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Necessary Madness

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

NECESSARY MADNESS

Lisabet Sarai

Dedication

In memory of my father, who knew the Quabbin Valley was haunted

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The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Chevy: General Motors Corporation

Saturn: General Motors Corporation

BVD: Fruit of the Loom

Tabasco brand Pepper Sauce: McIlhenny Company

Seagrams: Pernod Ricard, USA

Thorazine: GlaxoSmithKlein

Chapter One

First came the flames. Then, the screams. Each cry was distinct to Kyle's ears—the men's hoarse yells, the women's shrieks, the inarticulate wails from the infants. He couldn't see them, not yet. Sooty smoke billowed up, hiding the plummeting bodies, making his eyes sting. Orange tongues of fire pierced the black cloud. The cries grew louder as the heat intensified.

He took a big swig of cheap vodka. The bottle was already half empty. His head spun and he knew he couldn't stand, but the awful screams still rang in his mind.

Please, he thought. No more. I can't take any more. Let me pass out soon. He drank again, his gut churning as the raw liquid splashed into his empty stomach.

He tried to focus on the present—the rough stone pressing against his back, the chill wind biting through his ragged jacket, the faint smell of urine that filled the passageway under the highway. Useless. The sensations of the real world seemed thin and frail, powerless to overcome the horrible scenes in his head.

Every time, it got worse. It took more alcohol to remove him to that state of blissful oblivion. *I'm adapting, just like any drunk. Before long, I'll need a whole bottle to drown out the visions. Eventually, it will kill me.* The thought was a relief.

The spells came more frequently these days, and not just during his waking hours. Nightmares stalked him, full of bloody flesh and torn limbs, searing fire or icy floods. He'd claw his way back to consciousness, howling like an animal, trying to escape. He'd been kicked out of every shelter in the city. He upset the other residents too much.

He could always go back to the hospital. Thorazine didn't completely smother the visions, but it deadened the emotional impact. He could sit for hours, watching disasters play themselves out on the screen of his mind, and not care.

It worked for a while, but then he always ended up signing himself out again. As painful as consciousness was, it was better than the half-life of being drugged. At least, that was what he told himself, on the good days when his curse was in remission. The staff

looked relieved when he left. Even the professionals had trouble dealing with his 'hallucinations'.

"Hey, gimme a drink, will ya?" A voice cut through the screams echoing in his head. The grizzled man lying next to him on the sidewalk smelt like long-unwashed socks. "Come on, please? Us bums got to stick together."

Kyle handed him the bottle. His hand shook. "Sure, help yourself."

The old timer took a deep swallow, then grinned at him. "Thanks, kid."

The flames flared up, hiding the man's pock-marked face and gap-toothed smile. A woman's cry rang out, full of terror. "No, please, no more..." Kyle muttered, closing his eyes. The hungry fire continued to dance behind his eyelids, mocking his attempt at escape. He groped for the bottle.

Brilliant white light flooded his vision, momentarily chasing the inner fire away. "Okay, boys, time to get up." The masculine voice held a natural authority—strength without cruelty. "Off to the shelter with you. You know you can't stay here, getting drunk and blocking pedestrians." A firm hand grabbed his arm and tried to haul him to a standing position. "Come on. We've got a wagon right here. Wouldn't you rather be in a nice warm bed than a stinking underpass?"

Kyle opened his eyes, blinking in the glare of the cop's flashlight. "I...no, please...I can't..." A scream of agony assaulted his inner ears. He doubled over, answering the pain tearing through his stomach. Only the cop's grip kept him from collapsing onto the damp cement. Another pang knifed through his abdomen. The fire roared inside him.

"Are you sick?" Barely conscious, Kyle had a confused impression of the other man's face—square jaw, sandy hair, warm blue eyes.

"My stomach... The fire..."

"What fire?"

Kyle couldn't think, couldn't focus. The policeman searched his face, trying to understand.

"They're dying," he moaned. Maybe he was dying himself. He retched and tasted blood. He was sinking into a rosy, fire-lit haze.

"Who? Who's dying?" The policeman gripped his shoulders, shaking him, trying to bring him back. "What's going on, boy?"

