



The

Solitary Knights
of Pelham Bay
Book 2

A Test of *Love*



Claire Thompson

ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING

Romance Unbound Publishing
Presents

The Solitary Knights of Pelham Bay
Book 2: A Test of Love

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The Series

It started as a joke. Several guys burned by love decided to create a club they dubbed the Solitary Knights. A safe haven for the romantically disinclined, the guys meet once a month to drink a beer and renew their vow to avoid love at all costs. Yet beneath the laughter and bravado, each man hides a broken heart.

One night, Drew Kensington, owner and bartender of the Pelham Bay Pub, issues a 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.”

From 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 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.”

**Book 1: Finding Chandler, is available at 1RomanceEBooks.com as a Free Read. While Book 2 can stand alone, the experience will be enhanced if Book 1 is read first.*

Book 2: A Test of Love

The rain had turned to sleet by the time Ryan got off the bus and walked the half-block to his Brooklyn basement apartment. He tread carefully down the slippery concrete stairs and fought as usual with the lock, his mail tucked under one arm.

Once inside the warmth of his place, he dropped the letters and junk mail on the sofa. Peeling off his sodden jacket, he hung it over the clanging radiator to dry and blew on his frozen fingers.

It was late. Ryan yawned, thinking about the early meeting with clients the next morning he would have dearly loved to cancel. Not an option.

He went into the kitchen to make himself a quick cup of tea, which he carried back into the living room, cradling the warm mug in his hands. He sat on the sofa and leaned back, closing his eyes. Drew's questions earlier at the pub had made him think. Was it really that he was just unlucky in love? Or had that one love, so long ago, ruined his chance to find happiness? Before he realized his mouth was moving, Ryan whispered the name he'd kept banished from conscious thought for so long – *Tom*...

With a sigh, he turned toward the pile of mail. There was an envelope from Rutgers University. When he saw the name on the return address, he sucked in his breath. Not a man who believed in fate, Ryan stared at it in disbelief. *Thomas Shafer – Chairperson for Rutgers Against Hunger*. The coincidence was just too weird. The very man who had never entirely faded from his dreams – first pulled into his mind by Drew's challenge, and now this!

Ryan ran his finger lightly over the name, closing his eyes as a spasm of bittersweet memory ran through him. Professor Tom Shafer, the object of Ryan's youthful, fevered longing, had been thirty-five to Ryan's twenty. While fifteen years wasn't so much between adults, back then it had been an insurmountable gap between the professor and his student.

Ryan tore open the envelope. Inside was an invitation to a fundraising dinner, Professor Shafer's signature stamped by a computer. Ryan snorted. What had he expected, a personal love letter?

Probably the professor didn't even remember the boy he'd once counseled in his office, or their heartfelt conversations about being openly gay in a still-homophobic society. Did he remember the field trip to the Jersey shore to study the marine ecosystems, when they'd been separated from the other students for nearly twenty minutes?

Even now, when he closed his eyes and allowed the memories to flow, he could smell the tang of salt on the sea breeze and hear the waves crashing nearby. Tom and he were crouched beside a large boulder, alone for the moment, just the two of them.

Tom had been saying something about the evidence of erosion as they knelt side-by-side, examining the sediment. Tom's words drifted away and all Ryan knew was his closeness, his scent, his warm breath.

Of one accord they leaned toward one another, foreheads and noses nearly touching. Ryan closed his eyes, his heart thumping, his hands clenched, every cell in his body alive with anticipation, desperate for the kiss he knew was coming at last.

Then, all at once, without opening his eyes, he felt the absence. Tom had moved away, standing and brushing the sand from his jeans, turning his face toward the sea. Ryan remained paralyzed in his crouch, his mouth robbed of its kiss, his heart twisted and dashed against the stones of Tom's rejection.

That was the moment the wall had come crashing down between them, or at least a veil so thick that the young, inexperienced Ryan couldn't see a way past it. The almost kiss they'd almost shared, Ryan now understood in retrospect, had been the boundary his professor could not or would not cross.

For the young man he'd been then, it had been the ultimate rejection, and one that would color his interactions with others for years to come. He touched his mouth, which had kissed so many men in the years that followed, and shook his head, surprised at how the memory still had the power to affect him, even after all these years.

Probably just as well if the professor no longer recalled the lovesick kid Ryan had been back then. It was embarrassing now to think how he'd pined for his teacher, masturbating in the dorm showers to the image of a man who would never want him.

Yet, now that the sleeping memory of his crush had been reawakened by Drew's challenge, Ryan couldn't stop the flow of images passing like beckoning invitations through his mind.

What would it be like to see Tom's smile again? To stare into those serious, dark eyes? The professor had a way of calming Ryan back then. How many times had he come racing into Tom's office, filled to bursting with righteous indignation about the latest social injustice of the day? Tom would listen, ponder, and discuss it with Ryan in a way that not only helped him gain perspective, but validated him as a person.

Of course, all that was a long time ago. Tom would be forty-nine now, and had no doubt gone through a lot of life changes himself. Who knew if he was the same man after all these years, or if they could possibly connect the way they once had. Maybe it was better to let the memory of the calm, compassionate and oh-so-sexy professor drift back into a safe sleep, intact as the almost-first love of Ryan's life.

Why stir up the past and risk getting hurt yet again? Even if they did connect, what were the odds an attractive, sweet, successful guy like Tom Shafer was even available?

Ryan snorted again, annoyed with himself for these teenaged musings. He was long past that kind of wishful thinking. In the intervening years since Tom, what had Ryan found? Men who confused control, sex and power with love. Guys who would say anything to get what they wanted.

He pushed away the recollection of a succession of failed relationships. They had no power over him, not any more, he told himself firmly. Love was for losers and someone always got hurt at the end.

He would go to the fundraiser, but with zero expectations—simply as a matter of curiosity. It was for a worthy cause, after all. Ryan glanced at his watch, downed the last of his tepid tea and took himself off to bed.

~*~

Ryan had arrived nearly an hour late for the event, stuck in negotiation hell for an important client, unable to extricate himself in time for the cocktail hour that had been scheduled before the dinner itself commenced.

He found himself sitting at an assigned table with a bunch of people he didn't know, on the off-chance of reconnecting with a guy who, for all he knew, wouldn't remember him from Adam.

A woman who introduced herself as the chair for the department of environmental sciences stepped up to the podium and greeted the guests, thanking them for coming. "Please allow me to introduce our speaker for tonight, Dr. Thomas Shafer." Ryan's fork stopped in midair, his attention focused on the front of the room. While the woman listed Dr. Shafer's accomplishments and publications, Ryan strained over the heads blocking his view to see Tom, without success.

Then he appeared, rising from one of the tables in the front and walking toward the podium. Though his once-dark-brown hair had turned to silver, there was no mistaking the man. Tall and still trim, he moved with a lanky grace that made something catch in Ryan's throat.

Fourteen years fell away, and Ryan felt as if he were twenty again. He enjoyed the professor's class, and took copious notes most of the time, awed at Tom's vast knowledge and insight. But occasionally he found himself daydreaming as he stared at the square line of Tom's jaw, the bobbing Adam's apple, the hint of chest hair curling from the opening of his button-down shirt.

Tonight the professor was wearing a suit and tie, looking very proper. Time had been kind to the older man. At least from where Ryan was sitting, he still looked very good indeed.

As Tom spoke, it seemed as if he were focused directly on Ryan, though after a moment's self-consciousness, Ryan realized he was probably staring at some distant focal point at the back of the room. It was likely he couldn't even see Ryan back there over all the other tables filled with people, nor would he recognize him if he did.

Nevertheless, Ryan stared back, unable to take his eyes from the face of the man he'd been so hopelessly head over feet for all those years ago. When Tom's speech, of which Ryan hadn't registered a word, was over, there was applause and then people began to move from their tables, heading back to the open area to mingle.

Ryan stood as well, edging toward his old professor, with no idea what he'd say when he got there. He stood near the group of three men and two women, which gave

him a chance to study Tom more closely. If anything, he was even better looking than when he was younger. There were laugh lines etched deep at the corners of his eyes, belying the two worry grooves between his eyebrows. Instead of aging him, Tom's silver hair actually suited him, setting off his still-vivid, dark brown eyes.

Tom chose that moment to look over at him, their eyes locking while Ryan waited to see if he was remembered. All at once a change seemed to come over Tom's face. His mouth eased into a smile, a question lighting his eyes.

"Excuse me," Tom said to the group, moving from them and walking toward Ryan. "Ryan?" Tom tilted his head in question. "Ryan Kennedy? Is that you?"

"I admit it." Ryan laughed, pleased more than he wanted to admit that Tom had recognized him.

"It's been, what? Ten years? Fifteen?"

"Fourteen."

Tom nodded his head slowly, rubbing his chin between his thumb and forefinger. Ryan couldn't help staring. He used to fantasize about licking his way along that jaw line until he got to Tom's lips. If only he could kiss him, he had thought back then—then Tom would have known they were meant for one another, age and student-teacher hurdles be damned. Back then he'd written long, aching missives to Tom, which of course never got sent. In them Ryan outlined all the ways in which they were kindred, not only sexually, but philosophically, intellectually, spiritually...

Tom was looking at him expectantly and Ryan realized he must have asked a question.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You were majoring in...?"

Shit. Tom didn't remember Ryan, or rather, he didn't remember what they'd shared. Or what Ryan had thought they'd shared. Otherwise how could he have asked that question?

Swallowing his disappointment, Ryan replied in a neutral voice, "Environmental studies. Then I went on to get my law degree at Yale. I've got a practice in Manhattan with Jacobs and Brock. You might have heard of the group. We practice environmental law, with a focus on toxic tort litigation." Ryan bit his lip to stop himself, aware he sounded like he had something to prove. Without giving Tom a chance to answer, he rushed on, "How about you? Still teaching biology?"

