meals and in bed. On his porch or my deck, beer or scotch or wine lubricating our throats and loosening our tongues. We spoke of our pasts, shared the

details of what went into the making us. We learned of each other's likes and dislikes, triumphs and disappointments.

We kept working on my phobia, too, trying out different ways to loosen its grip on me. The attempts were always pleasant and usually successful.

Wednesday night, just as I thought Booker and I were about to retire to my bed, he kissed me and headed for his place.

"Wait!" I called out. "Aren't you going to sleep with me tonight?"

"No," he said.

"Why?" We'd been spending every night together in my bed, which was larger than his.

My consternation seemed to amuse him. "That wasn't a rejection. I just have something in mind for tomorrow. You'll need to feel a little deprived for it to work."

"What is it?" A sperm bank donation?"

Booker only laughed and waved. "Good night, Charlie lark. Sweet dreams."

I went to his place first thing Thursday morning, hoping to slip into his bed and cajole him out of celibacy. Except "first thing" happened to be close to ten o'clock—we'd been up late the night before—so Booker was already awake and about. I got a heartfelt kiss but nothing more. It only made things worse.

Booker immediately led me back to my property, sashayed onto the pier, and instructed me to stand on the beach. This was apparently the beginning of another "session." I always did as I was told when it came to my water-acclimation exercises. So I stayed put and merely watched him. He sat on the edge of the pier, honing my curiosity, as he casually swung his feet over the water. Then, with a subtle ass-shift and hip-lift, he slid off his shorts and set them aside.

Son of a bitch was naked. His hand crept to his crotch. Subtly, he started playing with his dick.

We hadn't had sex since the previous morning. So the sight of this gorgeous, tanned, hard-muscled man, sitting nude amid the glories of nature and playing with his own glory of nature, was not something I could ignore. I approached the pier.

"Stay back there," Booker said.

I paused, scowling. "Then put your damned shorts on."

"No. I like sitting here like this." Cunningly, he smiled at me. "I like *doing* this."

He lifted his cock just a little, just enough to give me a tantalizing glimpse. The lure hanging between his long, lean thighs was bigger than when he'd started fondling it. I wore a body-hugging, square-legged swimsuit, something Booker had picked out for me when we'd gone into town, and that band of cloth suddenly felt mighty snug.

"You look uncomfortable," he said, his glimmering gaze falling below my waist. "Why don't you wade out here and stand in front of me?"

Canny bastard wanted me to walk into the lake. The water was probably five feet deep where he sat, or nearly so, but I was getting hornier by the minute.

"Come on, Charlie." Booker's fingers crawled over his burgeoning erection. "I need you."

He needed me. How could I resist? And so I inched out there, rubbing my own cock as I did so, concentrating on my reward for being brave enough to stand in water up to my chest. Just as my gut would send an anxious shiver through my muscles, Booker would do something else enticing—squeeze his shaft just below the head, or caress the

head, or run a hand over his chest. Arousal lowered his eyelids and parted his lips. I moved on, irresistibly drawn to him, even as mounting fear slithered beneath my skin and threatened to paralyze my legs.

But I did it. I got there. I stood in front of him and sucked him off as his strong hands cradled my head and my own hands made a phallic offering to whatever sprites inhabited Cloud Lake. I hadn't come in water for a while—not since the last time I'd done it in the bathtub, years ago—and it made me perversely proud. After Booker and I had both gotten off, he slipped into the lake, kissed me long and deeply as he held me close, and then guided me back to shore.

At dusk, we went out in the paddleboat. Another victory. We never got so far out from shore that we couldn't see the bottom, but hell, I was on water for the first time in twenty-three years.

Friday night we sat in front of the fire pit on my beach, munching s'mores and drinking beer—a surprisingly good combination. Aside from the crackling and snapping of the fire, the only sounds on the lake were the throaty, double-note calls of frogs and the occasional screech of a bottle rocket from Pumpkinseed Campground. The sky, patterned with stars, looked like the sequined shirt of a Country Western singer.

Booker wasn't very talkative. I knew why. The world was on the verge of intruding on our idyll.

“Are you thinking about tomorrow evening?” I asked gently.

“Mm-hm. I'll only have one chance to do it, so I'd better get it right.”

In order to fend off another uninvited visit by Karl Bollinger, considering I was now part of the picture at Cloud Lake, Booker had called the therapist on Tuesday and set up a meeting. We needed to get something on the guy, and that necessarily involved some contact.

Booker would be seeing him tomorrow evening in a town about twenty miles away. Neutral territory would be best, for a number of reasons.

“Do you think he knows you're going to give him the heave-ho?” I asked.

Booker, sitting cross-legged, brushed his hands over his jeans. He stared into the fire. “I'm pretty sure he suspects, considering I didn't invite him over to my place. But I think he's still hoping he can talk me out of it.”

“Any idea what you're going to say?”

“Vaguely. But I'll probably end up winging it.” Arms on thighs, Booker leaned forward and absently peeled bark from a small branch.

My heart ached for him. I wanted to go with him tomorrow, provide him with moral support, but I obviously couldn't. Even though Karl Bollinger didn't know me as his son's boyfriend, chances were good he'd recognize me as Hosea Booker's neighbor and fuck-buddy.

“Son of a bitch is really hung up on you,” I said, and immediately thought of Kenneth. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree...*

“Damned if I know why,” Booker muttered glumly.

I knew why, at least from my perspective. “You're a very desirable man.”

Booker slid me a glance. “Don't go there, Charlie. I really don't want to hear it.”

“Sorry. Didn't mean to compliment you.”

Without looking at me, Booker reached over and gave my hand a quick squeeze. “How long does that battery last in the camera?”

“Two hours,” I said. Booker would be wearing a mini “spy” camera with audio and built-in DVR.

“Hope I’m done with him a lot sooner than that.” Now he did look at me. “You don’t think he’ll notice that thing sticking out of my shirt pocket?”

“Actually, you could probably keep it *in* your shirt pocket. It’s the audio we need, not the video. Besides, I don’t know how well the camera works in low-light conditions.”

Booker nodded. “I’ll use my judgment. I’m still not sure where the two of us will end up having our little talk. It just can’t be an enclosed space, like a vehicle. I don’t want him fuckin’ grabbing at me.”

Booker poked at the fire. A flurry of sparks shaved through the darkness.

I wondered if I should take down the other cameras we’d set up. There was one outside my back door—a fairly standard surveillance camera with night-vision capability—and a more sophisticated unit, with motion detector *and* night vision, in Booker’s kitchen. Since making our personal porn vids, we hadn’t checked either camera. That could wait, I figured, until Booker’s appointment was out of the way. Sunday could be our “plug ‘n’ play” day. Booker’s written recollections of his experiences with Karl were already stashed in a safe deposit box at the bank.

