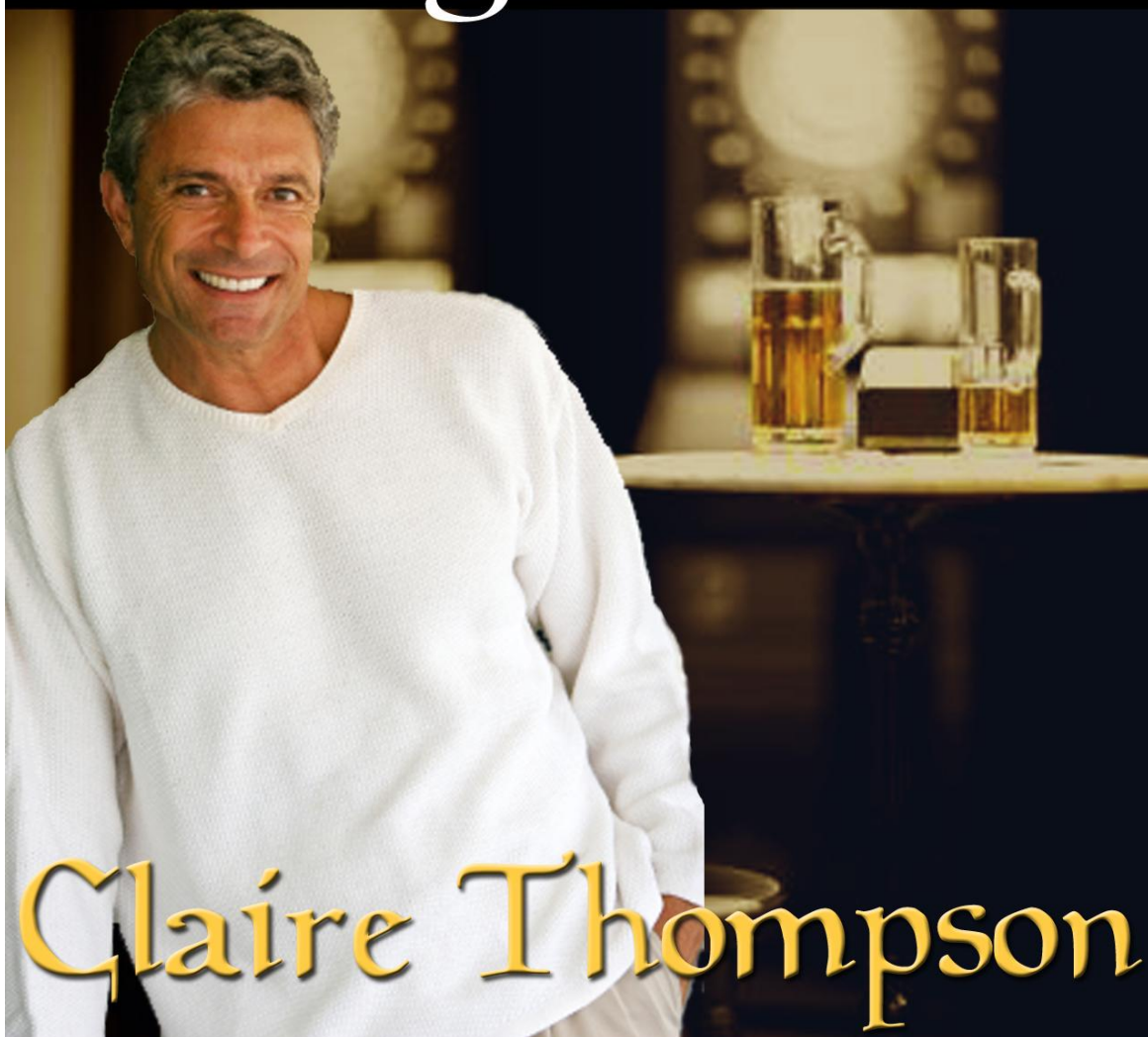




The

Solitary Knights
of Pelham Bay
Book 1

Finding Chandler



Claire Thompson

ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING

Romance Unbound Publishing
Presents

The Solitary Knights of Pelham Bay
Book 1: Finding Chandler

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Prologue

"The Solitary Knights of Pelham Bay Pub will come to order." Eric Moore tapped his beer mug with a spoon, his voice rising over the individual conversations of the dozen or so guys sitting around the table. "I see we've got a new member—another convert to the wisdom of staying footloose and fancy free."

"Meet Seth Larson," Steve Cohen offered, touching Seth's forearm as he spoke. "Seth has realized the errors of his ways and sworn off relationships forever." He spat the word "relationship" like a curse, amidst a smattering of applause.

Seth offered a weak smile. He had that lost, bruised look of someone with a newly broken heart.

Jack laughed and raised his mug, his voice loud. "Welcome." He eyed the newcomer with a comical leer. Drawing the tip of his tongue suggestively over his lips, he said, "Steve told you about the initiation, right?" Seth looked blank while the others around the table smirked. "You have to have sex with every guy at the table."

"You mean he *gets* to," Steve interjected with a grin.

Several of the guys laughed and cheered. Seth blinked, his mouth falling open with confusion. Jack laughed and gave Seth a playful punch in the shoulder to show they were kidding, though Drew knew if Jack had his way, he'd be first in line.

Drew Kensington, proprietor and bartender of the Pelham Bay Pub, watched from behind the bar with amused tolerance as the men introduced themselves. The group called themselves the Solitary Knights, so named because each claimed to have learned the hard way that relationships invariably ended in misery and pain, and remaining single was the best way to go.

A quiet pride surged through him as he looked around his Chelsea neighborhood pub. He'd been horrified by the metal and plastic eighties techno bar he'd first walked into, almost rejecting the deal because of the tacky décor. In retrospect, it had turned out to be his salvation.

Instead of brooding over the shambles of a life he'd left behind in London, he threw himself into the renovations. To distract himself as much as anything, he worked alone every day until nearly dawn those first few weeks, falling asleep in the back room where he'd set up a cot for his bedroom and a hot plate for his kitchen.

Given carte blanche by the owner of the building, he replaced the mirrored walls with rich wood paneling and tossed out the plastic cubes that served as tables in favor of comfortable booths. Instead of a dance floor lit by flashing disco balls, there was now a carpeted area with a pool table and his beloved dartboard complete with its own mahogany cabinet, first prize in the Pig Bristle Pub annual dart contest back when Drew was still a lad in England.

The clientele at his pub had changed over the three years since he'd leased the place, which suited Drew. His mainstay customers were gay men in their thirties, forties and fifties—guys looking for a quiet place to unwind and share a beer with friends. There were no backrooms for illicit couplings, no dance floor and no DJ. Drew piped in low key British rock, just enough to create an atmosphere without being intrusive.

"I'm Jack Harris." Jack's booming voice shook Drew from his reverie. "A founding member of the Solitary Knights. Everyone at this table knows that love's a fucking joke. Meaningless sex, and lots of it—that's our philosophy."

There were several grunts of agreement. Marcos, who sat across from Jack, shook his head, an expression of disapproval on his haughty, elegant face.

"What?" Jack challenged. "You got a problem, Savakis?"

Marcos offered a faint, disdainful smile and shrugged lightly. He spoke softly with a faint accent. "I would have thought by this stage in your life, you'd have more discrimination. Screwing everything in one's path hardly seems like the way to happiness."