Tom smiled, a slow, easy smile that felt like a finger drawing its tip along Ryan's nerve endings. His cock rose and Ryan pulled his jacket closed, embarrassed at his body's betrayal.

"Yep," Tom answered. "After all these years, I'm still at it. Though I teach graduate studies now, thank god. No more lectures to bored, indifferent freshman, there simply because they have to fulfill their science requirement and figure biology is the easiest way out."

Tom glanced at his watch. "I wonder if I can get out of here now," he murmured, offering a conspiratorial grin. "They roped me into this thing, and while I'm glad to help, there's only so much hobnobbing and false bonhomie I can muster."

Ryan laughed. This was the Tom Shafer he remembered, funny, irreverent, always pushing against the status quo. "You could come get a drink with me," he suggested, making the snap decision a split second before voicing it.

Tom appeared to contemplate Ryan's offer, his fingers again massaging his chin. "I'd like that," he said, bestowing another smile that tugged at Ryan's cock. "Meet me at the Salty Dog in thirty?"

The Salty Dog.

Tom had said more with those three words than in the whole time they'd been talking up until then. Back when Ryan went to school there, the Salty Dog was a gay bar located not far from the university. Ryan was surprised to know it still existed, more surprised still that Tom had suggested it.

Maybe he did remember Ryan after all.

~*~

Fourteen years. Was that really how long it had been? Ryan Kennedy, the golden boy who had very nearly broken his way through Tom's defenses, had reappeared even better looking than in his youth. What a test of will he'd been for Tom back then. It would have been so easy to give in to his baser instincts. It had taken every ounce of will to muster the moral strength to resist.

Tom knew the invitations for the fundraisers went out to all alumni still on record, but nevertheless it had been a shock to see Ryan Kennedy sitting there at the back of the room, looking every bit as tempting as the handsome student he'd been all those years ago. Maturity suited him, the dark blond stubble on his jaw and the leaner face of adulthood easing him from pretty boy to handsome man.

Distracted by seeing Ryan, Tom had switched to autopilot for his speech, something he was quite adept at from his years of lecturing students while his mind was sometimes elsewhere. He was pleased when Ryan had approached, though he couldn't deny the thread of nerves weaving down his spine. The longing that had filled him when Ryan had been his student had nearly cost him his sanity. It was made doubly difficult by Ryan's open, aching schoolboy crush.

Tom had had to be strong, not only for himself, but for Ryan. He couldn't let him know he shared his desire, and longed to do more than just talk with the undergrad with the quick mind, provocative thoughts and hard young body...

He was reasonably sure he'd never given himself away. Except the once, and thank god, he'd caught himself before it went too far. But the cost had been great. He'd lost the friendship of a young guy he'd genuinely admired for his earnest idealism and optimistic dreams for the future. It had taken a long time to get over Ryan Kennedy.

He scanned the interior of the Salty Dog, spotting Ryan sitting on the last stool at the long bar. His blond hair fell in a straight, thick fringe over his forehead and into his

eyes as he leaned forward over his drink. Tom smiled – Ryan had always been in need of a haircut. He found it curiously reassuring to think that, at least, had not changed.

As Tom headed toward the bar, a young guy slipped onto the stool beside Ryan. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, his biceps bulging at the sleeves. Tom stopped just behind them, waiting to see what would play out.

“Can I buy you a drink?” The man put his hand familiarly on Ryan’s thigh. Though Tom knew it was ridiculous, he felt a pang of jealousy.

“Already got one, thanks,” Ryan replied. “I’m meeting someone.” As if on cue, Ryan swiveled on his stool, his eyes lighting as they came to rest on Tom. The young man’s hand fell away and he was gone.

Tom slid into his spot, pretending he hadn’t witnessed the scene. “Hey there. Sorry it took a little longer than I’d hoped to extricate myself.”

“No problem. Can I get you something? Guinness Stout?” Ryan signaled to the bartender.

“You remembered my drink of choice.” Tom said, inordinately pleased. Ryan ordered Tom’s drink, along with another beer for himself.

“Do you remember how we used to meet here?” Ryan asked, the light tone belying something deeper in his eyes.

“Sure.” Tom smiled.

“So then you remember our painfully earnest conversations about life, the universe and everything.” Ryan laughed self-consciously. “At least I was painfully earnest.”

“I was just in pain,” Tom rejoined with a grin. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you?”

“Pardon?” Ryan turned more fully toward him, eyes widening. The bartender set down their drinks.

Tom laughed, embarrassed, wondering why he’d blurted such a truth to a man he barely knew, no longer the kid with the schoolboy crush. He lifted his glass, taking a long drink while he composed himself.

“You sure kept it a secret back then.” The bitterness in Ryan’s tone was unmistakable. Could it be he still cared, that it still mattered?

“You were barely twenty. I was an associate professor, not yet tenured. It was 1995 and campus politics were decidedly less liberal than they are today – not that they’re so liberal now.” Tom shook his head, remembering. “Do you have any idea the trouble I could have gotten into, getting involved with an undergrad? Not to mention the guy I was hooked up with back then.”

“I remember. Your significant other.”

“He was my other, but his significance was questionable. The most jealous guy who ever walked the earth. He used to inspect my collar for lipstick – figuratively speaking.” Tom tried to smile but didn’t quite manage it. It had taken a long time to get over Anthony’s brand of suffocating love.

It was William who had redeemed Tom's faith and kept him from turning into a cynical, jaded guy who thought love was only for fools. William had given him back his hope. Ah, how he missed him.

Ryan brought him back to the moment. "Well, whatever he was to you, you used that relationship, among other things, to keep me at arm's length. It was supposed to be another nail in the coffin of my teenage infatuation."

"Probably," Tom admitted. "If it's any solace, it wasn't you I was afraid of, Ryan. It was me. Put yourself in my shoes—a sexy young student with a bad case of puppy love is ready to throw himself, naked, at my feet. Shit, I was only thirty-five, for god's sake. I'm amazed, looking back, that I had the self-control I did."

Ryan laughed. "Well, it wasn't from lack of trying on my part." Ryan fixed him for a moment with that clear blue-eyed gaze that used to make Tom's heart catch before turning to the bar to focus on his drink.

"So, you're what now, thirty-four?"

"Yep."

Thirty-four... No way someone that young could possibly be interested in a guy just shy of fifty, old schoolboy crushes notwithstanding. Did Tom still have what it took to attract a man? Did he want to find out? He could reach over, just like the guy who had vacated his stool a few minutes before. He could curl his fingers around Ryan's solid-looking thigh, moving his hand suggestively upward as he fixed Ryan with a smoldering stare...

Mentally, Tom shook his head. What was he thinking? Just because Ryan had attended the fundraiser, it didn't mean he was interested in starting something with his old professor.

Forcing his attraction for the younger man to remain at bay, Tom instead offered, "You know, I still feel bad for how things went down. I'm sorry for the pain you went through. I can understand why you dropped my class and stopped coming around, but I wish it could have been different."

"Me too." Ryan shrugged. "But hey, that's life, right? We both moved on." Ryan took the wedge of lime from his drink and pulled it apart, sucking the tart fruit into his mouth.

Tom watched, mesmerized as Ryan's red tongue snaked over the pale green rind. He sucked in his breath, warning himself to get a grip. Ryan had just said he'd moved on.

They engaged in small talk while they drank their beer. When Tom suggested buying the next round, Ryan shook his head. "It's been a long day. I'm beat." He pulled his wallet from the inside of his jacket and extracted a twenty.

More disappointed than he wanted to admit but not willing to make a fool of himself, Tom reached for his own wallet. Ryan stopped him. "Hey, it's on me. You must have bought me a hundred glasses of root beer back in the day. I owe you."

"Okay, thanks." As they both stood, Tom asked, "You live around here?"

"No. I live in Brooklyn. I've got a drive ahead of me. At least it's Friday and I can sleep in tomorrow."

"You've had a couple of beers, though." Aware he might be overstepping, Tom offered, "I only live about two miles from here. I'd be glad to make you a cup of coffee..." He trailed off, waiting.

"There's no significant other at home, then? No one waiting up for you?"

"No one but George." As Ryan raised a brow, Tom added with a grin, "My cat."

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Ryan followed Tom to his house, located in a quiet suburban neighborhood in New Brunswick. The evening was getting increasingly interesting. He thought he was giving Tom a graceful out by saying he was beat. What a pleasant surprise when Tom had instead invited him home. Not that that necessarily meant anything more than what it seemed to be on the surface—a friendly offer of a cup of coffee before an hour's drive.

Tom's house was much as Ryan would have expected it—the furniture functional and comfortable, with black and white photographs neatly framed on the walls. There were bookshelves everywhere, crammed with books that clearly weren't there for decoration.

Tom hung their coats and suit jackets in the small front hall. He led Ryan through the living room to the kitchen, which was small but bright, the walls painted a sky blue, the cabinets white. "So," Tom said, as he poured ground coffee into a drip coffeemaker, "how about you? If you don't mind my asking, is there a significant other waiting up for you?"

"Me?" Ryan frowned, Tom's question causing a list of failed relationships to march unwelcome through his brain. "No. My last serious relationship was a major train wreck. One of those messy, horrible endings where you end up feeling like total shit." Ryan shuddered, recalling the tears and accusations. "I actually ended up having to get a restraining order against him. He's not allowed to communicate with me in any way, or come within a certain distance of my residence or work."

"Wow," Tom frowned. "That's some serious stuff. Was he physically threatening?"

Embarrassed, and wondering why the hell he'd just admitted that to a man he no longer knew, Ryan tried to backtrack. "You could say that, yeah. He's a big guy. A body builder. He likes to throw his weight around, literally." Glossing over any details, he added, "He's one of those guys who can't take no for an answer."

"I know the type. Better to make a clean break. You give them an inch and they'll drive a truck through it."

"Yeah. He actually left town for a while, which was good. He's back though. I saw him at the gym the other day." Ryan realized he was hugging himself. Self-consciously, he dropped his arms. "Anyway, he's keeping his distance. I learned my lesson with that

relationship. Since then, I keep things light. Simpler that way. Like we say at the club, I'm footloose and fancy free."