“How do you suppose your boyfriend’s going to react to this shit?” Booker asked. He opened another beer. “Assuming anything comes of it.” He didn’t sound convinced anything *would* come of it.

“Kenneth isn’t my boyfriend,” I said. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if he never heard a word about it. He and his father don’t seem very close.”

Booker tapped the top of his beer can. He looked at me then looked at the fire. “Does Kenneth know he isn’t your boyfriend?”

The question both pleased and dismayed me—a discomfiting reaction tied entirely to my relationship with Booker. I suddenly realized I had no idea where that relationship was going. I had no idea how much or how little it meant to us and what our expectations were. Hell, I didn’t even know if we *had* any expectations.

“What does it matter?” I asked, trying to gain some insight.

Booker shrugged and kept tapping on the can top. “I just don’t like messing with guys who are involved.”

I swiveled to face him. “I told you, Kenneth and I never agreed to any kind of commitment. And he’s been sleeping around. I’ve already laid the groundwork for a breakup.”

“Which means it isn’t a done deal yet.”

“Booker, for chrissake,” I said, raising my voice and tossing up my arms in frustration, “I can’t blow the man off over the goddamned phone!”

Nodding, he looked down at his lap.

“I’m sorry if it bothers you,” I said. “But for all intents and purposes, I am *not* part of a couple.”

The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment before a voice in my head responded, quite archly, *Oh aren’t you?*

If I felt bonded to anybody, it was the handsome, humble, caring, and altogether extraordinary man beside me.



## Chapter Eleven

Even the air felt stressed on Saturday. Bloated with storm clouds, the glowering sky split open around noon. Booker and I had been in his shop, working on one of his projects, but we ambled onto the screen porch when the first growl of thunder sounded.

Approaching storms are always majestic. It was the first one I'd experienced at the lake, and I was enthralled by its slow, rumbling approach from the west. Clouds crawled across the sky and up each other's backs. They seemed to sponge the light from the sky.

Booker's hands rested on the chair arms. I laid a hand over one of his, my fingers stroking lightly, tracing the geometry of his bones. Sporadically, his fingers flexed, grasping mine. It was an assertion of connection—I felt that beyond a doubt—and with each wordless, passing minute, the connection strengthened. But I also sensed that neither of us knew quite what to make of it.

Booker was reflective. Anxious, too, I supposed. I didn't try to press him into conversation. Once the storm had passed, we resumed working for another few hours then had a modest, early supper. Afterward, Booker got ready for his meeting with Karl. I didn't shower with him, because he didn't seem to want me to. Not surprising that he wasn't in the mood for sex. I wouldn't have been, either.

"At least you shouldn't have to worry about the camera getting wet," I said as I secured it within his shirt pocket. "Sky seems to be clearing."

Distractedly, Booker nodded. He slipped on a light jacket, which would cover the small device if he felt hinky about it being visible. Had I not known what it was, I wouldn't have made much of it. But that was only one person's reaction.

It was hard to ignore how good my lover looked and smelled. Although his face betrayed his tension, its grimness gave him a dimension of maturity even deeper than what I'd previously noticed. And it was distinctly masculine.

At that moment, I realized Booker had a whole variety of appearances and scents, and each had its own strong appeal. Impulsively, I flattened a hand on the side of his face. "I'll be waiting at my place." I smiled encouragement. "Just call if you need to hear a friendly voice."

The lines in Booker's face deepened. "Shit, Charlie, I really hate that you've gotten involved in this. I think you need to pull back."

"Don't you get it? I *want* to help."

"But why?"

When he looked at me like that—straight on, his beautiful eyes so large and expressive—I was barely capable of thought. All I could say was the first thing that came to mind. "Because you're very special to me."

Booker lowered his gaze. "Oh, Christ. Don't say that. I don't need that."

All my filtering mechanisms stopped functioning. I wanted this man more than I could stand. I cared for him more than I could say. "But I do," I said. "*I* need it. I need *you*."

Feeling a little lightheaded, I could hardly believe my ears. Had I really started making declarations to him? And so fervidly? I didn't know what the hell was coming over me.

Booker dropped against the door frame. Shoving both hands in his pockets, he stared at the chipped linoleum. “Fuck.”

“What do you mean, ‘fuck’? Don’t tell me you’ve got a boyfriend or a wife or a kid or something.”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is? Are there more secrets, other secrets?”

Booker’s head snapped up. He glared indignation at me. “No.”

Flustered, I bent forward and imploringly stretched my hands toward him. “Fuckin’ *talk* to me, man! What’s wrong with me finding you special?” I’d made an investment in him, maybe a more significant one than I realized, and now he was saying he didn’t want it. When he tried reaching for me, I brushed his hand away.

He seemed stung by my rebuff.

“Guessing games make me crazy,” I said irritably, just to explain my reaction. I certainly didn’t want to hurt him.

“I’m sorry. I don’t...” Helplessly, Booker shrugged. “Why do you have to feel that way about me? I’m no better than anybody else.”

“Yes, you are,” I said, the fervor returning to my voice. “To me you are.”

He shook his head. “Don’t single me out, Charlie.”

“Why?”

“Because it isn’t real. You’re fooling yourself. I’m replaceable.”

“You’re not a fucking sparkplug, Booker!”

“Then make me one. Make me interchangeable with all the others.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “All *what* others? Booker, motherf—” I rolled my head back then pitched forward in utter frustration. “What do you *want* from me? You think I need to fall for a human bundle of contradictions? I don’t.” I shoved a hand through my hair. “I’d be better off unscrewing my dick and handing it over to you. That way you wouldn’t be able to fuck with my head.”

He was watching me, frowning at me. “What did you say?”

“Are you deaf in addition to being confused? I swear to Christ—”

“You’re falling for me?”

“Not the fuck anymore,” I muttered, although the words were nothing more than an empty comeback. Letting out a long breath, I leaned against the opposite side of the door. I had to calm down before I tried explaining why I was wiggling out. Explaining *part* of the reason, anyway. “I’m sorry. But last night it bothered you that I haven’t gotten rid of Kenneth yet, I assume because you want me to focus on you exclusively. Now you’re upset because I *have* focused on you.”

As soon I started talking about “focusing” on Booker, the reason for his resistance became clear to me. Being the target of someone’s attention had given him nothing but grief, except when it was his artwork that set him apart. Now, as he faced the prospect of seeing Karl again, his aversion to being singled out was like a reopening wound.