Jack stiffened, his face drawing down into a frown. He crossed his beefy, tattooed arms over his black leather vest. "At least I—"

Eric cut him off. "Hey guys, knock it off. We've heard it all before." He turned to Seth. "I'm Eric Moore. I'm what you'd call a slow study. I had not one, but three different guys break my heart before I finally figured out if you don't hold it out there, they can't break the damn thing."

Most of the men nodded, several clinking their mugs in agreement. "We're glad to have you with us, Seth." Ryan, a handsome guy in his mid-thirties, offered. "I fell in love once a long time ago. It took me a while to get it through my head that it takes two. Since then, I've bounced from one screwed up relationship to the next. I've finally figured out it's best to avoid the whole damn mess altogether."

Seth, who looked even younger than Ryan, spoke for the first time. "But you're so young! You've really given up?"

Several heads swiveled to stare at Seth with disapproval. "You sure you're in the right place?" Jack demanded. He was smiling, but his eyes were hard. "We don't do love here. That's the whole point."

"Relax," Steve, who had brought Seth to the gathering, interjected. "He's still shell-shocked. In our circle of friends, we all thought Seth and Richard were this perfect couple. Seth had no idea Richard had this whole secret life on the Internet, or that he'd up and move to L.A. for his online dream guy." He shook his head in dismay. "Crazy stuff."

Seth nodded, the pain returning to his eyes. Steve patted his arm, offering a paternal smile. "This group is just the thing for you, Seth. We help each other keep our sense of humor, if nothing else. We remind each other why we're here, by telling our stories. You know mine already, but it bears repeating."

Steve took a long pull from his beer mug. "I thought all my problems stemmed from passing as straight, which I did the first thirty-two years of my life, if you can believe that. I even got married, that's how in denial I was. When I finally busted out, I was determined to do the entire gay population on the island of Manhattan."

Steve shook his head with a rueful laugh. "Then I met 'Mr. Right'." He held up both index fingers, making a motion in the air that indicated quotation marks. "Boy, what a joke that turned out to be. After catching him not once, but on four different occasions with four different guys, I finally figured out what he'd known all along. Love is for losers. I've been happy ever since."

Drew looked up as Steve made this last remark, thinking how very unhappy the man looked, despite the wide smile pasted beneath the sad eyes.

"Damn right," Gordon added. "You made the right decision, Seth, joining this group. We've all been around the block a time or three. Maybe you can learn from our mistakes."

A few more members recounted their disastrous encounters with love, glossing over the pain with laughter and jokes. Drew wiped down the already-spotless counter as he listened. It was a rainy Tuesday night in mid-November and the bar, other than the Solitary Knights, was nearly empty.

What did it say about these men, that their stated mission as a group was to avoid love at all costs? Hadn't any of them, at least once, at least for a while, found the right guy? Why was it a foregone conclusion that just because they'd failed at love before, it didn't exist?

Before he realized what he was doing, Drew began to speak. "If you'll pardon the interruption." He spoke quietly, but his voice was deep and it carried, and the men turned to look at him. Aware he now had their full attention, he felt himself flushing, but forged on, determined to have his say.

"My apologies for sticking my nose where it doesn't belong, but I've been listening to you blokes all these months now and I can't help but wonder. Are your hearts really as hard as all that? Maybe you've just been unlucky in love. Is it really as hopeless as you make it out to be? People change, situations change, you've changed." Half-aware he was speaking more to himself than the guys sitting in front of his bar, Drew kept talking. "What if you could go back and do it again? What if you could find that unrequited love, that one guy—if only you knew then what you know now—who you could have really had something with?"

Several of the men protested vehemently, but just as many others were quiet, their expressions thoughtful. It was to those men that Drew directed his attention. Feeling reckless, he threw out the challenge, "Why don't you *find* that one guy—the one that got away, the one you've never quite let fade from your dreams? Track him down. Reconnect. Then come back here and tell us what you found out."

Book 1: Finding Chandler

Eric and Ryan left the pub at the same time. Eric pulled up the collar of his coat as they headed into the freezing November rain. "So you were in love once a long time ago, huh? You don't seem old enough to even have a 'long time ago'," Eric teased Ryan.

Ryan shook his head. "I'm old enough—thirty-four next week. This was back in college—junior year. My biology professor, of all people. Maybe it wasn't even love—who knows. Maybe I was just so flush with finally allowing myself to be openly gay, and finding a gay man I could look up to." He waved his hand, as if swatting away a fly. "Anyway. Ancient history. I haven't thought about him in years." He shoved his hands deep in his pockets, ducking his head into the wind. Something told Eric he was lying, but he didn't press the matter.

Instead he said, "Yeah. College. Jesus, they aren't kidding when they say youth is wasted on the young. I was such an idiot back then. There was a guy..." He trailed off. Why bring it up? Like Ryan said, ancient history.

"This is my bus stop," Ryan announced, stopping in front of a plastic overhang where several people huddle on a bench. "You have far to go?"

"No, no." Eric pointed down the block. "That's my subway station right there. Try to stay dry." They waved and parted, and Eric walked on, shivering in the icy rain.

Chandler Adams.

The moment Drew had said, "What if you could go back and do it again?" Chandler had leaped, full-blown, into Eric's consciousness. Even after all these years, Chandler was the still the one he used as a yardstick when testing a new lover's worth.

Chandler Adams, with his unruly mop of curling red hair and brilliant green eyes that slit into merry half moons when he laughed. Chandler, gawky, uncertain, painfully sincere, with a child's trust and a poet's heart. Even now, twenty three years later, Eric could see Chandler clearly in his mind's eye, loping along University Avenue, a hand raised in shy greeting.

Even if his skin hadn't been ravaged by teenage acne, Chandler was not a guy you would have called handsome. He was too thin, for one thing, tall and gangly, his hands, feet and head too big for his frame. His nose was too large for his narrow face. Yet there was a sweetness to his open, almost naïve honesty, and a depth to his deep green eyes that drew you to him, that made you want to stay and learn more.

When he got home, Eric pulled out the old trunk he kept beneath his bed. It was filled with memorabilia he almost never looked at anymore from his days in high school and college, and from when he'd been stationed in Germany.

He found the old tin box and pried it open. Inside were the letters from Chandler. They were well-handled; read many times over the long years. When he'd first received them, he'd barely glanced at them, telling himself it was better to let go. Yet he had

saved them, some part of him, even then, knowing the truth. But by the time he was ready to act on it, so much time had passed that he knew he'd destroyed any chance of reconciliation. By then he had lost track of Chandler, and was certain even if he found him, Chandler would want nothing to do with him.

Eric picked up a fading Polaroid photo of Chandler, standing awkwardly against the wall of a brick building, a lopsided grin on his face, his bright red hair falling in curls over his forehead. Eric smiled, recalling that perfect spring day when he'd snapped the picture. They'd spent the morning making love and the afternoon at a street fair, eating ethnic foods and examining the arts and crafts, with next to no money in their pockets.

Eric had bought a leather wristband for Chandler that day, which he never took off after that, claiming he'd wear it until the leather disintegrated. "And then I'll buy you another one," Eric had promised, feeling expansive from the joint they'd smoked, and ridiculously happy. "Only not of leather—something better. Maybe silver, or even gold."

But he hadn't.

He hadn't stayed around long enough for the cheap leather band to age. He'd graduated and gone off to Germany without ever looking back. He'd walked away from his best friend, thinking it was the right thing to do.

What an ass he'd been. What a waste; what a shame. And now, of course, it was too late.

Wasn't it?