"The club?"

A white cat with vivid blue eyes appeared, curling its way sinuously around Tom's ankles. Tom leaned down, absently patting the animal.

"That's a pretty cat," Ryan said, glad for the distraction. What was it about the professor, even after all these years, that made him blurt truths best kept quiet?

"That's George." Tom reached into a cabinet, pulling out a box of cat food, which he tapped into a small ceramic bowl on the floor near the pantry. George offered a thank-you meow and moved with feline grace toward his food, which he inspected delicately with his pink nose before taking a dainty bite. Tom smiled down at him with obvious affection. "He adopted me when I bought this place."

Tom brought the coffee pot to the table and sat down beside Ryan. "So you were saying...a club? What kind of club?" He poured coffee into each mug and stirred sugar into his.

"Oh, it's this thing I go to. A bunch of guys—we call ourselves the Solitary Knights of Pelham Bay. We meet once a month for a beer and a game of darts. We all have our horror stories, I guess. None of us has been too successful in the true love department. It's a kind of support group, a reminder for each of us that love is for losers."

"I always thought love was for dreamers," Tom said, his eyes searching Ryan's face. Ryan snorted. "Yeah, right."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "You used to be a dreamer, once."

Ryan shrugged. "In my experience, you meet someone, you think he's the one, you put your heart out there and wham, he gets out the sledgehammer and smashes it. Now, a stupid person will meet another guy, think *he's* the one and start it all over again. Oh, *this* time will be different, you tell yourself. But it isn't. It never is."

"Ryan." Tom gently chided. "What happened to the boy I used to know? The boy who was passionate about social equality and the power of love to effect change?" Tom shook his head, snorting softly. "It's ironic—back then you were the one who reached past my defenses with your earnest, youthful optimism about how you were going to change the world. What happened to that young man, Ryan? Where did he go?"

"The boy grew up, I guess. I was twenty, for god's sake. I was all potential, no experience. That's before I actually got out into the hard, cruel world and realized what a losing battle it can be."

"Sure. Life hurls all kinds of crap at us. Our hearts get battered—that's part of being alive, Ryan. But that doesn't mean we stop or give up or turn inward and shut ourselves off from finding happiness again. Hearts may even break, but they don't stop working, not as long as you're alive. You don't lose the capacity for love."

"Yeah, well, maybe you've just been luckier than I have. If love's out there, I sure haven't found it."

"You're way too young for this kind of cynicism, my friend. Where is the dreamer I used to know and admire, the one who recited poetry aloud?" Tom smiled. "Remember that one by e. e. cummings I always liked? Something about death being no parenthesis?"

"Oh, god." Ryan groaned and covered his face, embarrassed. "I was such a sentimental sap back then. I can't believe you even remember that. I've learned a lot since then."

"You have, have you? What have you learned? If you've learned to shut off the potential of love, just because you might get hurt, then I don't guess you've learned a hell of a lot." Ryan glanced up, taken aback by the sharp tone in Tom's voice.

Stung, Ryan retorted, "Yeah? What would you know about it? You're forty-nine and still alone, as far as I can see." He let his eyes sweep around the room, as if someone might suddenly pop up from behind the refrigerator.

Tom pressed his lips together, a spasm of pain contorting his features.

"God, I'm sorry," Ryan blurted, instantly struck with remorse. "That was uncalled for."

"It's okay," Tom graciously allowed. "Forget it." His expression softened as he added, "I always remembered the last lines of that poem. They have great meaning for me." Tom closed his eyes, as if the words were written on the inside of his eyelids. He quoted, "'Laugh, leaning back in my arms. For life's not a paragraph and death, I think, is no parenthesis.'"

Ryan didn't respond.

"How did it go, Ryan?" Tom prompted. "'Wholly to be a fool'..."

Despite himself, Ryan found himself continuing the line of the poem he hadn't thought about in over a decade. "'While spring is in the world, my blood approves, and kisses are a better fate than wisdom'."

Tom put his hand over Ryan's, nodding. "Yes. That's it, Ryan. That poet had it right."

Ryan's mouth was suddenly dry and sweat prickled at his arm pits. He looked down at Tom's hand, admiring the simple silver band on his finger. Tom's touch set his blood thrumming and he found he wasn't breathing.

His hand still over Ryan's, Tom scooted his chair until he was sitting right beside him. "I missed you when you left, Ryan. I felt your absence every day. It was years before I finally let you go in my heart and mind."

Ryan stared at him, dumbfounded. "I had no idea," he whispered. "That kiss. That almost-kiss on the beach...for me it was the final rejection. I wanted you too much to stay."

"I know." Tom nodded. "I'm sorry. It was a boundary I just couldn't cross with a student. Even though you were over eighteen, I couldn't see past that student-teacher

relationship. I was young and rigid. I didn't know it was possible to bend without breaking..."

Ryan stared at the older man, at a loss for words. Tom smiled suddenly and shook his head. "And now, when I've got it all figured out, I look in the mirror and see my father. Not exactly the stuff of a young man's fantasies."

"You look pretty darn good to me," Ryan replied, meaning it.

"Oh, sure. A handsome, successful guy like you is really going to be interested in an old fart like me."

"You kidding? I'm so sick of the horny, superficial jerks I meet, I'd just about given up. Maybe..." Ryan paused, struck by the realization. "Maybe I've been looking in the wrong places."

Tom leaned toward him, his eyes closing, and Ryan understood he was being offered that kiss, at last—at last.

As their lips touched, Ryan understood they'd been silently negotiating toward this moment all evening. Tom pulled him closer and Ryan actually moaned against his mouth, an echo from fourteen years before, when his longing had nearly destroyed him.

He leaned into Tom, inhaling the warm, fresh scent of his skin as they explored each other's mouths. Desire flamed inside him. It went beyond lust, rekindling with sharp longing the heart wrenching, boyish love he'd felt so long ago for this man.

Tom stood, pulling Ryan up into his arms. Ryan could feel Tom's cock pressing hard against him. They kissed with the urgency of desperate men, starving for each other.

When Tom finally let Ryan go, it was to pull at the knot of Ryan's tie. He lifted it over Ryan's head and tossed it on a chair. With agile fingers, he moved down Ryan's shirt, unbuttoning it as he went. Ryan closed his eyes as Tom pressed his hands against Ryan's bare chest, covering the nipples with his palms.

Tom kissed Ryan's neck. After a moment his warm, wet tongue was replaced by the nudge of teeth. Tom gave a low, guttural growl that raised the hair on the back of Ryan's neck, its call primal and insistent. Ryan groaned in return, impulsively seeking the bulge between Tom's legs. He cupped its hardness beneath the wool of the other man's slacks, wishing their clothes would melt away.

With hands and mouths still exploring, the men moved slowly through the living room and along a hallway toward Tom's bedroom. Once there, Tom pulled off his tie, his eyes locked on Ryan, who let his shirt fall to the floor. He reached for the buttons of Tom's shirt with fumbling fingers.

Between kisses, they stripped one another naked and fell to the bed. Ryan ran his hands greedily over Tom's body. "Probably not what you're used to," Tom joked. "You'll see—you hit forty and suddenly gravity takes on a whole new meaning."

"You look great to me," Ryan said. "Perfect." He reached for Tom's cock, which was still at half-mast, in contrast to his own throbbing erection.

Tom in turn reached for him. "Age before beauty. I have to taste you." He kissed Ryan's chest, drawing a circle around each nipple with his tongue, while stroking Ryan's cock.

"I've wanted to do this for fourteen years," Ryan protested, afraid if Tom kept it up, he'd come way too soon. "Me first." He pulled away.

"How about we compromise?" Tom laughed, but his eyes were blazing. He twisted around and Ryan understood. They shifted until each had his head level with the other's groin. Ryan closed his eyes, inhaling the heady aroma of Tom's musk.

"Yes," he whispered, the single sibilant word conveying his longing. He had every intention of taking it slow. He wanted to please Tom, to make him moan, to take every inch of Tom's cock into his mouth, and not stop until Tom begged for mercy.

He had never, he realized, wanted a man as much as he wanted this man, right now. Ryan's body ached with lust, his cock jutting at full erection, his heart racing. At the same time he was beset with a sense of the surreal. This man, the first man to break a heart that would endure much battering in the ensuing years, was naked beside him, his tongue already driving Ryan to distraction, his cock hardening at Ryan's touch. Could this really be happening?

He tried to focus, paying attention with his mouth and hands to Tom's dripping cock. Ryan stroked and licked the hot, spicy flesh, but found himself losing his concentration as Tom took him deeper, doing something amazing with his throat muscles that made Ryan groan involuntarily.

Despite his best intentions, Tom's cock slipped from Ryan's mouth. He was completely taken over by whatever it was the professor was doing with his mouth. "Jesus," Ryan moaned. "What the fuck...oh..."

Lips, tongue, throat muscles, fingers all moved in tandem, rendering Ryan utterly and completely at the mercy of the older man. Ryan tried to reach for Tom, to suck and stroke him in return, but found he was paralyzed with pleasure. He meant to pull back, to give Tom the option of swallowing or not, but he was powerless against Tom's relentless kiss. Tom didn't stop until Ryan was shaking, his body jerking in convulsive spasms of ecstasy.

Ryan drifted in and out of consciousness, floating on an orgasmic high as his body recovered itself. When he could finally catch his breath, he said, "That was incredible. I feel like my whole body came, not just my cock. My fingers, my toes, my hair, the backs of my knees. When I can move, I really want to return the favor. Or try anyway." Forcing his muscles to cooperate, Ryan leaned forward, seeking Tom's cock with an open mouth.

Tom pulled away, his erect shaft bobbing. "I have a better idea." Tom reached for his night table, pulling open the drawer. He withdrew a condom and held it out, a question on his face. "You ready for me?"