I was pretty sure Booker wanted me to want him—at least, temporarily and physically. But as soon as I started finding him *uniquely* desirable, he spliced my attitude with the only other expression of attachment he knew—destructive, suffocating obsession. Yet there was obviously a part of him that craved attachment.

A bundle of contradictions, all right.

Booker kept studying the floor and nibbling his lower lip.

“Just make up your mind, okay?” I said, sounding as tired as I felt. “Because if I’m gonna get my ass in any deeper, I sure as hell need to know where you’re coming from.”

I opened the door and walked outside. Booker followed. He didn’t say anything, and I was simply going to shamle to my cottage. But I couldn’t send him off like this.

I turned in his direction. “Hey!” When he looked my way, I said, “Good luck, sweet baby.” To my surprise, the term of endearment didn’t make me feel foolish and didn’t sound stupid. It sounded exactly right.

Booker smiled wanly and seemed relieved. “Thanks, Charlie lark.”

And that, too, had always sounded exactly right.

\* \* \* \*

My stomach felt awful. I couldn’t seem to settle down and find an adequate diversion. Anything that required concentration was out of the question, so I couldn’t read. I found the TV annoying, so I turned it off ten minutes after I turned it on. I didn’t want to be outside—without Booker’s company, the mosquitoes’ ongoing torment was unbearable—so I stayed indoors.

Given my state of mind, I figured I might as well make some phone calls. At least they’d take my mind off Booker’s mission and train it on something else.

Saturday night wasn’t a good time to call the pub. Too busy. Besides, I’d talked to Benny, Sheryl, and Gisella at different times throughout the week. My business manager, bar manager, and brew master respectively, they excelled at their jobs and kept things running smoothly. My trust in them all was implicit and well deserved.

I did call Carolyn, though, to get an update on the investigations I’d initiated. She was off work but at a barbecue with Ira. I heard the music and conversation and laughter fade out as Carolyn obviously moved away from the center of activity, which was likely somebody’s backyard patio.

“Liza needs more time to put the snoop on Bollinger,” she told me. “According to her, there’s some deep digging to do. Every lead takes her to a new level.”

“So there *are* skeletons in his closet?”

“It appears that way. In the closet, buried beneath the floor,” Carolyn said. “I’ll let you know as soon as she’s got everything she can get. There seems to be some kind of professional impropriety at the bottom of it all. Charges he barely managed to skirt, some position he lost. Sorry I don’t have any details yet.”

Filling in the details was something I could almost do myself, just based on what Carolyn had said. I was willing to bet Karl Bollinger had put the make on a patient or patients in Colorado. Whether or not he was ever prosecuted, he likely lost his job and even his license to practice, and then he fled the state. Maybe there was a civil judgment against him instead of or in addition to a criminal conviction. In either case, it seemed he’d tried running from a tarnished reputation ... only to risk tarnishing it again.

“Tell Liza I really appreciate the help,” I said.

“You’ll be telling her yourself,” Carolyn said drolly, “when you write out that check. Oh, but I do have a freebie for you.”

“What’s that?” I wandered into my bedroom and flopped down on the bed.

“That other man you were curious about.”

The funny feeling in my stomach briefly intensified. “Hosea Booker.”

“Yeah. Sounds like an interesting guy. You could’ve looked him up yourself. There

don't seem to be any mysteries in *his* past."

"Tell me about him."

"Well, aside from a few speeding tickets, he has a drug-related conviction that resulted in some minor time at a correctional facility. Everything else I found about him had to do with—"

"Art," I said.

"Yeah. Exhibits and sales of sculptures. Do you know him?"

"I'm getting to."

"Well, I hope that drug conviction doesn't rattle you too much."

"Why should it? Marijuana isn't some demonic substance," I said derisively. "It's a weed with beneficial properties."

When Carolyn spoke, there was a smile in her voice. "Please tell me you've found a replacement for Ken Bob."

That was one of her many pet names for Kenneth. "No. Hosea Booker isn't a replacement for anybody. He's ... unique." What the fuck; he wasn't around to hear me utter that detested word.

"You know," Carolyn said, "there's only one thing that disappoints me about this development."

"Please don't get on your damned cop-shop high horse," I said. "Believe me, he's learned his lesson." Carolyn wasn't as bad as some of her coworkers, but she could still adopt that tight-assed, self-righteous stance once in a while. *Oh, we're perfect citizens. We never break the law. It is sacrosanct, and we revere it.*

"I wasn't going to!" Carolyn said, taking offense. "I also happen to think the drug laws in this country are screwed up. You know that. Damn, Charlie, you must really like this guy if you're already his advocate."

I ignored that part. It was too soon for her to draw any conclusions about us. "So what disappoints you?"

"I'm not sure if you noticed or not, but there is or was a seriously hot guy in the place right next to yours."

A grin pushed my cheeks to my ears. "Oh?"

"Yeah. When I saw him, I thought, Wow, he and Charlie would make a really striking couple. Too bad he's probably straight, taken, and-or stupid."

"Well," I said, "that's life. Thanks, Carrie. You can go back to kissing barbecue sauce off Ira's mustache now."

"What makes you think I'm doing *that*?" she asked with a chuckle. Gradually, the level of background noise increased.

"Because you used to do it to me."

"You never had a mustache, Charlie. It was something else I licked food off of." She blew out air, a disgruntled sound. "Jesus, how soon they forget."

Talking about Booker gave me a pang that had nothing to do with heartburn. Not the physical kind, anyway. After I tossed my cell on the nightstand, I grabbed the pillow next to mine. Hugging it, I inhaled. The pillow smelled of him. Very distinctly. It smelled of Booker's hair and skin.

I rolled onto my side, telling myself not to fall under the spell of this isolated, perfect world. I'd have to leave it soon and resign myself to seeing Booker on weekends—if, that is, neither of us started dating somebody else. The possibility actually made me feel a

little ill. Even if we decided to keep our affair going, we couldn't keep the summer going. Winter weather could easily prevent my coming up here on any regular basis.

Turning off the light, I lay back down and closed my eyes. In spite of all my misgivings, a pleasant fantasy spun itself in my mind. Booker could live at Cloud Lake from, say, the end of April to the end of October. I could spend four or five days a week here and two or three in the city. Hell, my business virtually ran itself, thanks to my capable staff. Moreover, a potential buyer, a big one, had been sniffing around my thriving little pub. I wasn't quite ready to let go of it yet, but selling was an option, too. If I ever got bored up here, I could always do volunteer work. Help out at the animal shelter or food pantry. Deliver meals to seniors. Then, come winter, Booker and I could move to my place in the city. He could set up a workshop in my full, largely unused basement.