Eric stared for a long time at the picture, letting his mind drift back to the first time he became aware of Chandler. He'd been standing in for the professor in the freshman chemistry class where he was working as a teaching assistant during his senior year. He was giving a lecture on some basic topic in introductory chemistry when he noticed a young man in the front row staring up at him with what could only be called adoring eyes.

At first he assumed the kid must be daydreaming, but as the lecture continued, he realized the lovelorn looks were aimed directly at him. Later when Chandler showed up at his office during student hours pretending to need a tutor, Eric was sure of it, though he'd played along for a while, not wanting to embarrass Chandler.

Eric sighed, recalling how they felt each other out, neither willing to assume the other was gay, but both praying it was so. The first several times they met, ostensibly for chemistry tutoring, but soon just to talk, they'd carefully skirted the issue. Even so, from the beginning, they could share with each other about any and everything. Chandler never judged Eric, no matter how outrageous his confessions were, and back then he'd done some pretty stupid things. Chandler would listen, his homely face serious, his eyes looking past Eric's words to his unspoken need for understanding—and he would give it, without hesitation. With Chandler, he had felt safe, safer than he'd ever felt before or since.

Eric picked up one of the envelopes, faded and stained with time and use, and slipped the letter from inside it.

Dear Eric,

I hope the army isn't working you too hard over in Deutschland. I have tried but failed to imagine you without that mane of blond hair falling to your shoulders and into those blue, blue eyes.

Any idea when you'll be Stateside?

It's only been three weeks, but it feels like forever since you've been gone. I hope you got my last letter and the one before that. I realize now they might be reading this stuff and censoring it! I hope I didn't get you into trouble.

I know you said we should date other people, but so far there's no one around this damn campus who can hold a candle to you, E. Even if there was, you're the one I want. You're the only one I'll ever want. I was born for you. (I know you don't like when I say that, but it's just the truth, so what can I say?)

You'll be home at Christmas for sure, right? We'll definitely hook up then, okay? Take care. Love and kisses, C.

Eric held the page in his hand a long time, staring into space. He shook his head, thinking back over the years since he'd lost touch with Chandler. He'd signed up for the army before college, agreeing to a six-year commitment upon graduation, with the net result that his tuition was paid for.

When he had finished his stint in the armed forces, he'd thought about looking Chandler up, but only in a half-hearted way, and he'd never followed through. At the time, all he focused on was his new, exciting life—a civilian again, living in Greenwich Village, his whole future before him. Chandler represented the past. While Eric sometimes ached for the boy he left behind, he didn't miss the life Chandler represented, back when Eric was still just an untried kid.

How he must have hurt the younger man, ignoring his letters and never contacting him again. He'd burned any bridge of hope between them. There was no way back. Chandler would never forgive him, and he couldn't blame him. He'd behaved like an ass, and didn't deserve a second chance.

So he let Chandler go, burying whatever feelings remained in a secret place in his heart, telling himself he wasn't ready for love. He focused instead on the easy conquest, telling himself he craved the excitement of the chase, the allure of fast moving, good looking studs with style and flare but little substance.

What had happened to Chandler Adams? If he remembered Eric at all, was there any fondness left? Or were his memories so colored by Eric's defection that he spit on the ground when he thought about him, if he thought about him at all?

Eric took another envelope from the pile, the last letter Chandler had written. His heart constricted with remorse as he read.

Dear E.,

I guess I have finally figured out that you aren't going to write back to me. Guess I'm kind of slow, huh? I don't know what I did to lose your love. Maybe you've met someone new. I understand people grow and change. I just wish you could have had the grace to let me know what was going on in your head. This guessing is worse than knowing. At least then I could work on forgetting you.

I won't be writing again, Eric. This is the last letter. But know this. I was born for you. Whatever happens, whoever either of us ends up with, I fell in love with you the first time I saw you, and nothing has changed in that regard. I won't stop loving you, even if we never meet again.

Have a good life. Take care and be well.

Love, C.

With a sigh, Eric placed the letter carefully back in its envelope and went to bed, feeling lonelier than he had in years.

The next morning found Eric restless and distracted at the office. He couldn't stop thinking about Chandler Adams. Had he stayed in the city? How hard would it be to track him down? Would he even remember Eric after all these years?

Eric had a Facebook page his nephew had convinced him to create, though he rarely used it. He opened the account and clicked on the *Find Friends* tab. When he did a search of old college classmates, typing *New York University* and Chandler's name, the computer spit back the answer, "Sorry, no results found. Try again." Okay, so maybe Chandler didn't have a Facebook page. A lot of people, especially people over thirty, didn't see much reason for Facebook. Eric rarely used his.

He took a simpler route, typing *Chandler Adams* into the Google search bar. Under the heading, *Bronx-Lebanon Hospital-Dermatology* appeared the name *Chandler Adams, MD*. Chandler had been pre-med, so it was possible. But dermatology? Eric had some vague memory of Chandler's ambition to become a heart surgeon. Dermatology didn't sound very sexy, but then again, neither did chemical engineering, Eric's chosen profession.

He clicked on the link, hoping for a picture, still not certain this Chandler Adams was *his* Chandler, though the name was unusual enough that the odds were reasonable. The page indicated that Chandler Adams had graduated from NYU in 1989, which fit, and had gone on to Albert Einstein for his medical degree. Eric searched around a little more, but couldn't find a home address or phone number, or at least a photo to be sure beyond a doubt he'd found the right guy.

That night as Eric lay in bed, he let his mind drift back to their first days together. It had been a long time since he'd permitted himself to recall their lovemaking. It had been so new back then, infused with such passion and wonder. How sad to realize later in his life it had become just about the sex, about getting off and then getting away.

Chandler had actually trembled the first time Eric had touched his cock. Chandler had been desperately shy, but just as desperately eager. Eric's cock hardened when he thought about Chandler sitting beside him on the bed in the tiny dorm room, their

thighs touching. At the memory, Eric gripped his cock and stroked it, recalling how he'd run his hand along Chandler's leg, watching with satisfaction as the bulge in Chandler's jeans grew before his eyes.

It had been fun and exciting to initiate the younger guy into gay sex, and Chandler was a very enthusiastic student. Even after all these years, Eric could almost feel Chandler's warm, wet tongue snaking its way over his balls and licking its way up and down his shaft with greedy abandon. He stroked faster, remembering how Chandler, on his hands and knees, would shimmy back toward him when he placed the tip of his cock against Chandler's tight entrance. Quiet, even shy in their day-to-day interactions, in bed Chandler was a wild thing, nearly insatiable.

Chandler had been such a grateful lover, yes, that was the word. He had soaked up Eric's attention and offered the kind of complete devotion that Eric hadn't been able to appreciate at the time. Ironical that he'd spent the next twenty three years looking for precisely what he'd thrown away.

Thursday was ridiculously busy, which Eric decided was a good thing, as it distracted him from this endless musing over Chandler Adams. He went out that evening with some guys from work, and drank enough beer to fall asleep the second his head hit the pillow that night.

But Friday morning found Eric still thinking about his college lover. Drew's words still haunted him. Chandler was definitely the one that got away, but it was one hundred percent Eric's fault.. While waiting in the subway station for his train, he scanned the maps that showed the routes from Manhattan to the Bronx. That afternoon he left work early, going into a different station from his usual route home. He waited for the train that would take him to the 174th Street station.

Eric knew this was stupid. Chandler might not be at the hospital—he might have a separate practice in a different building or he might be in surgery or something—did dermatologists do surgery? Even if he was there, how could Eric manage to see him?

He found the front entrance to the hospital and approached the security desk. "I've got an appointment with Dr. Adams. What floor is he on?"