The address appeared out of nowhere, written in chalk on a wall of black stone. "Gardner Street," Kyle whispered, slipping away. "29 Gardner Street."

The last thing he saw was the cop's handsome face, the mingled suspicion and concern. The last thing he felt was the man's heartbeat as he clutched Kyle's body to his chest.

Chapter Two

Sergeant Rob Murphy cradled the limp body of the young man. There was blood on the boy's lips. He felt for the pulse in the thin wrist. It was faint, and twice as fast as it should have been.

Damn it. There were always these complications. "Julio," he called to one of the other officers who was herding the bums into the wagon. "Got a sick one here. Call me an ambulance, pronto."

"Sure thing, sergeant." The burly trooper snapped up the radio from the cab. Murphy returned his attention to the man in his arms.

Hardly a man, actually. The kid couldn't have been more than twenty. Under the grime, his face was pale, the skin fine and smooth. Straight black hair swept back from his high forehead. Graceful brows arched over his deep-set eyes, closed now but fringed with thick lashes. The nose was prominent, a bit heavy, with a sensual authority that rescued the face from girlish prettiness. The chin was slightly cleft, the mouth a bit wide. The lips thinned into a grimace, pressed together in pain, but Rob could see that normally they'd be fuller, ripe, pouting.

A beautiful face, Rob couldn't help noting. Holding the man's unconscious form with one arm, he slipped his other hand into the jeans pockets, looking for some ID. Nothing. Not even a handkerchief.

What a shame that such a handsome young man should be on the streets. Clearly he was quite ill—an ulcer, Rob guessed. He recalled the vagrant's crazed, desperate expression, his wild words. Possibly schizophrenic as well. At least a third of the city's homeless suffered from some sort of mental illness. The way he'd babbled on, about fire and death, he had to be a bit nuts.

On the other hand, he seemed to have a lucid moment just before he lost consciousness. That address. Maybe it would give them a clue to his identity.

"Julio?"

"Yes, sergeant?"

"Can you get HQ to send someone over to 29 Gardner Street? See if they know anything about our friend here."

"You got it, sir."

Murphy settled into a crouch, draping the inert man across his knees. The man wasn't as skinny as he would have expected for someone living on the streets. The body was slender but well-muscled, like a dancer's. Rob carefully rolled up a sleeve of the denim jacket. No needle tracks. That should make things easier.

The young man lay in his arms, nameless, helpless. Rob felt a fierce, irrational desire to protect him. But why irrational? He was a cop, after all. He was pledged to serve. Nevertheless, this unconscious youth stirred something more in him than professional concern.

Don't go there, Rob warned himself. You've got enough problems.

He was relieved to hear the siren as the ambulance rounded the curve and screeched to a halt.

* * * *

Once the patient was on his way to St. Vincent's, Rob joined Julio in the front of the modified Chevy van. He peered through the wire mesh at the half-dozen men they'd picked up. It looked pretty quiet. One guy was snoring; another one was talking to himself.

He and Julio would take the guys in to the station, just to make sure they weren't wanted for anything, then cart them over to Shepard's Place on Ives Street. It wouldn't make any difference. They'd be back under that bridge in a week, as dirty and drunk as ever.

He cursed at the wasted time. There was no way Mayor Wilson was going to clean up Worcester, not without a lot more money and boots on the beat. Better the mayor should focus on the climbing murder rate. Mary's sweet face rose in Rob's mind. Resolutely, he pushed it away.

Then there was the weird string of robberies that had hit the city's banks over the past year. They were all small heists, never more than ten or twenty thousand dollars. The money disappeared from the vaults as if by magic. The banks didn't even know it had happened

until they conducted their weekly audits. Commerce Bank & Trust had been hit in April. Flagship Bank was robbed in June, Fidelity in August, and Bay State Savings in September.

The papers were all over the force, calling them stupid and incompetent, but what could be expected when there wasn't a single clue? Nobody even knew exactly when the thefts occurred. Every staff member with access to the vaults had been questioned, even polygraphed, but the police had learnt zilch. Even if they suspected an employee from one bank, how could they explain the thefts from other institutions? It was a real headache.