Yeah, it was doable. Smiling, I drifted off. . .

Commotion outside jarred me awake. Blinking and breathing heavily, I bolted out of bed and out to my deck. The moon shone like a newly minted coin.

I heard someone shout, "Stop!"

A figure scrambled into a fishing boat tied to Booker's pier. Another, taller figure ran down the yard's low incline toward the docked boat.

The running man was Booker. He was back. And he was chasing someone.

I flew down my deck steps and across my own yard just as the boat's outboard growled to life. I was about to cry out, "Booker, don't!" because I saw what was coming. He may have seen it, too ... but not in time. He'd already jumped for the boat.

The man in it was ready for him.

Just as I reached Booker's frontage, I saw a shape rise up. Silhouetted against the sky for a terrifying moment, it made an even more terrifying, downward sweep.

I heard the most sickening sound I'd ever heard in my life—the dull *whack* of an oar connecting with my lover's skull. He tumbled limply into the water as the boat sped away.

I'd seen plenty in the sheen of moonlight. It was Kenneth who manned the craft and who'd wielded that improvised weapon. I was sure of it.

## Chapter Twelve

There are times when fear is a luxury.

I denied myself that luxury as soon as I saw and heard Booker's body make that lazy, crumpling arc and splash into the water. By the time I reached the shore alongside his dock, all I could make out was the gleaming bubble of his jacket on the lake's surface.

I half ran, half stumbled into the water, hating it for impeding my progress, wanting to fling every last drop out of the lake basin. It was my enemy in a different way now, for a different reason. And it kept getting deeper. Alarmingly deeper. Since I couldn't swim worth a shit, I had to plow forward on the balls of my feet, using my arms to push against the water and help propel me.

Just as I was in up to my chin, I made an awkward, Hail Mary leap toward Booker's jacket and grabbed onto it. I tugged as hard as I could, praying I wouldn't tear it off of him. His head popped out of the water, for he'd been floating face-down, and I heard a weak wheeze. He was straining to draw in air.

I pulled him close enough so I could wrap an arm around his chest and start hauling him backward, toward the beach. *Don't lose your footing*, I kept warning myself. *Don't you dare take him down, asshole. Just keep going*. By the time the water was level with my chest, I could turn Booker enough to give him a couple of mouth-to-mouth rescue breaths, which helped him cough up some water. Satisfied he was at least breathing again, however labored it was, I concentrated on getting us to shore. Booker's head lolled against my face, and I found myself kissing his drenched hair and muttering to him. "Come on, baby, I've got you. Hold on. We're almost there. I'll take care of you."

It felt like a miracle to hit the sand. As carefully as possible, I laid Booker on his stomach. He coughed up more dribbles of water, and those shallow, gasping breaths gradually gave way to more natural respiration. I knelt beside him and stroked the side of his face. My fingertips grazed something on the left side of his forehead, near the hairline. Leaning over, I delicately moved aside his plastered-down curls and peered at the spot, but the moonlight simply wasn't bright enough to allow for inspection. We had to get indoors.

"Let me know when you can walk, honey," I said to him. "Don't rush it, though. Just take your time."

Booker coughed again and sluggishly rose from the sand. I helped him into a sitting position. He tried saying something, but his voice was pinched tight. He coughed, cleared his throat, spat aside some gunk. Finally he croaked out, "I'm okay."

I got him to his feet, put his arm over my shoulders, and wrapped my arm around his waist. We shuffled back to his house. Once inside, I steered him to the couch.

"Take your clothes off," I said, standing over him.

He gave me a crooked smile.

I ignored him. This wasn't the time for those kinds of thoughts, although it did occur to me that we hadn't been naked and cozy since last night. Kneeling in front of the couch, I took off Booker's boots and socks then got up and helped peel off his jacket, shirt and pants. I was sopping wet myself, but I hadn't been clocked by an oar and I hadn't inhaled part of Cloud Lake. My discomfort was insignificant.

“Now get your ass in bed,” I said sternly. I could see he was about to protest, so I jumped in before he had a chance. “I’m not playing, Booker. I mean it. Get in bed and cover up. I’ll come right back and check you over.”

Another grin as he sat there on display, arms flung out to the sides and legs parted. I forced my gaze to move up to his forehead. Yup, a goose egg. And a good sign. It meant he likely didn’t have a concussion.

As I lifted his soaked clothing and carried it to the dryer in the kitchen, I felt a small stab of panic. Disengaging Booker’s shirt from the rest of the mass, I frantically felt its breast pocket. The camera wasn’t there.

I charged back to the bedroom and told Booker, “I can’t find the camera. If that fucker’s at the bottom of the lake—”

“It’s on the passenger seat of my truck.”

His voice sounded closer to normal now. He wasn’t exhibiting any of the signs of a concussion, either. Sitting against the headboard, he’d covered himself from the chest down.

I blew out a sigh. “Thank God. Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

I retrieved the camera from Booker’s truck. Next I went to the bathroom to grab a couple of Tylenol from the medicine chest, then back to the kitchen to heap some ice cubes into a towel and pour a small glass of water. I was running around like a contestant on one of those goofy Japanese game shows.

Once I’d delivered the stuff to Booker, I looked more closely at the bump on his head before he held the ice to it. I had some savvy when it came to recognition and first-aid treatment of accident injuries. When I opened my business, I took a comprehensive course offered by the Red Cross. Looking after employees and customers on a daily basis wasn’t a responsibility I took lightly. Still, I didn’t want to put Booker in danger.

“I should either call 911 or take you to the Emergency Room,” I said. “And call the cops, too.”

“No.” Booker’s answer was emphatic. “I don’t need medical care and I sure as fuck don’t want to deal with any cops.”

“Booker, you *could* have a concussion.”

“I don’t. I’ve had one before, so I know the symptoms. I’m okay. All that bastard did was knock me into the lake. I wasn’t unconscious, just dazed. I must’ve reflexively inhaled when I hit the water.”

He sounded alert enough. I figured I could leave him alone for a while. “Well, there’s something I need to do. It won’t take more than a half-hour or so. You just stay put. I’ll be back.”

“Charlie,” Booker said as I was about to leave the room.

I stepped up to the bed. “What?”

“I’m really sorry for the way I acted earlier. I didn’t mean... I wasn’t trying to get rid of you. That’s the last thing I want.”

My heart melted. “I’m glad you cleared that up.”