The man scanned a chart and looked up, taking in Eric's shaved head and gold hoop earrings with a skeptical look. Still in his suit and tie from work, his coat folded neatly over his arm, apparently he passed muster. "Third floor. Suite 345."

"Thanks." Eric moved toward the elevator bank and pushed the button. What the hell was he doing? He couldn't very well just loiter in the guy's waiting room all day, hoping maybe the doctor would come out.

Nevertheless, he found his legs taking him down the hall toward suite 345. He entered the waiting room, walking past the rows of chairs and small end tables piled with magazines. A young woman looked up from behind a sliding glass window. She pushed it open.

"You have an appointment?"

"No. That is, uh, I'd like to make one."

"Have you been here before?"

"No."

"The next available appointment for a new patient is..." the woman scanned her computer screen, using a long, red polished nail to keep her place. "...December eighteenth at two forty-five."

A month away. Now that he was here, Eric found himself wildly curious to see if he'd tracked down the right person. He really didn't feel like waiting a month to find out. "I have this rash on my back," he blurted, feeling like an idiot. "If there was anything today, I could wait..."

The woman pressed her lips together, but looked again at her screen. Her lips eased into a smile. "Actually, he might have a few minutes at 4:30. I'd be double-booking you, but if it's just a rash..." She looked him over, as if seeking evidence of this supposed rash.

Eric offered his warmest smile. "That'd be fine. I don't mind waiting."

"Okay." The woman typed something rapidly into the computer and then pushed a clipboard toward him. "Fill these out and include your insurance card."

Even after filling out the patient history and insurance information, Eric still had an hour to kill before his appointment. He left the office and found his way to the hospital cafeteria. He sat down near the window, staring out at the leaden sky. The clouds had that heavy look about them that promised snow.

He watched a group of men in white coats walking together toward a table with their meal trays. His heart caught a moment when one of them looked suddenly toward him. The man was tall and thin, his hair a reddish brown. Could it be...?

The man smiled, lifting his eyebrows as if to say, *Do I know you?* When Eric examined the man's face, he realized he was in his late forties or early fifties, too old to be Chandler. Eric stood and turned away. What was he doing, anyway? What made him think Chandler would want to see him again?

He could still cancel—the rash miraculously clearing up—but he knew even as he considered this that it wasn't an option. Even if Chandler didn't recognize him, or told him to go straight to hell, he had to see him again. He had to at least try to explain himself; to say he was sorry. To see those smiling green eyes once again. He left the cafeteria, returning to wait his turn for the doctor.

"Mr. Moore?" A large woman in a white uniform looked expectantly over the people sitting in the waiting room. Eric got to his feet, glancing at his watch. It was going on five o'clock, but he supposed he couldn't complain, seeing as they'd squeezed him in.

He followed the nurse, who led him to a small room that held the usual exam table, a padded stool on wheels and a chair. Eric hung his coat and suit jacket on the hook on the back of the door and loosened his tie. He sat on the chair and opened the magazine he'd brought with him from the waiting room, seeing nothing as he stared at the page.

A few minutes later there was a quick rap on the door. The man who entered had red hair and narrow green eyes. He was wearing a white lab coat over dark brown slacks and wore square frame glasses. His face had cleared up, and the angular lines of youth had filled out, but it was definitely Chandler.

Eric stood, his heart beating high in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry. He accepted the doctor's outthrust hand. "Hi. I'm Doctor Adams." Though Chandler's voice had deepened over the years, hearing it sent a shockwave of recognition through Eric.

"Eric Moore." Eric swallowed, his pulse racing.

Chandler tilted his head, cocking an eyebrow as he examined Eric's face. "Eric Moore," he repeated softly, furrowing his brows. He looked down at the chart in his hand and back at Eric, staring at him a good ten seconds.

"Did you go to..."

"NYU," Eric offered, smiling.

"Eric Moore," Chandler repeated. A sort of wonder suffused the words. He took off his glasses, fixing Eric with an intense gaze. His face softened, his lips parting as he stared at Eric, his eyes caressing him like fingers.

Eric felt a happy warmth slide through him. The expression on Chandler's face told him Chandler not only remembered him, but still had feelings for him. Was Chandler ready to pick up where they'd left off, lusting after Eric in his sweet, puppy-dog-eager way?

Eric's smile broadened, his confidence rising. "You remember me, huh?"

"I do," Chandler replied, eying him critically. "Though you've certainly changed."

Eric ran his hands over his shaved head and shrugged. "Yeah. A lot changes over twenty-some-odd years, I guess." Self-consciously he flexed his shoulders, which were solid and broad from years of working out, hoping Chandler liked what he saw. With a self-deprecating grin, he offered, "Back when you knew me, my sole form of exercise was lifting my hand from the potato chip bag to my mouth."

Chandler rejoined, "I preferred to work on my fine motor skills—especially rolling the perfect joint." They laughed together and Eric felt something ease in his chest.

As if recalling himself, Chandler frowned and put his glasses back on, his voice again assuming its crisp, businesslike tone. He looked down at the chart. "So, what brings you here? A rash? Let's take a look."

Eric hadn't expected this sudden return to formality. He stumbled over his excuse. "Oh. I, uh, that is..."

The doctor looked up, his expression neutral. "Yes?"

Confused, Eric tried to bring things back to the personal. "It's great to see you again. You look...really good." He wasn't lying. Though Chandler still wasn't what Eric would have called handsome, his skin faintly pitted from acne, his nose still too large in

his long, narrow face, there remained an innate kindness there, along with a new confidence that lent character to his features.

Eric wanted to pull him close, to bury his head against Chandler's neck and whisper how sorry he was for everything he'd done, and had failed to do. Yet he knew, even as he stood there, feeling more awkward than he could remember feeling, that there was no way to clean up the past or fix what had been broken.

Chandler was staring at him, apparently waiting for him to say something. Eric said the first thing that popped into his head. "You're what, forty now?"

"Forty one," Chandler responded briskly. "Look, it's good to see you too. I haven't thought about you in...a long time." His tone became almost wistful. He looked away, but not before Eric saw the faint flush creep over his pale skin.

After a moment, Chandler refocused on the paperwork in his hands and cleared his throat. "So, about this rash..."

"Look, about that. I don't really have a rash. I just, well, I just wanted to see you again."

Chandler stared at Eric a moment without speaking, his expression moving from confused to incredulous. "You used this medical practice in order to see me again? What kind of bullshit is that? If I'd been a dentist, would you have shown up with a toothache?"

Now it was Eric's turn to flush. "Wait a minute. It's not like that. I just wanted—I wasn't sure if you'd want to see me. After the way I..."

"After the way you just walked out of my life? Yeah, I guess I can see that. Frankly, I'm surprised you have the gall to try and walk back in now. Did it ever occur to you there was a *real person* you left behind when you went off to find your glamorous new life playing soldier? Did you ever stop to think it might have hurt a young guy who thought he was in love to have his boyfriend just fall off the face of the planet?" The bewildered pain in Chandler's eyes cut Eric to the quick.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Chan. You're right. There's no excuse, none, for what I did." Eric held out his hands but then let them fall. "Look, I was an idiot back then, Chandler. I was—I think I was scared. I told myself I was moving forward—out with the old, in with the new. I had this idea I had to cut ties with everything to do with my old life. By the time I got out of the service I knew there'd been too much water under the bridge—too much damage done. I figured there was no way you'd want to have anything to do with me by that point. Not that I blamed you. I was an ass. You were the best thing to ever happen to me, but I was too stupid to know it. I'm really sorry —"

Chandler cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Stop. I really can't deal with this right now. I can't believe you'd just show up in my office out of the clear blue. I'll tell you what I think. This isn't about me at all. I see a forty-something guy clinging to some dream of lost youth. How the hell am I supposed to react to that?" He pressed his lips together, clearly fighting for control. Eric was again seized with the desire to pull him

close, but he stood frozen, watching as Chandler rearranged his face into a mask of professional emptiness.