Still, tough as it was, Rob would rather be working on that case than relegated to rounding up bums and breaking up bar fights.

He sighed, slouching into the seat. He knew why he always drew the rotten assignments. Why he was still a sergeant when nearly all the guys he'd been with in the academy had been promoted. Yeah, he knew the score. These days everybody claimed to be tolerant and liberal, but homophobia was alive and well in the Worcester Police Force.

"Hey, you! Officer!" One of their passengers was banging on the grate. "Let me out. I've gotta take a leak."

"Just hold on, Charley. We'll be at the station in just a minute." Rob knew this guy. He was a trouble-maker.

"Please, sergeant. I don't think I can wait."

"If you piss all over my van, Charley, I'm going to throw you in the clink for destroying municipal property. Now sit down and behave."

Charley retreated, grumbling. The radio crackled into life as Julio turned onto Lincoln Street. "Murphy speaking."

"Sergeant Murphy? This is Bill Rausch. About that address you asked us to check."

"Oh, right." Rob adjusted the antenna, trying to eliminate the static. "What did you find out?"

"It's an old wooden triple-decker. I talked to the residents in all three floors. Mostly Hispanic, big families. No one knew or had seen anyone meeting the description of the man you sent to the hospital."

"Hmm. That's too bad." Weariness washed over him. Another two hours until he was off-duty. He really needed a beer and a good night's sleep. "Sorry to waste your time."

"No, it was lucky you sent me over there." Interference drowned out the next sentence.

“What? I couldn’t hear you.”

The line cleared. “I said, it was lucky. Because while I was up on the top floor, I smelt smoke. We went up to the roof and discovered a pile of old construction material, burning away. Looked like a loose wire started the blaze. We managed to put it out. But if we hadn’t caught it, I’ll bet that place would have gone up like a torch. And there wasn’t any fire escape.”

Rob sucked in a lungful of air and let it out slowly. “Good work, Bill. We’re on our way in with a wagon full of guests. See you in a couple of minutes.”

Fire. Death. It had to be a coincidence. But maybe the kid wasn’t so crazy after all.

Chapter Three

Kyle's throat was sore. His head ached. His whole body felt heavy, as though someone had encased him in concrete.

For now, though, his mind was clear, free of any disturbing images. He swallowed the sour taste in his mouth, took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

He was there. The cop who'd picked him up. He was sitting by the side of the hospital bed, watching Kyle, turning his blue cap around and around in his blunt-fingered hands.

Everything about the man screamed 'strength'. He wasn't that big, but he looked like solid muscle. His shoulders and upper arms strained against his starched indigo uniform whenever he moved. His dense thighs had a similar effect on his trousers.

His face was strong, too. Kyle remembered the square jaw, but he hadn't noticed the determined mouth. No one was going to mess with this guy. On the other hand, the eyes were a clear, open blue and the shallow creases on either side of his nose suggested that the man laughed easily. There were a few lines on his forehead, too. Kyle guessed he was in his early thirties.

The officer leant forward in his chair. "Hey, you're awake!" The thin lips curled into a warm smile.

Kyle gave him a weak grin. "Yeah. Sort of. I'm in the hospital?"

"St. Vincent's. You've been here for the past two days."

"What happened?"

"You passed out. Probably from loss of blood. That ulcer of yours was pretty serious. They did an emergency endoscopy and cauterisation. The doctor told me, another few weeks on the street and it would have perforated. You're a lucky man. You could have died."

Kyle closed his eyes, weary. He recalled his last terrible vision, dimly, like a bad dream. "Maybe that would have been better," he murmured.

"What?"

"Oh, um, never mind. Thanks, Officer — "

"Murphy. Sergeant Rob Murphy."

"Thank you, Sergeant Murphy." Kyle hiked himself up on the pillows, not wanting the macho cop to see him prostrate and helpless. "When can I leave?"

"That's up to the doctor. Now that you're back among the living, though, I've got to get some information for my report."

Kyle stopped smiling. "What kind of information?"

The cop gave a casual shrug, as though trying to put Kyle at ease. "Well, we can start with your name. I assume that it's not John Doe."