“Come here. Please.” Booker grasped my shirt sleeve and pulled me toward him.

“Thank you,” he whispered before he kissed me, before his lips pressed, cool but expressive, against mine. His hand rose to the back of my head and held it in place as our mouths opened to each other. I cradled Booker’s face in both hands and let myself fall into the kiss. Damn, I was crazy about him. And relieved beyond expression that he

seemed fine.

“You’re welcome,” I said, backing away.

“My hero,” he said with a warm smile. “What you did was incredible, Charlie. I’m really proud of you. And grateful.”

A blush heated my face. I shrugged. “It had to be done.” I touched his shoulder and tried to lighten things up. “You’re the only lay I’ve got right now. Please, just stay there and relax. I’ll be spending the night here to make sure you’re all right.”

“Where are you going?”

“To find the prick who did this to you.”

\*

I couldn’t figure out what the hell had possessed Kenneth to show up at Booker’s place, but I had a good idea how he got there. He’d probably rented Rick Pavlic’s cottage for the weekend. I didn’t know where on the lake it was. I did know, however, the direction to take in my search for it. The boat that had churned away from Booker’s dock had headed toward the southwest.

Driving around the lake made no sense, so I immediately discarded that option. Most cottages weren’t visible from the road. Besides, I had no idea what Pavlic’s looked like. I could easily have identified Kenneth’s car, but he was too shrewd to park it where it could be seen.

I had to take the paddleboat on a shore-hugging tour. That was my only recourse. After I went to my cottage to throw on some dry clothes, I grabbed an electric lantern from a kitchen cupboard. Combined with the moonlight, its beam should help me spot the boat Kenneth had used—and, especially, its motor. I’d caught a glimpse of the outboard’s sleek, dark mass at the back of the boat. More important, I’d clearly seen the white block letters of its manufacturer’s name: MERCURY.

Shoving my light paddleboat from beach to lake entailed wading into the water. In the dark, and without either Booker or a crisis to spur me on, my nerves were strung so tight they seemed to vibrate beneath my skin. Their ends felt knotted together in my gut. As I guided my little craft away from the shore and climbed into it, I tried to focus on the task at hand—finding and confronting Kenneth.

I wanted to kick some ass.

I paddled into the still night, curving around the ends of docks. A pontoon boat here, a canoe there, then a little johnboat with a trolling motor. Not what I was looking for. Around the next bend, a thick blanket of lily pads forced me to circle farther into the lake than I felt comfortable going, but it was preferable to getting stuck. My heart thudded as the old fear gripped me. To overcome it, I envisioned that oar striking Booker and pitching him, injured, into the lake. A fresh draft of directed fury kept my feet pumping the pedals.

Up ahead, a small boathouse caught my attention. I clicked on the lantern and swept it over the surface of the water. A swirling trail of rainbow iridescence led up to the structure. In front of it, the odor of gasoline exhaust, faint but unmistakable, tainted the air.

Pavlic’s cottage, if it *was* his, sat on a small rise. It looked completely dark. I eased up to the dock. Just as I grabbed for one of its pilings, a pair of headlights blazed behind the cottage. They cut to one side as some vehicle apparently made a Y-turn and headed for the road.



If that *was* Kenneth, he sure as shit wasn't going out to party. He was making a getaway. I got as close to shore as I could, then stepped out of the paddleboat and pulled it onto the sand. Snatching out the lantern, I examined the boathouse. Its two doors, front and back, were closed and locked. There was a small, grimy, dockside window. Maybe...

The window afforded me the glimpse I needed. There was a V-hull fishing boat, its motor tilted forward out of the water. Weeds hung from the propeller. The word *Mercury* glowed white in the light from my lantern.

Most telling of all, an oar, out of its lock, spanned the boat's benches.

I didn't do anything more. Couldn't, really. I needed to get back to Booker, anyway, and begin my all-night watch.

He was sleeping when I padded into the bedroom, his head turned to one side and lips slightly parted. Smiling, I knelt beside the bed. "Hosea," I whispered.

I'd never before studied Booker while he slept, since he always awoke before I did. Now I realized what I'd been missing. He looked like a fairy-tale prince, young and darkly handsome. And, I thought, so vigorous yet so vulnerable.

My heart swelled. I lightly touched the soft curls that strayed over Booker's cheek and forehead. My admiring gaze wandered over the lush fringes of his eyelashes, the strong, slightly crooked line of his nose, the relaxed contours of his lips.

Although I didn't want to disturb him, I had to, just to make sure he hadn't lapsed into unconsciousness or, worse yet, a coma.

I gently shook his shoulder. "Booker, wake up. Open your eyes."

Falteringly, his lids rose.

"Look at me. Who am I? What's my name?"

His mouth moved into a drowsy smile. "Someone hit you in the head with an oar, Charlie? You got amnesia?"

I sighed in relief. "Well, you seem to be in good shape. Does your head hurt?" The bump was big and ugly, with a glossy shine that further drew attention to it.

"No worse than a toothache." Booker yawned and pulled the covers up around his neck. His eyes closed. "Now leave me alone and let me sleep."

"I can't. I'll have to wake you again in a few hours."

"Maybe you should do it by blowing me."

"I'd love to," I said, "but I don't think it would be safe."

Booker cracked open his eyes to regard me. "Why?"

"You have a head injury."

Shifting beneath the blanket, he broke into lazy laughter. "You think my skull is gonna collapse if you suck my dick? You give great head, darlin', but you're no goddamned Shop Vac."

I smiled in spite of myself. "To tell you the truth, I'm really exhausted."

Booker glided a hand over my face as his eyes again drifted closed. He slid to the other side of the small bed. "Then crawl in and hold me and sleep with me, Charlie lark. Just don't ask me any more stupid questions."

I got undressed and slipped in beside him, molding the cool, boneless length of my body to the hot, hard length of his. Nothing ever felt more right.

## Chapter Thirteen

Keen arousal spangled my groin. I wasn't quite sure how I'd reached that state, since the last thing I remembered doing was bobbing contentedly on the water with pretty birds flying around me. Booker was somewhere nearby, playing a guitar made out of beach junk and singing an old song. "All I need is the air that I breathe..." I liked the song but couldn't concentrate on it, because I was about to come.

My eyes opened as the tugging at my cock continued and my breath came out in quavering moans. Booker, wearing nothing, was hunched between my legs. I couldn't see my cock—it was hidden within his mouth, lost beneath the tumble of his hair—but I could sure as hell feel it. I closed my eyes again and gripped the sheets as the first slap of orgasm lifted my hips. It was abrupt and powerful, the sharp throbs of pleasure zinging through my body like lightning strikes.