Chandler offered a small, tight smile. When he spoke, his voice was cool, devoid of emotion. "Like you said, it was a long time ago. We were young and stupid. Now if you'll excuse me, I have real patients to see."

Eric remained still, only the slump of his shoulders revealing his despair. He should have been prepared for Chandler's reaction. Clearly Chandler wasn't the same love-struck boy he'd once known. Eric had seen to that all those years ago. He'd been a fool to expect any reaction other than the one he got.

Defeated, Eric left the office and the building, barely noticing the cold as he walked to the station and made his way home to his empty apartment.

Though he knew he was on a fool's errand, Eric couldn't seem to let it go. The next day he called Chandler's office. Not surprisingly, he couldn't be put through directly to the doctor.

"I'd like to leave a message."

"Name and date of birth."

"I'm not a patient. That is...uh, this is personal. A personal message from an old friend."

"I'm sorry, Sir, we don't —"

"Please, just leave him a message from Eric Moore. Tell him I have something of his I need to return." He left his office, home and cell numbers, feeling like a fool. He sat up late, willing the phone to ring.

Why should Chandler Adams give him the time of day? A lifetime had passed since they'd last seen one another. And yet...and yet he'd seen that look of longing, the wistful expression before Chandler had slipped back into professional doctor mode.

Saturday slid into Sunday, and still Eric heard nothing.

He spent much of the time musing over the past, daydreaming about a time when he was happy, though back then he'd been too foolish to seize on that happiness. Did he really care about reconnecting with Chandler, or was he just clinging to old dreams of lost youth, as Chandler had claimed? He couldn't honestly answer the question, but decided the best way to find out was to get to know the man Chandler had become, and at least let Chandler know he'd changed from the guy who simply walked out of Chandler's life.

Though he knew he should let it go, that Monday found Eric waiting outside the employee entrance at the hospital at six a.m. He had no idea what time Chandler would arrive, or even if he would. The day had dawned cold, the sky a dark wintry blue. Eric wound his scarf tighter round his neck, scanning the people heading from the parking lot toward the door.

At seven twenty he saw Chandler climb out of a silver Lexus, a briefcase in his hand. He was wearing a camelhair coat, his head bare. Eric watched him walk, his heart

quickenings its pace as he wondered what the hell he'd say. All the carefully chosen words designed to make Chandler want to see him again had drifted away like crystallized breath in the frozen air.

Chandler saw him when he was about three yards away. He stopped as Eric moved toward him. "Hi," Eric said, feeling shy for the first time in memory. "I, uh, I was hoping to catch you before you got too busy."

"Eric. What are you doing here?" Chandler frowned.

"Did you get my phone message Friday?" Eric tried to keep the accusatory tone from his question.

Chandler shook his head. "I got it. I didn't see the point of —"

"Please." Eric put his hand on Chandler's arm. "Have lunch with me. Just lunch. I'm not a stalker or anything sinister. I just want a chance to reconnect with you. To...to say I'm sorry. I was a jackass back then. I didn't know what I had. Who I had..."

Reaching into his coat, Eric fished one of Chandler's letters from the pocket and held it out. "I have this letter. It's from a guy who once said he was born for me. Read it, please? Maybe it will help you remember."

A look of pain washed over Chandler's face, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. He took the folded paper and opened it, glancing for a second into Eric's face before looking down.

His eyes moved quickly over the words, a small, sardonic smile appearing on his lips as he read. He thrust the letter back into Eric's hand. "I was just a kid then, still full of foolish romantic ideas. You were my first."

"I know," Eric said softly. "That should count for something, shouldn't it? Lunch. Just lunch. You pick the place and the time. What do you say?"

Chandler shook his head. "You never could let something go till you got your way. I guess that still hasn't changed."

Eric drew in his breath, cut by this remark, though he couldn't deny its truth.

But when he looked up, he saw Chandler was smiling. "I can't have you hanging around the employee parking lot all day, so okay, you win." Chandler pulled out his cell phone, touching the screen and scrolling a few moments before saying, "I can meet you at one o'clock at the hospital cafeteria. I have a half hour."

"The hospital cafeteria," Eric began to protest.

"Look. I work long hours. If I have enough notice I can carve out time. Today's pretty booked."

"Okay. Sold," Eric said, not wanting to look this gift horse in the mouth. "I'll see you then." He put his hand on Chandler's arm, squeezing lightly. "Thanks, Chandler."

Chandler was ten minutes late for lunch. "Sorry," he said, joining Eric at a table, a tuna sandwich and bag of potato chips on his tray. "Didn't mean to keep you waiting."

"No problem." Eric couldn't help the wide smile that split his face, but he didn't have to admit he'd just spent the last ten minutes thinking Chandler had stood him up.

He dipped a soggy French fry in ketchup, not tasting it as he chewed. Usually adept at small talk, he couldn't think of a thing to say that wouldn't sound ridiculous. He couldn't remember feeling this nervous since junior high school.

Chandler looked at him from across the table. "What's really going on here, Eric? Why are you so eager to reconnect? We don't even know each other anymore. What's this about?"

Figuring he had nothing left to lose, Eric decided to lay it right out there. "This might sound kind of lame, but I'm in this—this club. We call ourselves the Solitary Knights. We've all been burned in love, I guess you'd say. We get together once a month or so and share a beer." He grinned sheepishly, suddenly seeing the group as an outsider might. "We're just a bunch of bitter old farts, using the group and its premise as a way to justify the fact we're still alone and lonely as hell.

"But the other night something happened. Someone said something that really made me examine what the hell I think I'm doing with my life. I'm forty-four years old. I started thinking back, trying to recall the last time I was really in love, not just with the idea of it, but with the actual person, and I kept coming back to you—to us. I let it slip away because I was too self-centered and clueless back then to know what I had until it was too late."

Chandler frowned. "Look, Eric. That's all very nice and pretty sounding. You always had a way with words and could talk the pants off anyone you set your sights on. Don't think I didn't know it."

Eric winced but held his tongue. Chandler continued. "To tell you the truth, you sound like a guy having some kind of midlife crisis. I'll tell you what I think. I think you didn't come here looking for *me*. You came looking for some kind of dream of something you've lost. You don't know me. We've both lived a lifetime since we last saw each other. What is it you're really after here?"

Not sure himself anymore, Eric reached impulsively toward Chandler. He was taken aback by the zing of electric desire that coursed through his body as he touched Chandler's skin. Chandler stared down at his hand until, embarrassed, Eric took it away.

"Are you with someone?" Eric asked softly, realizing he hadn't even allowed himself to consider this before, stunned at how desperately he hoped this wasn't the case.

Chandler didn't answer right away. Finally he said, "No. Not right now. My work keeps me busy. I have a full life. I've had my share of love and loss." He looked away, adding, "More loss than love, I suppose."

Eric resisted the urge to touch him again. "I want to know you again," he said. "I want to know *me* again, if that makes sense. Do you remember, Chandler, that sense of wonder we shared? You taught me that. You showed me how to look at life with a kind of joy I hadn't known existed before I met you." Eric closed his eyes a moment, wishing he could find some way to reach Chandler, to remind him what they'd once had.