"Kyle McLaughlin."

"Date of birth?"

"November twenty-first, nineteen eighty-nine. I'll be twenty next weekend."

"Address?"

"Uh...I'm sort of between places at the moment." Kyle cursed his weakness. All he wanted was to hide.

"Hmm." The cop grinned, apparently trying to reassure him. "What was your last address?"

Kyle swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. "Worcester State Hospital. Acute ward."

"I see." The sergeant nodded quietly and wrote something in his notebook. Kyle expected a why as the next question. Then he remembered. This guy had seen him in the grip of his curse. He wouldn't need an explanation.

"Where will you go when you're released from here?"

Exhaustion settled on Kyle like a leaden blanket. He sank back into the pillows. "What does it matter?"

Murphy chuckled. "Well, I'd hate to have to come and round you up again the next time we do a sweep." Then it seemed that he really saw Kyle, saw his complete lack of hope. He placed his hand on Kyle's forearm, careful not to disrupt the IV drip. His eyes were like a summer sky. "Look, I can see you're in pain, and I don't just mean from the ulcer. I'd like to help, if I can."

Delicious heat blossomed in the bare skin under the older man's palm. Unshed tears made Kyle's chest hurt. It has been so long since someone had touched him with any sort of tenderness or concern. "No one can help me," he said. "Even the shrinks can't make the pictures go away."

"How long have you been having these — hallucinations?"

"Since I turned thirteen. The older I get, the worse they become." Tears welled up, to his extreme embarrassment. He turned away, trying to hide them from his inquisitor. A gentle hand cupped his chin, bringing him back to meet Murphy's sympathetic gaze. "I don't know how much longer I can stand it."

"You're schizophrenic?"

"That's the current diagnosis. But I don't think so. The usual drugs don't work. They deaden my emotions, but they don't kill the visions. And when I'm not having a spell, I'm more or less sane." He stopped, familiar guilt overwhelming him. Sane enough to search the papers, looking for, and eventually finding, accounts of the disasters his dreams prefigured. Disasters he could see but not prevent.

Kyle scanned Murphy's face, trying to read his expression. Some struggle was going on inside the man. His lips were set in a grim line and his brows knotted into a scowl, but his eyes shone with excitement. He still clasped Kyle's arm, his fingers tense now, digging into the flesh. Kyle placed his own pale hand on top of Murphy's in a gesture of reassurance. The policeman started as if he'd been burnt.

Kyle felt the shock too, electricity sizzling between them. Murphy snatched his hand away, staring down at his shiny leather boots. When he looked back at Kyle, he seemed to have made a decision.

"I might not be able to do anything to help with your hallucinations, but I can give you a safe place to stay, at least until you recover."

"I don't know..." Kyle began. He didn't want to get mixed up with this cop. The signals were too strong. The man's sheer physicality unbalanced him. Already, he felt that queasy sensation that presaged his visions. Powerful emotion often triggered his crises.

"No arguments. I live alone. I've got plenty of room in my apartment." The quiet authority in Murphy's voice sent a delicious thrill up Kyle's spine. He shivered. Murphy's tone softened. "Seriously, Kyle, I don't want to see you back on the streets. Stay at my place for a few days, a week. Give yourself a chance to heal."

Murphy's hand rested on Kyle's thigh, stroking it through the sheet. He seemed unaware of what he was doing, but with every moment, Kyle felt his own resistance melt further.

"Well, I..." All at once, the vision hit, knocking the breath out of him like a punch to the gut.

Terrible doubt. Scalding desire. He was naked, kneeling on a wooden floor. He could feel it bruising his knees, but he didn't care. A nude man towered over him, corded thighs spread wide, gripping his swollen cock with blunt-fingered hands. Offering Kyle the veined column of flesh. Pressing it against Kyle's lips.