Ryan nodded eagerly and rolled to his side, sticking out his ass in clear invitation. "Yeah. I need to feel you inside me." Though he still felt like a ragdoll, his nerve

endings tingled with expectation. He twisted back to watch Tom pull the condom onto his cock and smear lubricant over the head.

Tom lowered himself quickly beside Ryan. He used his fingers first, gently opening Ryan's passage. "Jesus, I want you," Tom murmured, his voice nearly a whisper. When he replaced his fingers with the fat head of his cock, Ryan pushed back against the welcome invasion, savoring the fullness as Tom eased his way inside.

They moved in tandem, undulating together as Tom increased the tempo. He wrapped his arms around Ryan, holding him tight as he thrust inside him. Ryan felt full and safe, wrapped in this man's arms. In a way it was as if he'd been waiting all these years for this one moment. Closing his eyes, he pressed back against Tom's body, taking him in as deep as he could.

Though it felt wonderful, one particularly hard thrust caused Ryan to open his eyes. They focused on a framed photograph on the bureau of Tom standing arm-in-arm with a handsome dark-skinned man with a dazzling smile.

Ryan caught his breath. No significant other, so what was this? By the expressions on their faces and the way they were standing, it was clear these men were far more than friends. The ring he'd seen on Tom's finger. Had this man placed it there?

After a moment, Tom slowed his pace. "Hey," he murmured, nuzzling against Ryan's neck. "Where'd you go?"

"What?"

"You went all stiff on me. Is something the matter?"

"No, no," Ryan lied. They were too new for him to ask about the picture, especially not now. Maybe later. Maybe Tom would volunteer the answer.

Tom's hand curled around Ryan's shaft, stroking it as he again began to swivel and thrust inside him. "Good. I want your full attention, young man. There'll be a quiz after." He continued to stroke Ryan's cock while he fucked him, until every thought was dispelled from Ryan's overactive mind, his body taking over yet again as they careened together toward orgasm.

~*~

"You asleep?" Ryan asked softly, in case he was.

At some point Tom must have gotten up and turned off the light and pulled the covers over them. They were curled together in the bed like a quotation mark. "Hmmm," Tom murmured sleepily.

"Sorry," Ryan said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, that's okay." Tom rolled onto his back, pulling Ryan toward him.

Ryan had been lying awake for a while, staring at the picture on Tom's bureau, now softly lit by the moonlight streaming through the gauzy curtains at the window. "Who is that? In the picture?"

He had to know, even if it meant ruining whatever the hell it was they had going now. Tom didn't answer right away. He lay still, his arm loosely over Ryan's back. Ryan, his cheek against Tom's chest, could hear the steady, slow thump of his heart.

"William," he finally said. "That's William."

"William." Ryan repeated, tensing. Was Tom involved after all? Had he taken Ryan so readily into his bed, while still in love with another man? Ryan couldn't reconcile this with the man he'd been with tonight. What the hell was going on?

"He died five years ago of bone cancer."

The words hit Ryan like a blow. "I'm so sorry." Whatever he'd been expecting, that wasn't it. Impulsively he reached for Tom's hand. As he stroked it, he felt the ring on Tom's finger. "Did he give you this ring?"

"Yeah. He had one like it. I wear it in memory of him." Tom said nothing more for a while.

Ryan felt like an ass, recalling his own earlier glib remark about Tom not being any better at finding love than he had been. What must it be like, to find the love of your life, and then lose him to cancer? Would it be possible to love again?

As if listening in on Ryan's thoughts, Tom said, "It was a long while before I was ready to date again. We were together for four years before he got sick. Watching someone go through that, it's not something you get over in a hurry. He suffered a lot toward the end. But I wouldn't have traded a second of my time with him. Not one."

"Man," Ryan said. "I don't know if I could deal with that."

"Believe it or not, time does help to heal the pain, even that kind of pain. It's about hope, Ryan. Life's not a paragraph. Love keeps the story going."

"Man, I'm really sorry."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm good. Life is good." Tom stroked Ryan's hair. They were both quiet for a long while.

"Sleep," Tom eventually whispered, and he did.

~*~

"Oh, wow, a parking place right in front. That never happens." Ryan maneuvered his bright red Porsche into place by the curb in front of his Brooklyn apartment house.

After a leisurely bout of lovemaking in bed early that morning, they'd roused to shower and have some hot coffee. Tom was expecting Ryan to say his goodbyes at that point. In his experience, younger guys like Ryan tended to like to get away for a while after a first night's intimacy. They needed time to "process the experience." Tom knew better than to protest, even though he would have loved to take Ryan right back to bed.

Thus, he was surprised but pleased when Ryan suggested they spend the day together, if he had the time. They would go to breakfast and then maybe work out or just relax in the sauna at Ryan's club. After that, they would play it by ear.

"If you've got the time, that is," Ryan said. Tom, who hadn't dated much since William's passing, had nothing but time, though again, he kept this to himself.

As they'd made the drive from New Jersey to the city, Ryan had explained that his car was his one self-indulgence. In order to afford it, he lived in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn and took the subway in to work each day, his car safely ensconced in a manned garage. He took out his baby, as he called it, on the weekends, or for special trips like the one he'd made the night before to Rutgers.

"You sure it's okay to leave this fancy car by the curb?" Tom asked with a grin.

Ryan nodded. "Sure. It'll be fine. I'll just grab my gym things and be right down. You can wait here and keep her safe."

"Sounds like a plan."

The engine still running, Ryan hopped out and let himself into his place. A man stepped out from a nearby doorway, a hat pulled low over his face. He seemed to be moving toward Ryan's car with a purposeful stride, but veered away at the last minute, heading off in the other direction. A young woman with two small children in tow hurried past.

Just as Tom began fiddling with the radio, Ryan opened the driver door, letting in a whoosh of cold air. He'd changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and wore a black leather jacket. Tom, who had put on wool slacks and a cashmere sweater that morning, suddenly felt overdressed.

Ryan tossed his gym bag onto the backseat beside Tom's. When he put his hand on Tom's thigh and squeezed, Tom forgot his momentary discomfort.

"So I want to take you to this great little place not far from here that makes the most amazing omelets. Then, if you're still in the mood, we can head over to the gym and relax in the hot tub or sauna awhile before coming back to my place." He increased the pressure on Tom's thigh and gave him a meaningful smile.

Tom wouldn't have minded dispensing with both breakfast and the sauna, but didn't want to seem like a horny old bastard, and so simply nodded his agreement. It was about more than just the hot sex, though that had been terrific. What had made the time with Ryan so unusual, he realized, was that it was the first time since William that Tom had actually gotten out of his own head, at least for a while.

With every other guy since William, even during the act of sex itself, it was as if William were perching just behind his shoulder, watching the proceedings with that all-knowing smile he'd had. But he'd slipped away this time, at least until Ryan had brought up the photograph.

Tom hadn't been expecting company, but even if he had, would he have hidden the picture of William? In retrospect, it probably would have been better to tell Ryan beforehand, but he wasn't sorry Ryan had seen it and asked about it. It was better that Ryan knew up front about William, if they were going to start something real.

Something real... Was he really considering something with this young guy? Was the age gap just too wide? And even if they could work past that, was he ready for the complications a relationship would bring?

Listen to him, talking about a relationship, for heaven's sake. Everything was so new, he chided himself. One day at a time. No grand plans needed to be made—he would just see how things played out.

Ryan parked at the back of the lot, as far from the other cars as possible. The restaurant was small and upscale, with plush chairs and linen tablecloths. Tom realized he'd been expecting a dive, something a student would take him to. But Ryan, driving his Porsche and practicing law in Manhattan, had clearly come a long way since those days.

Tom was just taking his second bite of a perfectly cooked Greek omelet when Ryan tensed beside him. "Shit."

"What is it?"

"That's Richard Bangert over there. He runs a string of chemical plants in north Jersey. We're in the middle of litigation against him because of alleged high levels of mercury, PCBs and other chemicals that are causing an unsafe environment for his workers. We just got his biggest factory temporarily closed down due to defective equipment, leaks and poor site management. The guy is not a happy camper, and of course he's appealing it."

"Sounds like he should be in jail, not at breakfast," Tom observed, eyeing the heavysset, sixty-something man with distaste.

"He's been fined big time, but this thing'll be around for years. He made a few veiled threats at the courthouse the other day. I wouldn't be surprised if he collects his debts with brass knuckles and baseball bats in back alleys. He's a real class act." Ryan shook his head. "At least he's stopped actively poisoning his employees."

As if on cue, the man they'd been staring at turned his head toward them, pursing his lips and frowning as he stared hard at Ryan. "Man, Ryan," Tom said. "I never really thought about environmental law as being dangerous, but that guy looks like he wants to kill you."

Ryan laughed and shrugged. "He's a punk. He knows if he tries anything, we'll bring down the full force of the law on him. Unfortunately, he has very deep pockets. Even if we succeed in shutting down all his operations in New Jersey, he'll probably just move on and find a new place to pollute. It's a lot cheaper than getting his sites up to code."

After breakfast, they drove to Ryan's gym, a high tech affair filled with the latest equipment and flat screen TVs. It seemed to Tom that every guy in there could have entered a Mr. Universe contest. Tom never set foot in a gym. He preferred the solitary challenge of running, which he still managed most mornings, even in winter. Nevertheless, the thought of sitting naked in a sauna with Ryan and a bunch of young muscle-bound studs did not especially appeal.

"Let's do the hot tub," he suggested, as they put their bags into lockers.

"Sounds good," Ryan agreed.

They had one of the three hot tubs set into the floor beside the swimming pool to themselves. Once they'd eased their way into the heat, Ryan leaned back, putting his arms out along the perimeter of the tub and closing his eyes. He heaved a contented sigh.

Tom watched him, admiring his strong young body, with his broad, muscular shoulders and smooth chest, the skin turning rosy in the steaming water. He wanted to lean over and kiss his new young lover. He wanted to lick his way down Ryan's chest and keep on going. Of course he did no such thing, instead leaning back and letting the jet streams pummel his back and shoulders.