"Remember that time, Chan, when we went to that street fair in SoHo and I bought you that leather wristband? Remember how I knelt down right there in the street and tied it on your wrist?"

"You were stoned. You nearly got arrested." Finally Chandler graced Eric with a real smile, one that reached his eyes.

"I admit it." Eric grinned back. "I was high as a kite. But the sentiment was real. You meant something to me. You mattered. *We* mattered. I've lost that, you see. Over the years, somehow I've turned into a man I don't want to be. Jaded, cynical about love, wondering if that kind of fresh, easy joy ever really existed, or if it's something I just made up."

He looked into Chandler's eyes, hoping the earnestness of his feelings came through. "I'm not asking to pick up where we left off—I know that's ridiculous and presumptive. I'm just asking," he paused, suddenly wondering himself what the hell he *was* asking of this stranger who had once been his lover. "I guess I'm asking for a chance to start over."

Chandler looked at Eric for a long time, saying nothing. Finally he sighed, shaking his head. "It doesn't work that way, Eric. I wish it did, but life doesn't come with do-overs. Maybe you have some misty romantic memories of our relationship, but what I remember is you leaving me. What I remember is twenty letters left unanswered. What I remember is being so in love and so brokenhearted that I briefly, in my stupid melodramatic youth, considered suicide."

He stood, taking his tray in his hands. "Why would I want to reconnect with you, Eric? Why would I want to put myself out there like that again?"

Eric opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. As Chandler walked away, Eric finally managed to whisper, "Because I'm not that man. Because I want to make it right." But Chandler was already gone.

~*~

Peggy, Chandler's office manager, raised her eyebrows as she brought a vase of roses into his office. "Are you holding out on us, doctor? Did you have a fight with your girlfriend? Isn't it the man who's supposed to send flowers?"

Chandler looked up from his paperwork. "What?" His personal life was strictly private, and while he'd never pretended to be straight, he'd never shared any details with his staff and didn't plan to start now. He stared at the dozen long-stemmed roses in confusion. "Those are for me?"

"Yep. There's no card. Do you have a secret admirer out there we don't know about?"

"It would look that way." Peggy waited, clearly expecting elaboration. "Probably just a patient whose acne is cleared up." He offered a smile.

"Uh huh," Peggy replied, her tone making it clear she wasn't going for it, but it was all she was going to get. Once she was gone, Chandler ran his hands through his hair and swiveled toward the large picture window in his private office. Though it was only

late afternoon, it was already getting dark outside, fat flakes of snow falling past the glass, illuminated by the city lights.

Of course the roses were from Eric. There was no one else in his life at the moment. Not that Eric was in his life. It had taken years, *years*, before he could even think of the guy without the broken shards of his heart contracting with pain. No way was he going to open himself up to that kind of anguish again, no matter how many years had got behind them.

And yet...and yet he couldn't deny the attraction, immediate and visceral, the moment he'd seen Eric in the exam room. Though he'd pretended otherwise, he'd known immediately who Eric was when he'd glanced at his chart and then at Eric's handsome face. Even with the shaved head and the changes time had wrought to Eric's face, the man still had the power to yank at something deep inside Chandler.

Though he'd tried to ignore and then to deny it to himself, seeing Eric had shocked his system and sent something ticking inside him, like an old watch suddenly shaken back to life.

Reaching into his pocket, he removed his wallet and opened it. Carefully he withdrew the scrap of leather that was all that remained of the wristband Eric had so grandly presented him all those years ago. Chandler had ripped it from his wrist the year after Eric had left him, but for some reason he'd saved a torn strip of the band.

As he rubbed the soft leather between his thumb and finger, he closed his eyes, remembering Eric's question the first night they spent together, the question that sent his heart battering against his sternum...

"You ever been with a guy?"

Chandler, barely eighteen, shook his head, his face hot, his balls tight.

"You want to be?" Eric whispered, leaning closer.

In spite of his nervousness, Chandler found himself leaning forward as well. He nodded, letting his eyes close again, lust outweighing fear. Eric's lips were soft when they touched his, his kiss feather-light.

Eric pressed him down against the bed so they were lying side by side. He continued to kiss Chandler as his hand found Chandler's fly, tugging at the metal button that held it closed and dragging the zipper down its bumpy path over Chandler's erection.

Panic edged its way past desire, and Chandler found his voice. "I don't know...I've never done..."

Eric, so confident, sure enough for them both, touched his lips with two fingers. "We'll go slow. As slow as you need."

Chandler relaxed against the bed, though his heart continued to thud. Eric reached down, unlacing Chandler's sneakers and pulling them off his feet, along with his socks. Chandler let Eric pull his T-shirt over his head and drag down his jeans. Eric stripped without the least self-consciousness, lying down naked beside Chandler, who couldn't help but stare at his erect cock.

Eric took his time, rolling Chandler to his stomach to give him a long, lingering massage until he'd kneaded every vestige of tension from Chandler's muscles. When he finally rolled

Chandler onto his back and slipped his fingers beneath the band of Chandler's briefs, Chandler just sighed, more than ready for his touch.

When Eric's lips closed over his cock, Chandler lost control. Before he realized what was happening, he felt the familiar tension in his balls that signaled an impending orgasm. Eric lowered his head, licking his way downward toward Chandler's balls.

"Shit," Chandler groaned, completely undone. Eric drew back, catching Chandler's cock in strong, sure fingers. "I can't...please..." The capacity for speech was obliterated as the cum hurtled its way from Chandler's balls up through his shaft. He shuddered and moaned, white streams of warm ejaculate hitting his chest.

What was that, all of ninety seconds? Hugely embarrassed, Chandler tried to apologize. "Nothing to be sorry about." Eric's smile was like a promise. "We have all the time in the world."

A week passed, and Eric continued to send little gifts, or Chandler assumed they were from Eric—a box of fancy chocolates, a bottle of fine single malt scotch, another bouquet of flowers, this one bright yellow daffodils and sprays of purple irises.

The office staff was abuzz with speculation, but Chandler did his best to ignore the whispers. He couldn't deny feeling vaguely pleased by the gifts. He couldn't remember the last time someone had tried to woo him like this. It felt kind of good, but it didn't mean he was going to call the guy. At least not right away.

That Friday as he walked toward his car, he saw something white tucked beneath the windshield wiper. As he got closer he saw it was an envelope. He plucked it from beneath the wiper and climbed into his car, turning on the engine.

His name was written on the front in neat print. He knew before opening it who it was from.

Dear C.,

I've written this letter several times and each time I've torn it up. This one is going to make it to you, no matter what. I don't suppose for an instant it will make up for the twenty I never wrote back all those years ago. I'm ashamed now to think of how casually cruel I was, how self-absorbed in my new life that I couldn't take a moment to write back to the one person who ever truly loved me. All I can say now is, I'm sorry. I'm not that guy anymore, Chandler. I would love to have the chance to prove that to you.

You asked me why I'm so eager to reconnect, after so long. You made me stop and analyze what the fuck I think I'm doing, trying to step back into your life when, as you pointed out, we don't really know each other.

I can tell you this. When I close my eyes, I see a vivid memory of the young man you were, curled up outside my dorm room, your head on your knees. You had fallen asleep waiting for me to return from who knows what event—I no longer recall. You could have given up and gone back to your own room, but you waited.

You waited for me.