Kyle opened his mouth, eager to feel the steely hardness on his tongue. He swallowed as much as he could. The man growled and jerked his pelvis forward, sending his cock deep into Kyle's throat. Kyle clutched the tree-like thighs, struggling to keep his balance. His own cock surged as the man fucked his mouth like a pile driver. Each stroke forced his nose in the man's musky crotch. Fear lurked at the back of his mind, but the ramrod thrusts battered it into meaningless fragments. There was nothing but two cocks, his own and the one he was sucking, both throbbing, ready to burst, ripe with cum.

The powerful man looming over him roared. He ground his rod against Kyle's palette. Bitter semen flooded Kyle's mouth. He drank it down greedily. He felt his own erection pulse, tremble, then explode, painting his belly and thighs with white ropes of sticky cum.

The other man sank to his knees, face to face with Kyle. He reached out to draw Kyle into a kiss, his sapphire eyes gleaming...

"Kyle? Kyle!" Murphy sat on the edge of the bed, shaking him. "What's wrong? Wake up!" Kyle blinked, bewildered by the instant transition. The vision was gone, as abruptly as it had arrived. The policeman sat back and searched Kyle's face.

"You're back," he said, finally.

"Yeah." Kyle felt his cheeks grow hot, remembering the raunchy scene he'd just witnessed. No, participated in.

"Your eyes rolled up. You started to convulse. Then you went deathly still. Did you see something?"

Kyle nodded. "But it was different from usual."

"Different, how?"

"I don't want to talk about it. If you don't mind." Kyle smiled to himself. "Could you please go ask the nurse when the doctor's supposed to come by? I'd like to get out of here."

“Sure.” Murphy gave him a half grin then headed for the door, strength coiled in every movement. Kyle buzzed with secret excitement. He’d just seen a vision of the future, a true vision if his past experience was any judge. And for the first time, it wasn’t a disaster.

At least, he hoped it wasn’t.

Chapter Four

"Kitchen's here, with the door out to the back porch. Only one bathroom, I'm afraid. Here's the guest room—your room. The closet's empty; you're welcome to put your stuff in there."

Rob led Kyle through his apartment, fussing and clucking like a mother hen. He wondered for the hundredth time whether this was a mistake. The guy was just so damned beautiful. Rob could hardly bear to be close to him. Driving the few miles from St. Vincent's to his building, Rob had tried to pay attention to the road, but he couldn't help sneaking sidelong glances at the mysterious, sensual face of his companion. Kyle seemed to be brooding. Maybe he had his doubts, too.

"What stuff?" Kyle spread his arms, a half-smile on his plump lips. "Everything I own is on my back."

"I'll take you over to Greendale Mall so you can pick up some new clothes. Loan you some cash until you get on your feet."

"What makes you think I'll ever 'get on my feet', Sergeant Murphy?"

"Rob. Please."

"Okay, Rob." Kyle stared at the mostly bare maple outside the guest room window, before turning back to confront him. "Why should anything be different now?" Rob heard the bitterness in his voice. "I have a disease, and I don't mean the ulcer. I'm cursed. I see terrible things, and I can't stop them. It's getting worse all the time. There are only two possibilities. Either I'll kill myself, or I'll truly go insane."

Rob suppressed the urge to take the man in his arms. Instead, he settled for an avuncular pat on the shoulder. "It's only your imagination, Kyle. Your mind playing tricks on you. Once you understand that, maybe you can suppress the visions. Or control them."

Kyle sank down onto the bed. His dark eyes burnt under exquisitely arched brows. "My imagination? You know that's not true."

Rob lowered himself onto the desk chair. He wished that he were somewhere else. He wanted to help Kyle, but he really didn't like where the conversation was going.

"What else could it be? These spells – they're like seizures. Storms of random activity in your brain that make you see things. I was there at the hospital, remember, when it hit you yesterday. You were completely out of touch, yelling about the brake, the gas tank, groaning and crying. You were delusional."

"It was a crash," Kyle intoned. "At least five cars. Glass everywhere. The screech of rubber, the stink of leaking gasoline, and then the explosion and the smell of charred flesh... Check the papers, Rob. Call the police station. If it hasn't happened yet, it will soon."

"You really believe that your hallucinations foretell the future?" Rob remembered the night he'd picked Kyle up, the narrowly averted catastrophe at the address Kyle had seen.