When he opened his eyes, he noticed a tall, very muscular man in a Speedo who looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties standing by the pool's edge, staring hard directly at them. Tom trained his gaze on the man's face, assuming once they made eye contact the guy would look away. But he didn't. If anything, his gaze became more intense.

"Someone's staring at us," Tom remarked, his eyes still on the man.

Ryan sat up and looked. Lying back quickly, he groaned.

"What is it?"

"That's Kurt. Kurt Engle, the guy I was telling you about. The one I filed a restraining order against."

"I thought he wasn't allowed to be around you. Does he have to leave now?"

"No, it's not a specific distance order. He's not allowed to approach me or my property, but in a public place, as long as he doesn't try to speak to me, he's not in violation."

Kurt continued to stare at them, a scowl on his handsome face. He was solidly built, with broad shoulders and legs as thick as tree trunks. A moment later another man, shorter and darker, appeared beside Kurt, also in a bathing suit, a towel over his shoulder.

"Looks like he's got a new boyfriend," Tom offered.

"Thank god for small favors," Ryan replied, his eyes still closed. Tom watched as the other man pulled on Kurt's arm, gesturing toward the pool. Kurt shook off the man's hand, continuing to stare back at them, making Tom feel very uncomfortable indeed.

He relaxed some when the two guys entered the pool and began to swim, but after only a few laps, Ryan's ex climbed out and grabbed his towel, heading for the locker room.

"Hey," Kurt's companion called after him, but Kurt didn't turn around.

"Uh oh," Tom observed. "Trouble in paradise."

"Ignore them," Ryan said, reaching beneath the water to find and cup Tom's package. "Want to get out of here?" he murmured, as he stroked Tom to erection beneath the frothing water.

"I thought you'd never ask."

~*~

It had started to snow by the time they'd left the gym. Ryan started to bypass his street, heading toward the garage two blocks over where he kept his car stored, but he could see the open space in front of his building. On an impulse, he turned down his street.

"Twice in one day – it's too good to pass up." Ryan eased into the spot and shut off the ignition.

"You sure? I don't mind walking."

"Nah, it's okay. It's a weekend – it should be fine. I'll drive it down later."

"Okay, you convinced me." They walked toward Ryan's front door. Tom followed Ryan down the short flight of stairs and waited while he unlocked the door, relieved when, for once, it opened without a fight.

"I have to warn you, all the money went to the car, not the apartment." Ryan felt a moment's qualm at the thought of Tom seeing his cramped, inelegant place. While he kept it neat, he'd done little to make it a home. Odd, until this moment, that had never seemed to matter.

Once inside, Ryan forgot his insecurity. Without even glancing around, Tom pushed him against the door, pressing his knee between Ryan's legs while he pinned him by the mouth and shoulders. When they finally came up for air, Ryan's cock was rock hard, his balls tight.

He reached for Tom and swiveled, so that it was Tom who was now pressed against the door. Before Tom could say a word, Ryan fell to his knees. Eagerly he pulled at Tom's fly, reaching inside.

"I have to taste you," he murmured, in a conscious imitation of Tom's words the night before. Tom moaned as Ryan closed his lips over Tom's cock. Ryan slipped his hand inside the leg of Tom's boxers, cupping his heavy, hot balls while he sucked Tom's cock. Ryan couldn't get enough as he bobbed and licked, taking the whole shaft down his throat for long seconds before sliding slowly back, his lips and tongue dancing over the hot, silky flesh.

It wasn't long before Tom leaned forward, gripping hard on Ryan's shoulders. Just as Ryan felt the convulsive spasms of Tom's impending orgasm, Tom tried to pull away, but Ryan held on. He reached for Tom's ass, his mouth locked on Tom's cock, leaving no doubt as to his intentions.

"Ryan," Tom breathed, as he released his seed in warm jets against the back of Ryan's throat.

Only when he was certain Tom was done did Ryan pull back, licking his lips as he smiled up at the sexy older man.

"Man, you're going to kill me!" Tom laughed. "I'm too old for all this sex."

"Yeah, tell me another lie," Ryan teased, as he stood, wrapping his arms around Tom.

"No, really." Tom grinned. "I'm now in desperate need of a nap."

"No problem. I've got a bed. Come, I'll show you." Ryan did his best imitation of an innocent grin.

Tom stared down at the bulge in Ryan's jeans, his tongue appearing on his lower lip. "On second thought, I'm really not that tired."

~*~

They came out of Ryan's apartment together, Ryan leading the way, Tom just behind with his hand resting lightly on Ryan's lower back. Ryan couldn't remember feeling so calm and so excited all at once with someone new. And to think, this man had been just one state over, all this time. Why had they waited so long to reconnect?

The snow had stopped, only a dusting of it sticking to the car. As they came out onto the sidewalk, Ryan saw immediately something was wrong with Porsche. "What the..." Ryan stopped abruptly, causing Tom to bump him from behind.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

Ryan walked quickly around the car, his worst fears confirmed. All four tires were flat. Ryan actually felt his knees about to buckle. For a moment he thought he might be sick.

Taking it in, Tom gave a low whistle. "Whoa. Those have been slashed."

Ryan tried to draw a steadying breath. *Calm down*, he told himself. *Tires are replaceable. It's not the end of the world. Just some damn kids.*

"Hey, there's something on the windshield." Tom moved toward the bit of folded paper tucked beneath the wiper. He handed the unopened note to Ryan.

Ryan unfolded it carefully, quickly scanning the page. In block letters, it read: STOP MESSING AROUND WHERE YOU DON'T BELONG OR YOU WILL PAY.

Shocked and confused, Ryan read it a second time before lifting his eyes to meet Tom's.

"What? What's it say?"

Wordlessly, Ryan handed the page to Tom. Tom read it and looked up, Ryan's confusion mirrored on his face. "You piss somebody off around here, Ryan? Have you had problems like this before?"

"No. Never." Ryan shook his head in disbelief.

"Could it be some kind of gay bashing bullshit?"

"God, do you think that's what it is? Or maybe some asshole got me mixed up with someone else."

"Someone else with a car like this? I hate to say it, Ryan, but that seems pretty unlikely."

"Fuck." Ryan swore softly. "I wonder if anyone saw anything." He bent down to touch the serrated tear where one of the tires had been cut, his mind whirling.

Tom glanced at his watch. "It's not too late yet, garages should still be open. Do you have someone local who can tow it?"

Ryan thought a moment. "Jack Harris, a friend of mine from the pub. He's got a repair shop not too far from here. I've got his number."

"Good. Give him a call, and then we should report this to the police."

Ryan nodded, shock now giving way to anger. He accessed Jack's number from his cell phone address book and hit the send key. Who the fuck would do this? Was it really a hate crime, or was this something more personal, something directed specifically at him?

He explained the situation to Jack, leaving out the note, and gave him his address. He had to hold the phone away from his ear as Jack's big voice boomed out. "I'll come over myself. Your Porsche, huh? What the hell you doing, parking that baby on the street? You out of your mind?"

Ryan glanced over at Tom, for a moment irrationally assigning the blame to him. If he'd been alone, he would never have left his car there. Aware this was ridiculous and unworthy of himself, Ryan quashed the feeling. "Evidently," he said drily to Jack. "Thanks for helping me out. I really appreciate it."

"Anything for a fellow knight," Jack quipped, and hung up.

"Want me to call the police for you?" Tom asked. Ryan nodded, glad again that Tom was there. He watched while Tom placed the call and gave them the specifics. "They'll be here in about ten minutes."

"Thanks." Ryan felt a little better. At least they were taking some action, though that didn't solve the mystery of who had done this, or why. He turned back to the car, his baby, and suppressed a groan.

Jack arrived a few minutes later, double parking his tow truck and jumping down from the cab. As he always did, Jack seemed to take up more space than normal people. It wasn't that he was especially big or tall, but something about him conveyed a presence that demanded, and got, attention.

"This is Jack Harris," Ryan said to Tom. "Jack, this is Tom Shafer, an old friend of mine." The two men shook hands. Jack was wearing a denim work shirt over a black T-shirt. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the elbow, revealing forearms covered in tattoos. He had dark hair, closely cropped, and several days' dark stubble on his cheeks.

"A friend, eh?" Jack looked Tom up and down with a leering grin. "Just a friend?" His voice dripped with innuendo. Ryan resisted the impulse to tell him to back off. He knew Jack was a horn dog, who liked to brag that he fucked his way through life, leaving at the first sign of attachment.

Ryan had always quietly admired Jack's ability to keep his heart completely out of the picture. He envied Jack's ability to move from one man to the next without a care.

But now, looking at Tom and feeling the warm clutch in his heart, Ryan was no longer so sure that being impervious to love was the best way to go.

"A *very* good friend," Tom responded, moving to put his arm around Ryan's shoulders.

Jack laughed good-naturedly and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, okay. Never hurts to check." He grinned.

Turning to the car, he knelt, examining a tire. "These are history," he remarked. "I don't have the right tires in stock right now and tomorrow's Sunday..." He paused and then brightened. "Wait a minute. You can have Marcos' tires."

"What?" Marcos, another member of the Solitary Knights, also owned a Porsche. It was something he and Ryan had in common, and the one thing they talked about, when they talked at all. Marcos was rather stiff, so it seemed to Ryan, and Ryan actually enjoyed watching Jack tease him, which he did relentlessly during the club meetings.

"Yeah. His Pirelli P Zeros just came in. They would be perfect for your baby. Better than what you've got now, and they don't cost any more than these. He was supposed to bring his car in on Monday, but he can wait a few days until I reorder."

"You sure he'll be okay with that? I mean, if he's expecting them and all..."

"Well, he'll just have to be, won't he? Don't worry, I can handle Marcos Savakis. He'll do what I say, and he'll like it." Jack laughed and winked. Ryan just shook his head, but he couldn't deny he'd be glad to have new tires right away.