When I touched your shoulder, you opened your eyes and looked up at me, at first unfocused, and then this smile of pure joy lit your face. You weren't mad at me for standing you

up. You didn't ask where I'd been. All you did was hold out your arms to me, that smile lighting your face like sunshine.

Never again in my life, Chandler, have I experienced that kind of open, selfless love. You were loyal, steadfast, forgiving. You had so much trust in me and all I did back then was exploit your innocence, which I deeply regret.

I hope you can understand, I was immature, in many ways more immature than you, though I was the older and fancied myself the wiser, certainly the more experienced. While I did enjoy the attention you lavished on me, I didn't have the tools or understanding back then to return your love, not with the same open honesty.

I left you, thinking I was leaving behind the smaller world of my then-existence for something grander. I had no idea I was leaving the best man I would ever meet. I had no inkling then that I would, ironically, spend the rest of my life looking for precisely what I'd so thoughtlessly abandoned.

Yes, a lifetime has passed since last we met. We no longer know each other. And yet, even from our brief encounters, I have this sense of you. I still feel the underlying bedrock of your steadfastness, your integrity, your willingness to forgive.

I would love the chance to show you that, though I've definitely had my share of fuckups along the way, I have grown and learned from my mistakes. I don't expect you to leap into my bed, or even to become my friend again. All I ask is for a chance to know you again. To let you know me.

The flowers, the candy – they were a way to try to reach you, to get you to open the door, if only a little, but in the end, I guess they're just hollow gestures. This letter is my last effort, Chandler, to reach you. To apologize for the pain I caused you. To offer a hand in greeting – to try, once more, to reconnect.

I don't know if you remember that club I mentioned, the Solitary Knights. We hang out together because we claim we're too clever to fall again into the quicksand trap of love. We say we're unlucky in love, or love doesn't exist, but I think for most of the guys it's really more of a case of sour grapes. We made a lot of stupid decisions in our lives, and instead of trying to find the real thing, we've just given up, and use the club as a crutch to justify the fact we're alone.

I had given up, Chandler.

I had forgotten that feeling of limitless potential we used to know back when we were young. Finding you again made me remember what it was like, that feeling of possibility. Your existence reminds me there's hope.

I have to believe that. There's always hope.

Meet me tonight at Grady's Tavern. It's only a few blocks from your office and I left directions on the back of this letter in case you aren't familiar with it.

I'll wait until eight o'clock. If you don't come, I'll take that as your final decision and you won't hear from me again.

You once wrote me a poem, Chandler. I never forgot one of the lines. You said you were born with my name under your tongue. Is it still there? Am I still somewhere inside you?

Here's hoping.

Love, E.

Chandler read the letter again. Perhaps he'd underestimated Eric Moore. Maybe he really had changed. Maybe he understood, at last, the damage he'd wrought when he'd simply vanished.

Chandler shook his head, remembering that poem, how he'd labored over it, how he'd spent hours trying to find just the right words to convey the depth of his teenaged obsession with the older boy. He was surprised Eric still remembered it, at least that one line. Chandler himself had forgotten it until now.

Could it be, after all this time, that fate meant for them to reconnect? Did he owe it, if not to Eric, at least to what they'd once shared, to at least give the guy a chance?

Chandler looked at his watch. Though he usually left the office by no later than seven, he'd stayed to finish paperwork and it was now seven fifty-eight. He knew where Grady's Tavern was, and though he didn't make the conscious decision to drive there, he found himself heading in that direction.

When he pulled into the parking lot at ten after eight, he wondered if he was too late. He opened the front door and stood a moment, taking in the room. He saw Eric alone in a corner at one of the tables, his head in his hands.

Chandler stood for several seconds watching Eric, whose slumped body and hidden face spoke with a greater eloquence than all his pleading. That one gesture chipped away at the last of the ice that still covered the walls of Chandler's heart, even after all these years. It reached him in a way all the flowers and chocolates and love letters never could have. This was Eric alone, raw and defeated, vulnerable in a way Chandler had never witnessed.

He moved toward Eric, stopping beside him and placing his hand lightly on Eric's shoulder. Eric started and looked up, the pain in his face so stark it made Chandler catch his breath. He watched as Eric struggled with his emotions, waited quietly while Eric got himself under control.

"Chandler," Eric finally breathed, so quietly Chandler read his lips more than heard the words. "You came."

~*~

Eric sat on the edge of the sofa, watching Chandler, not sure what was expected. Chandler hadn't wanted to stay at the tavern for dinner, which suited Eric, who never could have gotten food past the lump in his throat.

He hadn't expected Chandler's invitation. In fact, he'd half-expected that Chandler had shown up at the last minute, only to tell him to leave him alone. Instead Chandler had said, "Come to my house. I don't live far from here."

Eric was glad for the few minutes alone to compose himself as he followed Chandler in his own car to a nice neighborhood of tree-lined streets. Chandler's house was at the end of a road, gray stone with red shutters.

Chandler handed him a snifter of brandy, which Eric took, cupping the glass between his palms as he stared down into the amber liquid. Chandler sat beside him on the sofa. "Thank you for that letter," he said softly.

Eric sipped his brandy, afraid to speak, afraid to say too much, or too little. Chandler continued. "I honestly don't know where we go from here. It's been a long time since I had someone in my life."

Eric didn't respond. Chandler was so close to him, he imagined he could feel a magnetic pull between them. It was a sheer act of will to keep from leaning over and taking Chandler's face in his hands, dipping his head to kiss those lips.

If by some miracle things were to begin again between them, this time he would take it slow. He would get to know the man Chandler had become, and let Chandler know him, the real him, in a way no one else had ever been permitted to.

"Your letter made me think," Chandler continued. "What you said about hope. I think I'd forgotten that too. I'd let the hope slip away, substituting being busy and finding solace in my work for the possibility of love. Maybe it is out there. I honestly don't know. One thing I know for sure, the certainty of youth is long gone."

Chandler had removed his glasses. He turned to Eric, who met his gaze, his heart catching in his throat as those green eyes seemed to penetrate his soul. Eric wanted to say something important, something that showed he was sensitive and listening, but when he opened his mouth, the words that came out were, "Kiss me."

To his shocked but delighted surprise, Chandler did just that. Eric sat frozen in place as Chandler reached for him, taking his face in his hands just as Eric had imagined doing to him a moment before. As their lips touched, Chandler moved one hand over Eric's shaved head to cup the back of his neck, the gesture somehow intensely intimate.

Eric's cock hardened and he felt goose bumps rising on his skin. After a moment, Chandler let him go and sat back, his eyes moving over Eric's face. He reached for Eric's shirt, unbuttoning it with deft fingers. Chandler leaned forward again, this time resting his cheek against Eric's bare chest. Eric wondered if he could feel his pounding heart. Still he made no move, aware how tenuous things between them still remained.

After a moment, Chandler pulled away and sat back, though he didn't speak. Reaching toward him, Chandler unbuckled Eric's belt and pulled the zipper of his pants down. A shudder moved through Eric's body when Chandler stroked his rigid shaft through his underwear. Eric moaned without meaning to. Embarrassed, he pressed his lips together.

"I want you, Eric. I never stopped wanting you." Chandler's voice was husky. "I was lying to you, and to myself, when I pretended otherwise. But I'm not the boy you thought you loved back then. I'm not the kid who hung, love-struck, on your every word. If we start something, you need to know I play for keeps. I'm not in this for a quick fuck or a one-night-stand. It's got to matter, or I'm not interested."