Booker levered himself forward until his face was over mine. My lips were already parted, so I was ready to take what he bore on his tongue. Our mouths slid together in a delicious, sloppy cum-kiss, made all the more delectable by Booker's excited breathing and the wet aggression of his mouth. He was reveling in it.

"You taste a little like salty clover today," he murmured against me.

"Is that good?" I asked, since I didn't know how Booker felt about salty clover.

"Delicious," he said, pushing himself off the bed. "You have spunk on your belly, by the way, so you might want to wipe it off before you get dressed. I'll be in the kitchen."

I smiled. Sometimes, when I was with him, I couldn't seem to *stop* smiling.

*All I need is the air that I breathe and...*

And what? Damn it, now that tune and lyric would be stuck in my head all day. It bugged me that I couldn't remember the song. I guessed I'd heard it on one of my parents' records. They had an impressive collection of vinyl LPs.

After I'd gone to the bathroom, cleaned up, and gotten dressed, I went to the kitchen to find Booker. He was dressed now, too, and ferrying food to the table—two plates of scrambled eggs, ham slices, and buttered toast with homemade blackberry jam. I thanked him; I felt ravenous.

"Have I ever heard you sing?" I asked as I poured a glass of orange juice from a pitcher.

Booker sat down. "I don't know." He dug into his breakfast.

"Do you sing?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. Once in a while when I'm working or I'm in the shower. I'm not really aware of it, though." He turned his eyes to me. The sight of them in certain light was still a stunner. "Why do you ask?"

I filled my fork with egg and ham. "Just a dream I had. It was nice."

"About me?"

"Yeah." I slid the fork into my mouth. "Like I said, it was nice."

Booker cleared his throat, then grabbed something from the table with a pair of tongs and tossed it in front of me. "Look but don't touch," he said.

It was a small plastic bag with a smaller, rectangular packet inside. I curled over to peer at it. There appeared to be a cluster of yellowish chunks inside the packet.

My gaze snapped up to Booker's face. "What the fuck?"

He continued eating. "I scoured the house after I got up. My visitor last night didn't take anything. He left something." Booker pointed his butter knife at the bag. "I found it in the tornado."

He must've meant the sculpture on the table. I glanced from him to the funnel to the bag. "What is it?"

"Crack, I think. I've never used the shit in my life, so I'm not sure."

I fell against the back of my chair. That explained everything. Why Kenneth had been over here, why he hadn't stopped to see me, why he'd been so desperate to get away—both from Booker's property and Rick Pavlic's place. He'd planned on being able to slip in and slip out without being seen by anybody, but his plan had been foiled by Booker's return.

"It looks like Karl sent someone over here to plant drugs in my house while I was gone," Booker said. "I'm guessing he had the guy on stand-by. First he wanted to see how our meeting would go. When I made it clear I didn't want anything to do with him, he excused himself to make a phone call. That must've been when he gave his goon the go-ahead." Booker didn't sound surprised, although he did seem to be suppressing some understandable outrage.

"Uh..." I scratched at my forehead. "His goon was his own son."

Booker's jaw slowed as he chewed. "Your squeeze? Are you serious?"

"Fraid so. And please quit calling him that."

"You recognized him?"

I nodded. "Last night, yeah. I just didn't have a chance to tell you."

"Do you think Karl knows about the connection?" he asked. "I mean, between you and me and what's-his-name."

"I don't know. I have a feeling he doesn't. But I think Kenneth was more than willing to help his father, even though I'm sure he didn't let on *why* he was more than willing."

"And why was that?" Booker asked quietly, his gaze trained on my face.

I couldn't look at him. "Kenneth was jealous the minute he caught me staring at you, when you went for a swim last Saturday. And if his father mentioned to him that you're gay, or that he'd seen us together, Kenneth probably figured it was because of you that I've ... been cool toward him."

Booker set down the piece of toast he was about to bite into. "What happened isn't your fault, Charlie. And, really, I don't think he intended to hurt me. I think he just panicked."

Reserving judgment, I leaned forward and started eating. My appetite had pretty much flown, but I needed the fuel. I was facing nearly four hours' worth of driving and one explosive confrontation.

"I'll be having a little talk with Kenneth today," I said. "While I'm gone, you might want to download whatever our cameras caught."

\* \* \* \*

A Thermos of coffee and radio music kept me going. It was nearly two hours to Kenneth's condo. I didn't bother calling first, so he wouldn't have a chance either to flee or dream up any bullshit. Since it was a Sunday, I was almost certain he'd be home and

he'd be there alone. He'd told me Kris wouldn't be with him this weekend.

Booker was adamant about not getting Kenneth arrested—unless, of course, the cops showed up at his cottage and turned it inside out looking for drugs. As long as he was left alone, though, he was willing to let bygones be bygones. I got the impression he felt sorry for my soon-to-be ex, although he was vague about why.

I had no thoughts or feelings as I approached Kenneth's residence. I wasn't apprehensive or irate. My urge to pummel him had been swallowed into the blank, hollow space I reserved for people I found unworthy of acknowledgment. I just wanted to make some things known and then get him out of my life.

The door to Kenneth's condo opened almost immediately after I rang the buzzer. His expression soured into a look of contempt as soon as he saw me. We stood there for a moment, as if facing off.

"Did you come to have that talk?" he asked bitterly.

"Yes."

I stepped inside without waiting for an invitation. Kenneth had no sooner pushed the door closed at my back than he slapped me, hard, the way women slap men in old movies. Men who get "fresh" with them. Men who stray.

*Dames*, I thought irrelevantly. *They're called dames*. Then, without transition, I thought of Booker's screen door smacking against its jamb.

I resisted the urge to put my hand to my face.

Kenneth's chin quivered. Tears gleamed in his eyes, and the brown beneath them wavered like water-lapped, shifting sand.

"You went after him; I know you did," he said in a strangled whisper. "You couldn't wait for me to get the hell out of your way so you could chase down some fresh dick. And now—surprise, surprise—you want to 'reevaluate' our relationship. You conniving prick."

My head seemed off-balance and my cheek stung, but I suddenly felt bad for him ... and inexpressibly sad. "That isn't how it happened," I said quietly.

"Bullshit. For all I know, you got it on with him the night before I showed up."