"I only wish that they didn't. All I ever see is violence and pain." Kyle buried his face in his hands.

Rob moved to the bed, next to his guest, and put his arm around the denim-clad shoulders. He couldn't help himself. "Look, that's crazy. This isn't some kind of horror movie. This is real life. There's a rational explanation for everything." He was trying to convince himself as much as Kyle. He didn't want anything more to do with psychic abilities. Never again.

Kyle skewered him with a dark stare, hurt and angry. "You don't know what you're talking about. I thought that you wanted to help me."

Rob tensed. Kyle was so close. The funk of his old sweat rose from the worn jacket, along with a trace of disinfectant. Rob could see the pulse beating in the boy's pale temple. He felt his own blood rush to his cock.

Kyle trembled. His nostrils flared. His eyes gleamed. Rob felt the pull, a magnet focused on his groin. It would be so easy to gather that taut young body to his chest, to fasten his mouth on Kyle's ripe lips, to take control. But that wasn't what the man needed. Kyle needed responsible strength. Logic. Maturity. With a heroic effort, Rob smothered his fantasies.

"I do want to help. If I didn't, do you think I would have taken you in? I just want you to be realistic. To recognise that even when you think you're seeing future events, that's a delusion."

Kyle wasn't listening, not really. Rob could see him adjust his face, hiding his emotions, shuttering those bright eyes, donning a false smile. Putting on a mask. "Whatever you say, Rob. Maybe you're right. After all, most nut cases think their visions are real."

"You're not a 'nut case', Kyle."

"Are you sure?" He giggled. "You can't have it both ways, you know. Either I'm prescient, or I'm insane." He stood, stretching, then grinned at the sight of Rob's obvious concern. "Hey, lighten up. Either way, I'm not going to stab you in your bed."

Rob shuddered, despite himself.

Kyle rested a light hand on Rob's shoulder. "I'm sorry to give you a hard time. I really do appreciate you giving me a place to crash."

The casual touch re-ignited Rob's carefully suppressed desire. Fortunately, the phone rang. "Excuse me," he muttered, beating a hasty retreat to the hall. "Hello?"

"Hi, Rob. It's Gina. I wanted to remind you that you've got the kids this weekend."

"Oh—right." Rob had completely forgotten. Once a month, he played host to six-year-old Will and eight-year-old Jennie. For the kids, it was a holiday—hamburgers and greasy fries, miniature golf or bowling depending on the season, their choice of ice cream, silly card games and late bedtimes. For Rob, it was a bittersweet reminder of what he'd lost.

"Rob? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, of course. I was just wondering if we could postpone it for a week." In a week, he reasoned, Kyle should be gone.

"I guess that would be okay. How come?"

Rob's cheeks burnt, though there was no one to see. "Um—I've got someone staying in the guest room at the moment."

"A young man?" Gina had always been quick on the uptake.

"It's not what you think." It wasn't, Rob insisted to himself. "He's a homeless guy that we picked up the other night. He just got out of the hospital, and I offered to let him stay here for a few days to recuperate. He didn't have any place else to go."

"Be careful, Rob." Gina's voice held genuine warmth. "Don't let him take advantage of you."

"Come on, you know me. Old Iron Boot Murphy. Nobody gets the better of me."

"Yeah, right!" Gina laughed. "The kids will be disappointed, but I'll tell them you promised to take them to both the movies and the arcade next weekend."

"Sounds good. Thanks a lot." His chest hurt. It always did, when he spoke to his ex-wife.

"Don't mention it." She paused, as though searching for words. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"You, too, Gina. See you next week."

"See ya, Rob." She hung up. He sighed. She still loved him; he knew she did. Hell, he still cared about her. It had been difficult for her to kick him out, but she had stuck to her guns. He'd been so stupid, bringing that boy back to the house.

"Who was that?" Kyle lounged against the door frame, rangy and raw as a modern James Dean.

"My ex."

Kyle smiled sympathetically. "Ah, I see..."

"I doubt that you do," Rob snapped.

"Hey, sorry, man. I should keep my big mouth shut." Kyle was touching him again, a simple, comradely pat on the back that nearly undid him.