The police arrived. Tom and Ryan gave their report while Jack got the car loaded on the truck bed. The police eyed them both skeptically, or so it seemed to Ryan, but were otherwise professional. They took the note with them and advised Ryan to report any further misdeeds, which he assured them he would.

"I've got a rush job I have to finish by day's end, but worst case, I'll have your car ready first thing in the morning."

"Thanks, Jack. I owe you big time."

"That you do. Don't worry, I'll take it out in flesh." Laughing, Jack climbed into the cab of his truck and drove away, Ryan's car in tow.

They returned to Ryan's apartment. Ryan was careful to lock the door. He no longer felt safe in his own home, he realized. Who wrote that god damned note, and why?

Ryan opened two beers and they settled on the living room sofa. "You know, I was thinking," Tom said. "Maybe this isn't a hate crime. Maybe it's about your law practice? That guy at the diner, the thug. Would he be capable of something like this?"

"That occurred to me, too, though we're pretty careful about keeping our private information private. I suppose if he dug around persistently enough, he could find out where I lived. But why bother? What is threatening a junior attorney on the case going to accomplish?"

"I don't know," Tom replied, taking a long drink of his beer. "Maybe the police will find something. Meanwhile, how about we order a pizza and stay in. I'll do my very best to distract you from whatever the hell is going on."

Ryan looked at the handsome older man, and, despite his worries, found himself smiling. "That," he said, leaning toward Tom, "is an excellent idea."

~*~

The next morning, even though it was Sunday, Ryan's friend Jack came through. Ryan and Tom walked the several long blocks to Jack's shop, which felt good, since Tom had missed his early morning jog.

Once back inside Ryan's car, Ryan said, "I'll give you a ride home."

"Great."

Ryan was considerably more relaxed on the drive back, Tom was pleased to note. The night before, Ryan had remained skittish and anxious. Despite his stated willingness to be distracted, Ryan hadn't been especially responsive to Tom's attempts to engage him sexually.

Tom told himself it was just a case of nerves, and not the belated realization that Tom was nearly fifty and way too old for Ryan. With as much grace as he could muster he accepted Ryan's suggestion that they watch old movies in bed and then sleep, just sleep.

Tom had Ryan park in the garage, pulling his old Toyota Corolla to the street. Once inside the house, Ryan put his arms around Tom and leaned into him, nuzzling against his neck. "Sorry I was such a wet rag last night. I'm feeling better. I guess I should consider myself lucky all they damaged was the tires."

"Yeah," Tom agreed, though he remained worried about the note. No point in distressing Ryan with more speculation, however, and so he kept his silence on the matter.

Making up for their celibacy the night before, they made love on Tom's bed, giving each other oral pleasure. Tom was ready for more, but Ryan crashed out on him, falling asleep nearly instantly after his orgasm.

Amused that an old guy had more staying power than his young lover, Tom went out to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. When he checked in on Ryan a few minutes later, he was still out like a light. The room was chilly, and Tom drew the quilt up over him.

He went out back to split some wood for his fireplace. The physical exercise always helped to clear his mind. Tom took off his watch and ring, leaving them in the empty flower pot that hung on the low patio fence, waiting for that "someday" when he started gardening again.

Ax in hand, Tom walked to the back of the property, where he'd stacked a pile of seasoned wood earlier in the season. Though the day was chilly, he worked up a bit of a sweat, and had a nice stack of split wood within the hour. He was nearly done when the sound of something crashing and breaking against stone made him look up sharply.

Dropping the ax, Tom raced back toward the patio. The flower pot was in pieces on the ground, his watch lying amid the shards of ceramic. He heard the sound of a car pulling sharply away, its tires squealing against the asphalt.

Gingerly he picked up the watch from among the sharp pieces of broken pottery. The crystal was smashed, almost as if someone had taken a hammer to it. Tom surveyed the mess.

The ring.

Where was his ring?

Kneeling down on the cold paving stones, he scanned slowly, looking for the glint of silver. It was nowhere to be seen. He stood, moving toward the dead grass and mud that passed as his backyard during that time of year, searching for the ring for several minutes. Again, it was nowhere to be found.

He returned to the patio, retrieving a broom and dustpan he kept just inside the backdoor. He swept the shards into the pan, looking all the while for William's ring, to no avail. He noticed a folded piece of paper among the mess and swept it into the pan as well.

Returning to the kitchen, he carefully dumped the contents into the trash, but retrieved the note, his heart thumping in unpleasant anticipation.

IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU, YOU'LL LEAVE THE KID ALONE, OLD MAN. I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE.

The page shook, and Tom realized his hand was trembling, not with fear, but with anger. What the hell was going on? Recalling the squealing car tires, Tom raced through the house to the front door, which he pulled open. Though he knew he was too late, he stared up and down the street, even now ready, eager, to confront the offender. But the street was empty and quiet, peaceful in its usual Sunday morning stillness.

Tom strode purposefully into the bedroom. "Ryan, wake up."

"Mmmm," Ryan mumbled, not opening his eyes.

Tom sat on the side of the bed and shook his shoulder. "Wake up, there's been another note. And they smashed my watch. My ring is missing. William's ring is gone. I was out back, chopping wood. Whoever it was, they smashed my flowerpot, took the ring and left a note in its place."

Ryan sat up, his eyes now wide open. "What?"

Tom stroked his finger, which felt naked without its silver band. William's ring, the ring he wore in memory of the one man he'd ever truly loved. Was it merely lost in the grass, or did the asshole who left the note take it? God damn it, what kind of sordid intrigue had Ryan got him embroiled in?

"What haven't you told me, Ryan?" Tom demanded. "What the hell's going on? Who's threatening you and why?" He thrust the paper toward Ryan, aware even as he did so that he wasn't being fair.

Ryan read the note and dropped it as if it burned his fingers. "I don't know, I swear. I know as much as you do."

"Yeah, well, now I'm being threatened too. My personal property has been destroyed and maybe stolen. I've been ordered to stop seeing you. I don't want to do that. But I have to know what's going on."

"I told you, I don't know." Ryan dropped his head into his hands, running his fingers through his silky blond hair.

"My ring," Tom persisted, not able to let it drop. "I have to find it. It's not like tires – something easily replaced –"

"Look, I'm sorry about your ring. I'm sorry about this whole thing. I don't know what's going on. Maybe it's a sign I'm not supposed to be involved with anyone. You're probably better off doing as the note says."

"Is that what you want? You gonna turn and run, the second the going gets tough?" Tom snapped. Aware he was being unfair, Tom couldn't seem to stop himself. It was because of the ring, damn it. The ring had made it personal. William's ring, lost, possibly forever, because of Ryan's screwed up past or shady dealings.

Aware he was doing nothing to help matters, Tom found himself saying, "Whatever's going on, it's clear this doesn't have anything directly to do with *me*. But now, whoever did this knows where I live. Damn it, I'm a professor at a university. I can't have this kind of dark intrigue shit going on in my life."

"You're right," Ryan snapped, fury in his tone. "Whatever's going on, we can't have it staining your pristine reputation at Rutgers." Ryan jumped up from the bed and began to pull on his jeans. He grabbed his sweater, pulling it over his head. "I'll see myself out. Don't forget to close the garage after I leave. Though, since I'm the problem, you should be fine once I'm gone."

All Tom's irrational, misplaced anger toward Ryan fell away. "Wait! Don't go, Ryan. I was being an ass. I'm sorry. Please..." He followed Ryan, who had left the room and was walking quickly through the house, grabbing his coat as he went.

"Ryan, let's talk this –" The door to the garage slammed shut. A moment later Tom heard the whirring clunk of the electric garage door slowly opening, and the purr of Ryan's car engine. He sank to the kitchen table, dropping his head in his hands.

~*~

"Who is it? Who's there?" Someone was knocking sharply at his door. For a moment, Ryan was swept back to three years before, that old, familiar helpless knot of fear forming in his gut. But it couldn't be him – not after all this time. He shook the thought away, rejecting it.

After a sleepless Sunday night, Ryan had spent a miserable Monday going through the motions at work. He wanted to call Tom, but at the same time, he remained angry at the way Tom had acted as if whatever was going on was his fault.

It just figured, didn't it? For the first time in ages, maybe for the first time ever, he'd thought he'd found someone he might really have a chance with. So much for that. The first hint of trouble, and Tom had behaved like a different man. Who needed a guy like that anyway – someone still so hung up on his dead lover that he freaked out over a piece of jewelry, worrying more about that than their potential safety.

The doorknob rattled. Ryan switched off the TV and stood, moving toward the door. "Who is it?" he called again, his nerves on edge. He reached into his pocket, feeling for his cell, ready to call 9-1-1 if necessary.

"It's me, Tom. Please, Ryan. Can I come in?"

Ryan peeked through the hole, just to make sure. He unlocked the door and stepped back, letting Tom enter, not sure just exactly how he felt about seeing him.

Tom stood on the stoop, his hands shoved in his pockets, a sad smile on his face. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I've behaved like a total fool. I way overreacted back at my place. I hope you can forgive me. It's been so long since anything mattered enough. Whatever's going on, I want to be there for you. For us. I don't want to mess this up."

Ryan stepped back to let him inside, still hurt, but hopeful. "I don't either, Tom. I'm glad you came over."

Tom opened his arms and Ryan moved into them. Taking Ryan's face in his hands, he kissed him hard on the mouth. Ryan leaned into him, wrapping his arms tight around Tom. Their bodies just seemed to fit. For the first time since the morning before, Ryan's muscles uncoiled and he leaned heavily against Tom, losing himself, at least for a moment, in their kiss.

When Tom at last let him go, he stepped back, his dark eyes focused on Ryan. "I don't want to throw away what we're building here. We do that, Ryan, and he wins. Whoever is doing this wins."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. He reached for Tom, pulling him close again, needing another kiss, aching for the warm press of Tom's body.