"No," I whispered, searching his face. All I could see was a stubborn, rancorous determination to believe what he wanted to believe. "Why did you do it?" I asked, thinking of that oar slicing through the darkness and being stopped all too abruptly by Booker's body, thinking of that bag of crack tucked into the sculpture he loved. "Why are you trying to blame an innocent man for what's wrong with us?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kenneth said sharply. "I didn't do a goddamned thing. And I didn't even *know* there was something 'wrong' with us until a few days ago." He was defying me to prove his guilt. A tear leaked from each eye. Angrily, he palmed them off his cheekbones.

"I assume you rented Rick Pavlic's cottage for the weekend. That must've been his boat you were in."

Kenneth's breath came hard through flared nostrils. Delicately, his whole body quaked.

"You could've crippled that man," I said. "You could've killed him."

Kenneth glared at me. When he spoke, his voice was like a snake hiss. Or an ejection of venom. "*I don't give a shit.*"

The words jammed a tube in me and sucked the pity right out. Fisting my hands into

Kenneth's shirtfront, I shoved him backward. "You'd *better* give a shit. Do you realize how easy it would be to have your miserable ass arrested?" I shoved him again. He did a clumsy turn and stumbled to his living room, where he dropped onto the leather couch. I followed and stood over him. "*Do you?*" I shouted.

He didn't look at me.

"We have you on video, sneaking into Booker's house and dropping that bag into the sculpture. You didn't make any kind of clean getaway, either. Two people, including me, saw you in that boat, saw you swing that fucking oar. And Rick Pavlic can verify that you were at his cottage yesterday."

"If you could put me away so easily," Kenneth mumbled, "why am I still sitting here?"

I sighed and briefly closed my eyes. "I don't know. Maybe because I once cared about you. And you have a son. And I feel bad and Booker feels bad because you have the issues you have ... and we have each other." I shouldn't have spoken for my lover, but I had a feeling my assumption was accurate.

"You condescending little whore." Kenneth's bleary gaze turned up to my face. "What you have, Charlie boy, is a sexually deviant, ex-con stalker who's been harassing my father and needs to be behind bars."

His descriptions of me and Booker were so incredible, they left me dumbfounded for a moment. Kenneth was the one who'd been blithely sleeping around, but I was the whore. And what kind of garbage had Karl Bollinger spewed about Booker to enlist his son's help? *This parolee I once treated at Reese-Houghton, he won't leave me alone. But he hasn't been overtly threatening, so the cops are powerless. I'm afraid something bad is going to happen if he isn't put away again. He's an addict. He's imbalanced. Yeah, it must've been something like that. But the jig would be up soon enough.*

"You're so wrong," I said firmly, allowing no room for refutation. "And I hope for everybody's sake you didn't call the cops and pretend to be some kind of informant. I hope to Christ you didn't phone in some anonymous 'tip.' Because even though that bag of whatever-the-fuck you planted is gone, I swear, Kenneth, if you stirred shit with the law in addition to—"

He shook his lowered head. "I didn't." For the first time since I'd arrived, he sounded meek.

I didn't bother asking why he hadn't made that call and probably didn't need to. Kenneth must've gotten spooked after Booker caught him on the property and especially after he whacked Booker with the oar. The whole scheme had gone terribly awry, which was one of the reasons he'd beat such a hasty retreat from Cloud Lake.

Studying him, I smoothed back my hair. He still hadn't raised his head. "You'd better be telling the truth, man."

I'd had enough. Turning away, I strode to the front door and paused with my hand on the latch. "I'm sorry it didn't work out between us. But at least you've made it possible for me to walk away without a single regret."

I couldn't see him, but I heard his final words.

"Get out, Charlie. Get out of my life."

\* \* \* \*

I came in through the backdoor and tossed my keys onto the kitchen table.

“Booker?”

No answer. Maybe he was in his shop or down at the lake. Then I spotted a note impaled on the tornado. I lifted it off. *Charlie ~ Had to pick up some stuff in town. I downloaded the recording. Play it while you wait.*

I touched his handwriting. It looked like a seismographic printout, all aggressive, vertical lines with sharp peaks. Very artistic.

Slipping the note into one of the pockets of my jeans—intending, I guess, to save it for some vague, sentimental reason—I ambled into the living room and sat at the desk. Our cameras lay on top of it. The computer was on, its disc tray taunting me like a stuck-out tongue. I pushed it into the drive and lowered my face to my hands. For some reason, I didn’t want to see Karl Bollinger. Not yet, anyway. Maybe it was because I’d just seen Kenneth. Maybe I didn’t want to envision the guy groping Booker. I don’t know; I just couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

The recording began with a few minutes of silence interrupted by sounds I couldn’t identify. Then I heard a muted thumping and rustling, and then a voice.

“Why is it you wanted to see me, Hosea?” Bollinger’s tone was studiously neutral, as if he were forcibly reining in a whole host of feelings he had difficulty controlling. I found it blood-curdling.

“I need to understand some things,” Booker replied. “Things you’ve never bothered explaining to me.”

“Is that why you’ve been stand-offish? You’re confused? I suspect I did explain whatever has you befuddled, but perhaps you didn’t grasp what I was saying.”

*Slick bastard*, I thought. To someone unfamiliar with the situation, Bollinger would’ve sounded like the hallowed voice of reason.

Wisely, Booker didn’t directly answer his question. “Tell me why you picked me out of the adjustment group at Reese-Houghton, why you got me into those private sessions with you. Tell me, Karl.”

“Don’t you know?”

“No, I don’t. You never gave me a straight answer. I was no different from the other nine guys.”

“Ah, but you were, Hosea.”

“How? I was just another inmate trying to adapt. That’s all.”

“That’s *not* all. I could tell you had problems accepting your sexuality, and those problems were exacerbated by the environ—”

“Bullshit!” This eruption of disgust was the loudest Booker’s voice had been. He immediately dialed down the volume. “I’ve known who and what I am for as long as I can remember, and I’ve never once had ‘problems’ with it. In fact, I’ve enjoyed it. So just cut the crap once and for all and get to the real reason.”

“You might think withdrawal and depression are ‘crap,’ Hosea, but—”

Again Booker interrupted him, this time with a groan of “Oh for God’s sake.”

“All right,” Karl said. “I’ll phrase it another way. You’re a beautiful and vital young man, with a great deal to offer. I wanted to help you realize your potential. I have much to offer, too. I knew we could help each other. I knew we were simpatico.”

*Keep talking*, I thought. Bollinger was starting to slip up, to make things personal.

Booker, too, obviously picked up on this. “‘Help each other,’” he repeated, highlighting the phrase. “You know, there were a lot of aspects of your therapy that made

no sense, and that's one of them." Before Bollinger had a chance to double-talk his way out of it, Booker again spoke. "Why have you been coming to my house at the lake?"