"Me neither, Chan. I want something real. I'm tired of playing it safe and shallow, and ending with nothing that matters." Eric reached for him, and Chandler moved forward, pressing Eric back against the cushions. They kissed, tongues exploring, hearts beating fast.

Chandler was the first to pull away. He stood, holding out his hand.

Eric followed him into the bedroom. Wordlessly they stripped, each with his eyes on the other. Eric fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around Chandler's thighs, resting his cheek against Chandler's rising cock as he inhaled its intoxicating musk.

The skin of Chandler's cock was silky soft over the hard shaft. Eric gripped the base between thumb and forefinger, trapping the blood to make it harder still as he leaned forward to take it into his mouth.

Chandler moaned, putting his hands on Eric's shoulders, his head falling back. Eric gripped his ass cheeks, taking Chandler as deep as he could, milking his cock until he had to pull back for air. He licked and suckled his way back down the shaft until he was again impaled on its length.

When Chandler's legs began to shake, Eric pushed him gently toward the bed. Chandler fell back upon it, his cock, shiny with Eric's kisses, pointing straight to the ceiling. Crouching beside him on the bed, Eric resumed his attentions, licking and stroking Chandler's cock and balls until Chandler began to shudder.

"Jesus, I'm gonna come, Eric. If you keep that up, I'm gonna come."

"That's the idea," Eric stopped what he was doing long enough to murmur. "Come for me. I want you to." This was for Chandler, just for him. Eric wanted to make love to Chandler, if Chandler would let him, without any expectation of anything in return. Maybe for the first time in his life, he found himself longing to give, and not just take, to put someone else's needs before his own...could this be what love was really all about?

He lowered his head again, gripping Chandler's balls with one hand, the other stroking between his ass cheeks while he licked and sucked the length of Chandler's cock. Chandler groaned, arching up against him, thrusting his cock deep into Eric's throat as he came.

Afterwards he lay limp, his body covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Eric was sweating too, his cock rigid, the tip seeping pre-cum. Ignoring it as best he could, he reached for Chandler, taking him into his arms. Chandler's eyes closed, his breathing easing from rapid to slow and deep.

Eric stroked Chandler's hair, pushing it from his forehead. He touched his cheek, drawing his finger along Chandler's jaw, tracing a line down his throat. Gently, he kissed Chandler's lips and his eyelids, experiencing a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed.

When Chandler reached for Eric's cock, Eric gently pushed his hand away. Chandler opened his eyes. "I want to return the favor."

"No. Tonight is for you. Just for you."

~*~

When Chandler awoke the next morning he was confused for a split second by the warm, snoring presence in the bed beside him. It had been a long time since he'd let anyone stay the night. He honestly hadn't planned on letting Eric, but after his orgasm, he'd fallen into a deep sleep, not rousing until the sun came up.

Quietly he climbed out of bed, going into the bathroom to use the toilet. He decided to take a quick shower before returning to bed, thinking perhaps this morning they'd make love properly, but when he came back out, the bed was empty.

Pulling on his bathrobe, he went in search of Eric, who he found in the kitchen, making a pot of coffee. Eric was wearing a pair of Chandler's sweatpants. His bare chest, covered in thickly curling dark blond hair over well-defined pecs, made Chandler's mouth water with lust. The pants were too long, and stretched too tight over his muscular, sexy ass. Chandler felt his cock rise and grinned at himself. It had been a long time since a man had attracted him to this degree. A very long time. Yet, even so, he found himself hesitant. Even after last night, he remained cautious around this man he'd once loved and lost so painfully.

Pulling his eyes from Eric's body, he said, "I see you found the coffee."

"Would you like a cup? I hope you don't mind I borrowed your pants."

"No problem. Yes, coffee would be a good thing, thanks." They moved together in the small kitchen, Chandler getting out the cream and sugar, Eric bringing the pot and two mugs to the table.

They sat sipping in companionable silence. Chandler felt a curious rising joy like a balloon filling his insides. He had no idea where this was going, but for now he felt happy. He studied Eric. A part of him, the horny part, wanted to take Eric back to bed and make love to him then and there. His cock ached to feel Eric's hot mouth on it again, or the tight grip of that sexy ass.

Yet intellectually he agreed with Eric that they should take their time. This was, he realized, a chance for something real. If Eric was content to wait, he would be too. No promises, but no games either.

Eric caught him looking at him and smiled, tilting his head in a way that took Chandler back twenty three years. "What're you thinking about?" Chandler asked.

Eric smiled. "About us. About last night. About how different I want things to be this time. My usual M.O. is fuck first, get to know someone later, if at all. I don't want that with you. I want to find out who you are, who you've become. I want to share those things with you. I want to be your friend, not just a fuck buddy. I want it to matter. I want us to matter."

"Me too," Chandler found himself saying. And he realized it was true.

They smiled at one another across the table. Eric laughed. "Hey, you know what I just thought of? Remember that game room at school where we used to hang out? Remember how we used to play darts all the time?"

Chandler nodded. "I sure do. I wiped the floor with you, as I recall."

"That's how you remember it, huh?" Eric laughed, but then shrugged in a gesture of mock defeat. "Okay, okay. You did wipe the floor with me. But I've done some practicing since then. In fact, that pub I hang out at, it's got this great old dartboard set up, and a bunch of us guys play when we get together. Maybe you could come by some time and play a few rounds. Loser buys the winner a beer."

"I haven't played in years, but I bet I could still wipe the floor with you," Chandler teased.

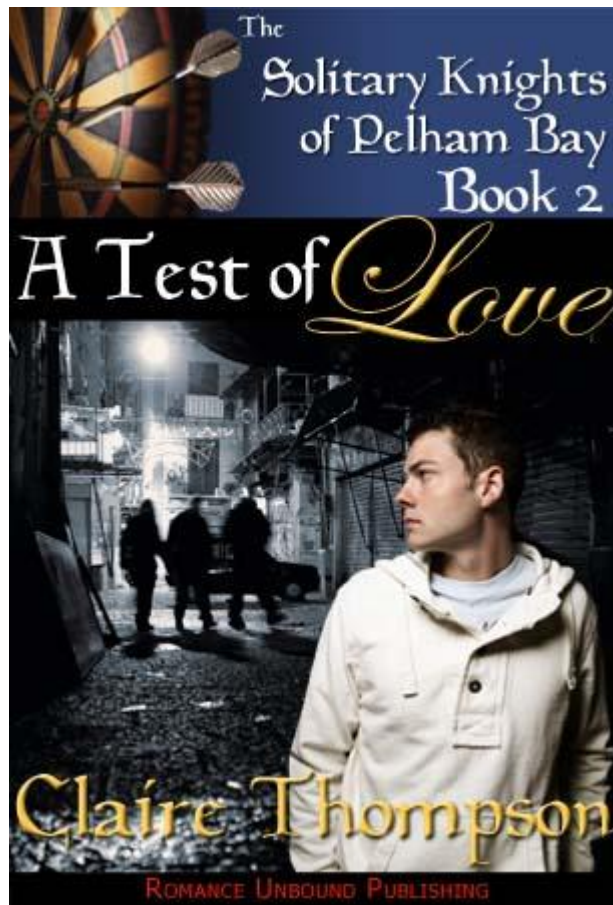
"We'll just have to see about that, won't we?"

"You're on."

Chandler poured himself another cup of coffee, his mind playing over the night before. "Hey," he offered. "About last night. I'm sorry I fell asleep like that..."

"Nothing to be sorry about." Eric reached his hand across the table, placing it lightly over Chandler's. "We have all the time in the world."

This time, Chandler thought, we really do.



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