When they separated again, Tom said, "I came straight here from the university. I had to see you, to apologize face-to-face. I didn't even stop to eat. How about you, have you eaten?"

"No. I wasn't hungry. I could probably go for something now, though. There's a little Italian place around the corner that's good and fast. Want to go there?"

"Sure." Tom smiled. "We can hash this through over dinner. Figure out what we're dealing with."

Over lasagna, hot fresh bread and Italian red wine, they talked, tossing around theories about who might be doing this, and why. "One of the guys on the legal team has dealt extensively with Bangert in prior litigation. I should check with him to see if Bangert's pulled any stunts like this before."

Tom shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't think so. That first note, maybe. But this second one, it's personal. I'm thinking it could be your ex. I've had some experience

myself with this kind of thing. It's a classic ploy by a controlling lover or ex-lover. Especially someone like Kurt, who's been limited by the law in his interaction with you. He doesn't dare threaten you directly, but these anonymous notes and random acts of vandalism—they can't be pinned directly on him."

Goose bumps rose on Ryan's flesh. *I'll never let you go, not ever. Someday, somehow, when you least expect it, I'll reclaim what's mine.* The words he'd banished from his consciousness when he'd made the final break with Kurt came unbidden and unwelcome into his mind, and he knew in his gut Tom was right.

"But what's the point?" he asked. "What does he hope to accomplish by threatening you? And it's not like he's going to win me back by slashing my tires."

"Guys like that don't think along rational lines. I'm guessing it's more like, 'If I can't have him, no one can'."

"I'll go back to the court," Ryan said, slamming his fist on the table. "I'll go to the police again." He looked around the restaurant, scanning the faces of the other patrons. Maybe Kurt was there now, watching, furtively planning his next move. Or maybe he was back at Ryan's place, plotting a way to break in and destroy the place.

"Let's get out of here," Ryan said, dropping his napkin on the table and pushing back his chair. "We'll take the back way home. It's quicker."

It was dark out, whatever moon there was obscured by clouds. The alley they walked along was lit only by the ambient light from people's windows. Almost as soon they began walking, Ryan heard the sound of footsteps clattering behind them.

"What's that?" he said, stopping to listen. The footsteps stopped too. Ryan jumped at the sound of some kind of club or bat slamming into a trashcan, which toppled and rolled somewhere just behind them.

"Come on." Ryan grabbed Tom's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"Ryan, if it's Kurt, let's just face him head on and deal with this thing."

"And if it's not? If it's muggers or some street gang bullshit? You want to face that head on too?"

Another trashcan clanged and they began to walk, much faster now. The sound of footsteps resumed behind them, coming closer.

By mutual, silent accord, Tom and Ryan began to run.

"That's right, run!" Someone shouted behind them. "Run, old man! You got no business with that pretty boy. Run, run, as fast as you can." There was laughter, punctuated by more clanging metal.

Once safely back in his apartment, Ryan said, "That wasn't Kurt's voice in the alley."

"But whoever it was, he wasn't alone," Tom said. "If it was Kurt, he could have put someone else up to doing this with him. That kid he was with at the gym, maybe."

"God, I can't believe this is happening. Running scared in my own damn neighborhood. This has got to stop." They were sitting side by side on the sofa. Ryan

turned to Tom, hating what he was about to say, but feeling like he had to at least give Tom the out.

"Look. I'm really sorry all this has happened. And I want you to know, I totally understand if you want to give this a break. At least until I can get whatever is going on sorted out. Like you said, you've got your reputation and —"

"No, stop. I'm sorry I said that crap. Please. I don't want to run away. Whatever's going on, we'll face it together. No more running and hiding. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Relief flooded Ryan. No matter what issues each had with his past, Ryan wanted Tom in his present. He wanted the chance at least, to give their budding relationship a try.

"Thanks," he whispered, hoping his gratitude was sufficiently conveyed in that one word.

"You bet." Tom smiled, the skin around his eyes crinkling at the corners. He sobered as he added, "Now, we have to decide what to do about my car. It's parked down the street, but the odds are good that asshole knows it's mine. Let's not give him a chance to slash *my* tires." He looked at his wrist, where his watch should have been, and offered a rueful grin. "I should probably get going anyway. I have an eight o'clock class to teach tomorrow."

"Would it be okay," Ryan paused, feeling stupid and angry at himself that he was letting old feelings, feelings he'd thought he'd mastered, get the better of him. Surely he was man enough to stay at his own place. It wasn't like Kurt would try to break and enter, and even if he did, Ryan could just call the cops.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing."

Tom searched his face. "What? You can tell me. Come on."

"Well, I was just wondering, maybe I could follow you back to your place. That thing in the alley kind of freaked me out. I just — I just don't want to be alone tonight."

Tom reached for Ryan, pulling him into his arms and answering him with his kiss.

~*~

Tom glanced up at the heavy clouds as he walked from his front door to his car, which he'd parked on the street again so Ryan could protect his fancy Porsche from the elements. Ryan had left an hour before to beat the traffic into the city.

Tom climbed into the front seat of his old clunker and put the key in the ignition. The hair on the back of his neck rose and he knew something was wrong, the split second before he felt something very sharp poking hard against the back of his neck.

"Move and I'll kill you." The voice from the back seat was low and mean, and Tom knew instinctively who it was. How had Ryan ever gotten mixed up with this guy?

"What do you want?" Tom tried to keep his voice steady, wondering how he could reach for his phone without being observed.

"I want you to drive. To Ocean Grove, to be precise. It's on the shore, near Asbury Park. Get on Route 18, heading south. I'll give you more specific directions when we get closer. First, give me your cell phone."

Tom hesitated, trying to think his way out of this, the knife point still pressed hard against his skin. Without turning around, he said in a calm voice, "What're you doing, Kurt? What do you hope to accomplish with all this?"

"So you figured it out, huh? Smart guy. Don't think Ryan'll be impressed. He likes strong guys, like me. Whatever he's doing with you, it won't last. God only knows why he's hanging around with an old man. Good thing I'm back in town to set him straight. Now give me the fucking phone." To emphasis his point, he pushed the tip of the knife harder, and Tom flinched with pain as it punctured his skin. He could feel a trickle of blood down his neck.

"The phone, asshole."

His mind churning, Tom reached for his phone from the inner pocket of his jacket and tossed it behind him.

"Good grandpa. Now drive."

~*~

Ryan's cell phone vibrated, activating his Bluetooth. He glanced at the phone beside him and smiled. "Tom. I'm glad you called. I'm still stuck in traffic on the way into the city, but I spoke to the police again and —"

"The police, huh? What're you wasting their time for?"

Ryan's blood froze. He'd know that voice anywhere, though he'd done his best to forget it. "Kurt."

"One and the same."

"You're violating your restraining order. I can press charges."

"Nah. I'm using Tom's phone, so it doesn't count."

Don't panic. "Why are you on Tom's phone? Where is he?"

"He's right here. Say hi, old man."

There was a pause and then, "Hi."

"Tom! Are you okay? What's he doing? What's happened? Where are you?" Ryan gripped the steering wheel hard, his stomach clenching with fear. He pulled over to the side of the road, desperately trying to remain calm.

"Sorry, babe. He can't talk right now. He's busy driving. You wouldn't want him to get a ticket, now would you?"

"Kurt, what the hell is going on? What do you think you're doing?"

"Relax. None of this would be happening if you'd just listened to me. I told you to lay off the old guy, but for some reason, you've got it in your head that he's better than me. You just don't listen, Ryan. That was always your problem, you don't fucking *listen*."

Ryan closed his eyes, unwelcome memories of Kurt's fist in his stomach, Kurt's raised hand moving fast toward his jaw as he said those hateful words — *you just don't listen*. He'd been too ashamed to admit to Tom the extent of what he'd tolerated at the hands of another man. Tom wouldn't want anything to do with him, once he knew.

But that couldn't be helped. He had to get Tom out of this mess — that was all that mattered. "What is it you want, Kurt?" He tried to speak in a nonthreatening way, though his guts were roiling with rage.

"I want you to meet me at that Harbor Lodge place. You know that inn, in Ocean Grove, where we used to go back when we were happy, before you had to ruin everything."

"Ocean Grove." Ryan cut him off. "Is that where you are now?"

"That's where we're headed. Meet us at the bridge behind the inn. How long till you can get there?"

Ryan glanced at the car clock and did some quick mental calculations of the route he'd need to take to make the best time. "Maybe an hour. Possibly less since I'll be going against traffic."

"We'll be there sooner than that. You better show up, or this old man is going to be taking an involuntary swim." The connection went dead.

Ryan eased back into traffic, his heart hammering a mile a minute. "Let him be safe, let him be safe," he whispered. Once heading in the right direction, he called 9-1-1.

He tried to explain what was happening. The person on the other end couldn't seem to grasp what he was saying. Ryan tried to think what kind of car Tom drove. "It's black. A black Toyota, maybe ten years old. I don't know. No, I don't know the model. It's owned by Thomas Shafer, a professor at Rutgers University. He lives in New Brunswick, near the campus. No, I'm sorry, I don't know the address. No, I'm not sure where they are right now, but they're headed to Ocean Grove, New Jersey. No, don't connect me to the New Jersey police, please, I —"

Once connected with a new person, he tried again, explaining what was happening and who he was. "New York? I'm sorry, sir, you have the New Jersey police..." He tried once more, his voice rising as hysteria threatened to burst its way through. Finally he got someone on the line who seemed to understand what he was saying. "We'll get someone out to the Harbor Lodge Inn right away, sir."

"Thanks. I'll meet you there." He hung up and focused on the road.

By some miracle, Ryan wasn't stopped, though he broke every speed limit and even ran a few lights. He was half-hoping to be stopped, so he could get the cop to follow him, but no such luck.

Now he drove past the old inn, closed for the season, keeping his eyes peeled for the narrow, rutted lane that led to the old bridge. This had to be the place Kurt had been talking about.