The question must have caught Bollinger off-guard. "Because we developed a bond!" he cried. "And it should be nurtured so you can fully overcome your trust issues!"

I thought I heard Booker snicker. Maybe he was thinking what I was thinking. *If it weren't for your sick ass, there wouldn't have been any 'trust issues.'*

"Karl," he said, "believe me, there was no bond. All I did was take my cues from you. I'd never been in prison *or* in therapy before. I didn't know what the hell was going on. So I tried to please you by doing whatever you expected of me."

I nodded in approval. It was Booker, now, who'd donned the mantle of reason. He'd regained his self-possession. Bollinger, on the other hand, kept baring his smarmy motives.

"And you did please me, Hosea. You did. And that strengthened my commitment to you. Do you really think any other man is capable of investing in you the way I have? Appreciating you? Guiding you? *No*. The others who've been in your life ... all they've wanted is physical gratification. They don't give a damn about your inner self, your growth, your future. You can't depend on them to be supportive of you. They're nothing but self-involved pleasure seekers."

"If you put so much stock in a person's inner being," Booker said levelly, "then why did I have to expose my body to you? Why all the touching?"

There was a pause before Bollinger spoke. I could only imagine what his face conveyed in that short silence. "Touching is ... is part of intimacy," he finally said in a self-conscious, faltering way. "It's a way to express caring for a person and build that person's self-esteem. Not all communication is verbal. Surely you know that."

Booker sighed. "I'm sorry, Karl. It didn't feel right when I was locked up and it doesn't feel right now. None of it. That's why you have to leave me alone. You need to find a partner some other way. I never wanted a personal relationship with you. Couldn't you see that? Can't you see it now?"

"And what *better* is in store for you, Hosea? Do you really think you have a chance in hell of getting beyond superficial, meaningless, ephemeral encounters?"

"Yes," Booker said with quiet conviction.

"Oh really. How, pray tell?" Karl asked snottily. "Are you deluded enough to think some runaround pretty-boy will ever truly love you? Be true to you? Stand by you?"

"Maybe. If I do the same for him."

"‘Maybe.’ You're going to throw away a sure thing for a *maybe*?"

"I don't want the sure thing that you're offering." Booker was starting to sound weary. "Just let me live my life, Karl. Maybes and all. *Please* leave me alone. I don't know how many more ways I can say it."

There was some thumping and clattering. "Excuse me for a moment," Karl said stiffly. "I need to check my voice mail."

I didn't hear anything for a while except faint, obviously distant noises. Booker had told me over breakfast they ended up talking at a picnic table in a county park. Karl approved of the privacy it afforded, and Booker was glad to sit across from rather than next to his admirer.

Suddenly I heard Booker murmur, "Hi, Charlie. I miss you."

My face broke into a broad, spontaneous smile.

When Karl again spoke, his voice was even colder, starchier. I imagined him standing over Booker like a tin soldier. “Well, Hosea, is that your sincere and final wish, then? That there be no contact between us whatsoever and I ... completely disappear from your life?”

“In a word,” Booker said, “yes.”

Another pause in the conversation. When Karl’s voice sounded, it was farther away. “You’ll be singing a different tune in a very short time, Mr. Booker. I guarantee it.”

I winced when he said that, my eyelids jumping together for a second. The words were assaultive. They were essentially a declaration of war.

Nothing else worth listening to was forthcoming, so I ejected the disc and wandered outside.

For the most part, I was grateful to be back here. Even the lake looked pretty to me. Pure and fresh and placid, it was blessedly devoid of the twisted motives that often sully human interaction. Water was never destructive on purpose, never had selfish hidden agendas. I felt a little silly about it, but I wanted to express my appreciation.

I walked to the end of Booker’s dock. “Okay,” I murmured, “you’ve won me over. I trusted you and you didn’t let me down.”

Cloud Lake glinted, as if pleased we understood each other. Concentric ripples appeared here, there—quiet celebrations. The scent of pine wafted past me on a powder-soft breeze. It was like a gift, and I filled my lungs with it.

*All I need is the air that I breathe...*

I remembered watching Booker stand where I now stood. Neither one of us was like Jay Gatsby, longing for a lost sweetheart. Perhaps, instead, we were each yearning for a future love.

The dock trembled beneath my feet. I didn’t turn. My nerves sang, anticipating my lover’s approach. I wanted to feel him before I saw him.

The sun sank farther into its slot beneath the horizon.

Booker’s arms slid around my midsection—a smooth, gentle movement that gracefully sealed the front of him to the back of me. I crossed my arms over his arms. He rested his chin on my shoulder.

Seamless.

“You okay?” he asked softly, so close to my ear that I could feel his lips, his breath.

I nodded then lightly brushed my hair against his. “Kenneth won’t be bothering us anymore.”

“The kitchen camera did capture him. Perfectly.” I felt Booker’s face crease against mine. “I think I’m better looking than he is.”

I met his smile. “Much. And a sweeter person. And more creative. And definitely a better lover and companion. Plus, you can cook. So you win.”

Booker kissed my neck, raising goosebumps on my skin. “Did you listen to the recording?” he asked.

“Yeah. Karl’s toast once we get all this stuff into the right hands. Let’s not talk about it now, though.”

We swayed together in a silent embrace as darkness fell.

“Charlie...”

“Hm?”

“I like it that you were here, waiting for me. I like it a lot.”



“I didn’t want to be anywhere else,” I said, and couldn’t seem to shut up after that. “I think, sometimes, all I need is the air that I breathe and...” I thought the phrase would come to me, but it didn’t.

“To love you,” Booker murmured.

*That’s it.* “And to love you,” I repeated. Now I did turn to face him. It was time to take another risk. “Booker, may I?”

We held each other by the waist. He knew what I meant, yet he didn’t avert his eyes or seem put-off.

“Yes, please do,” he said with absolute assurance. “And what I have to offer, do you want it?” He kissed me. “Do you want this?”

I nodded. “Very much.”

He took a quavering breath and let it out. “That’s a great song. By the Hollies, isn’t it? Nineteen seventies.” His smile was shyly teasing, distinctly happy. “Maybe I’ll sing it for you sometime.”

I hugged him. “You do win. Hands down.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

K. Z. Snow is a multi-published author who describes herself as “grossly overeducated and grossly underskilled.” Although K. Z. has written in a number of genres, her real love is m/m fiction. She lives an unremarkable life in rural Wisconsin, where she cooks as little as possible, reads and writes as much as possible, and enjoys spending time with her unremarkable friends and unremarkable dogs.

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