He saw Tom's Toyota parked on the wild grass near the bridge and heaved a shaky sigh of relief. Scanning the area, he saw the two men standing side by side in the center of the bridge. It appeared they were in a conversation. Ryan almost smiled, imagining Tom talking the guy down in that calm, professorial way he had.

As he pulled the car beside Tom's, both men swiveled toward him. Kurt moved suddenly, grabbing Tom from behind, one thick arm around his neck, the other, holding a knife pointed toward Tom's chest. He was leaning with his back against the railings on the narrow footbridge, holding Tom in front of him like a shield.

Adrenaline surged through Ryan's gut. He forced himself to move slowly. Kurt was bigger and had a knife, but there were two of them to his one, and they had the brains. He approached the pair, stopping on the ground as close to the bridge as he could get.

"Ryan. Babe."

"What're you doing, Kurt? Put down the knife and let him go."

"Sure, sure." To his surprise and relief, Kurt lowered the knife and slipped it into his jacket. He let go of Tom's neck, but placed his large beefy hands on Tom's upper arms. Ryan knew he had the strength to lift Tom and toss him into the water. At least Tom appeared to be unharmed.

"You okay, Tom?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah," Tom replied. "Kurt and I were actually having a pretty informative conversation but —"

"Shut up, old man," Kurt snapped, jerking Tom as he spoke. His tone softened, becoming almost wheedling as he focused again on Ryan. "This is so crazy, right, Ry?"

Ryan didn't answer.

"You made me do this," Kurt went on. "Don't you see? You took away every avenue for me to talk to you. I wasn't allowed to see you, or come near your house or job. I'm not allowed to call or even email, for chrissake. The professor here was just telling me about how important communication is, but you shut it down. *You* did, Ryan. You drove me to this, so blame yourself, not me."

"What is it you want, Kurt? Why involve someone else like this?"

"Hey!" Kurt shook his head emphatically. "Don't blame me for that! You're the one who picked up this old fart. You're the one took him home and fucked him." He wrinkled his nose in a parody of disgust. "Good thing I got back in town when I did. No telling who you'd end up fucking next."

"Kurt, this is —"

"No, no, I'm sorry." Kurt released one of Tom's arms to wave his hand for emphasis. "But I just don't get this fascination with old guys. He's got grey hair, for god's sake."

Ryan took a step forward, his hands curling into involuntary fists at his sides. Tom gave him an imperceptible shake of the head and Ryan stilled, waiting. "Thing is," Kurt went on. "I figured you're just confused. You don't realize this guy is pathetic, because

I'll give you that, even though he's old, he's still got some looks left. But face it, Ryan, he's weak. I ordered him around like a girl, and he doesn't do a thing about it. A real man would've knocked that knife out of my hand. A real man wouldn't have just let me force him to drive across the state so I can throw him in the river. That'll teach him a lesson, and show you what a pathetic, old loser he really is." Kurt had hold of both of Tom's arms again, gripping hard.

"Kurt, this is crazy. Let Tom go. We'll go sit down there, at the picnic table, and we'll talk, okay? Leave Tom out of it. He's nothing to you."

"Damn right he's nothing to me. And not to you, either."

"I've missed you, Kurt." Ryan spoke with as much sincerity as he could muster, given the homicidal rage churning in his gut.

"Huh?" Kurt looked confused by Ryan's unexpected about-face.

"Yeah. I know, it's crazy. But we did have a great thing going, right? I mean, the sex was incredible." Ryan avoided Tom's eyes, praying like mad that Kurt would buy his bullshit.

Kurt relaxed a little more, his face breaking into a smile. "Yeah. It was. The best ever, Ryan. And you know it. Yeah, I lost my temper sometimes, but only when you didn't listen..."

"I know. And we've grown up since then, right. I mean, it's been three years."

"Three years, two months and twenty four days," Kurt informed him, sending a chill up Ryan's spine.

It happened that quickly – Kurt took one hand off Tom's arm and Tom twisted suddenly, causing Kurt to lose his balance. Letting go of Tom completely, Kurt reached out blindly to steady himself. As they grappled, Ryan sprinted toward the bridge to help Tom, terrified of what Kurt might do. But before he reached them, Tom dropped to the ground suddenly, wrapping his arms around Kurt's knees. Kurt fell back against the bridge railing.

With a heave, Tom toppled the large man over and he fell, landing with a huge splash. Ryan reached Tom, pulling him to his feet. They peered over the side. Kurt was flailing and spluttering, gasping for breath, though it didn't look to Ryan like the water was very deep.

They turned to the sound of sirens, watching as two police cars came to the belated rescue, lights flashing.

~*~

They were lying in Tom's bed late that night, after hours spent with the police. "What is it, Ryan? What's eating at you? He's locked behind bars and the bail's going to be pretty high, I would guess, for all the shit he pulled. Violating the terms of the restraining order, vandalizing your car, trespassing and destroying property, kidnapping, assault and battery, what else am I forgetting?"

"Grand theft auto, assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder," Ryan supplied.

"Exactly. So what are you worried about?" Tom pulled Ryan into his arms. "You haven't relaxed yet, despite receiving my world famous full body massage."

"It's not about Kurt," Ryan finally said, resting his head on Tom's chest. "It's about me. About us."

"What? What about us?"

Ryan blew out a breath. Tom waited, trying not to anticipate. If that bastard had ruined things between them...

"I guess I'm worried what you must be thinking of me."

"How do you mean? It's not your fault Kurt's a flaming asshole."

"Yeah, but I used to be involved with him. It's my fault you got embroiled in this mess."

"Stop right there, Ryan. It's *not* your fault. Kurt's mentally unstable. He's crazy. His behavior has nothing to do with you."

"Maybe now. But if I'd handled myself differently back then. I mean, none of this would have happened if I'd been better able to deal with him back when the abuse started."

Tom pulled him close. "The abuse," he echoed softly, his heart aching for the younger man.

"Yeah," Ryan whispered. "He got crazy toward the end – violent. He – he hit me. More than once. I – I didn't get out right away." Ryan's voice was ripe with shame. "That's the thing, Tom. I stayed. I thought if I could just listen, like he said, or change this thing or that thing, that I could change *him*. Looking back, I can't believe I tolerated what I did for as long as I did. But while I was in the thick of it, I don't know, somehow I believed it was my fault. That I deserved it on some level."

Tom stroked Ryan's hair. "Listen to me. I've been there. Not to the extent you were, but I was in a similar relationship with a controlling man. You remember, I mentioned him, Anthony. I went to therapy after, which is something you might want to consider too, if you haven't already. The main thing I learned, Ryan, and that you need to hear, is it wasn't your fault. No matter what, no one deserves to be treated like that. Period.

"And it doesn't make you less of a man because you got roped in by his shit, or even that you stuck around for too long. The important thing is you got out. Not only that, you made sure he wouldn't bother you again, with the restraining order. You took action, Ryan. You moved on with your life and didn't let him shut you down."

"Thanks," Ryan said softly. "But I'm not so sure about that. I've never had a relationship since then. I've dated, I've fucked around. I don't even know if I have the capacity to love again. I'm damaged goods."

"Oh, Ryan." Tom pushed Ryan gently from his chest and reached for the lamp. He faced Ryan, who had sat up and was blinking in the light. "Listen to me. We're all

damaged goods. Everyone has a story – everyone has a past. That doesn't mean we forfeit the right to find happiness.

"Okay, so you made some dumb choices. And yeah, maybe you spent the last three years building up a wall, joining that club, for example, to keep yourself safe from emotional pain. It takes courage to give that up for the riskier but far better gift of hope. For the chance," Tom took Ryan's hand in his, "to find love."

Ryan stared at him. "You mean you want to try, with me? After all this?"

Tom smiled. He could see the photo of William on the bureau, and though it must have been a trick of the light, it seemed as if he were nodding, ever so slightly, in approval.

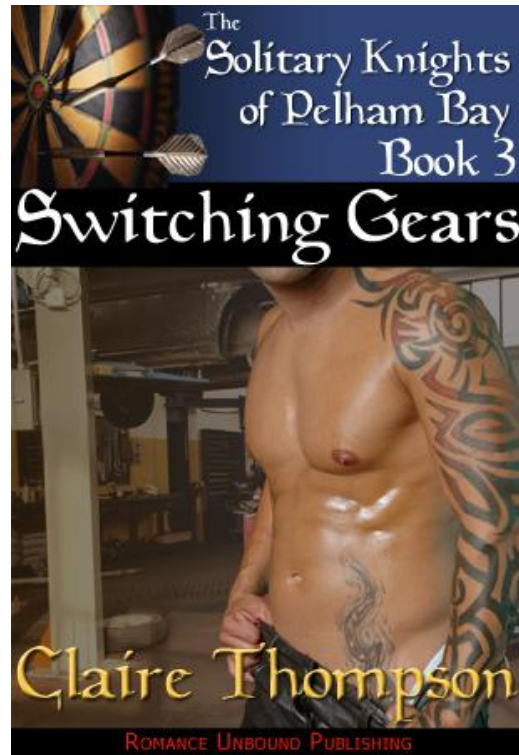
"Ryan," he said, turning from William to the living, breathing man beside him. "You're the first man since William died that I've wanted to be with, not just for a night, but the next morning too. I think I'm finally ready, with you, to try again."

"His ring," Ryan said. "When you lost the ring, you were so upset –"

"I know. And I'm really sorry I took that out on you. But in the end, it was just a symbol. In and of itself, it wasn't worth anything. I'll still have William in my heart, with or without that band of silver. But I'm realizing now, finally, that I have room in there for more. He'll always be a part of my past, but I think, with you, I've found my future."

Tom paused, trying to think of something more to say – something to convey the depth and breadth of his feelings. But when he looked into Ryan's eyes and saw the love light shining there, language left him. He held out his arms and Ryan moved into them, their kiss saying all that needed to be said.

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