Rob forced himself to move away. "That's okay. I shouldn't blame you. It's my own fault."

Kyle nodded, but didn't comment further. He surveyed his ragged clothes. "You know, Rob, I'm a mess. Maybe we should take that trip to the mall you were talking about. If I'm going to find a new place to live, I guess I need to look a bit more presentable."

"Sounds like a plan. Let me get my jacket and keys." Rob was grateful for an excuse to remove himself from Kyle's presence, even for a moment. The other man was like a drug. Intoxicating. Rob ached for him, but he didn't want to take advantage of Kyle's vulnerability. The boy was lost, alone and seriously disturbed. The last thing he needed was to learn that his saviour had baser motives than compassion.

It was going to be a long, hard week.

Chapter Five

Blackest night – no moon, no stars. A chill wind, rustling the piles of dead leaves and far away, the hoot of some bird swooping through the forest. Try to move, try to stand. Agony burns brighter than the sun, in the shattered leg crumpled underneath your body. Clutch at the steel rails, slippery with blood. Terrible, total weakness.

A single eye shines in the distance, diamond white, cutting through confusion. The steel sings underneath your body. The beast growls, hurtling closer. You scream, of course you scream. Your cry is drowned by the thunder of the engine, the wail of the whistle. The rails shake, grow hot as live coals. The eye bears down.

"No! Help!" Kyle dragged himself out of the horrible dream just as the train hit. The headlight dimmed behind his eyelids, then flickered out. The roar of the engine gradually faded. He sat up in the unfamiliar bed, gasping for breath, his bare chest dripping with sweat.

The maple tossed in the autumn breeze outside the window. He heard a bump outside his closed door.

"Kyle? Are you okay?" Even through the door, Kyle could hear the concern in Rob's voice.

"Yeah. I guess." A twinge hit his left leg, the faintest ghost of the pain from his dream. "Come on in."

His host sat on the bed, wearing nothing but snug white briefs. Kyle let his eyes travel over Rob's sculpted chest, following the trail of blond hair that ran along his breastbone down to his navel. An impressive bulk pouched inside the BVDs. Kyle felt his own cock stir and thicken under the blankets.

"So it happens while you're sleeping, too?" Tousled and bleary-eyed from his sudden awakening, Rob looked younger. He smelt of mint toothpaste.

"Sometimes. It's different, though. In the waking visions, I'm a spectator, watching helplessly as disaster strikes. In my nightmares, I feel as though it's all happening to me."

"Have you tried sleeping pills?"

Kyle laughed grimly. "They only make it worse. There was one night at Worcester State where I screamed for three hours straight without waking up."

"God, I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do." Rob shifted, turning more towards Kyle. The cop's hands clutched compulsively at the bedspread. The lump in his shorts had grown.

Kyle remembered what he'd seen the day he'd awakened at St. Vincent's. Himself, kneeling before Rob, sucking the cop's dick. A wave of lust washed over him. He decided to be bold. After all, he had nothing to lose.

"There is. Hold me."

"What?" Rob's eyes widened.

"Climb under the covers with me. Put your arms around me." Kyle flipped back the sheets, exposing his naked body to Rob's hungry gaze. "Please, Rob. I'm so alone."

"Are you sure?" Rob's voice shook. The cop stared at Kyle's rapidly hardening cock.

Kyle stroked himself. His cock swelled in his fist. "Do I look uncertain?"

Rob didn't wait for a second invitation. Standing, he stripped off his briefs. His rigid, uncut rod sprang out from the stretchy cotton. Kyle's mouth watered.

The older man stretched out beside Kyle and captured him in a brawny embrace. He was so warm. So strong. Kyle sighed, settling against Rob's chest, his head on the cop's shoulder. He tickled the fat nipples, flicking at them with his tongue. Rob shuddered with pleasure. He pressed his meaty thigh between Kyle's legs.

Kyle's cock slapped against his companion's. Their erections rubbed together, the friction kindling delicious sparks. Kyle reached down and captured the other man's iron dick, squeezing gently.

Rob gasped, then followed Kyle's lead. He pumped Kyle's cock in a firm, steady rhythm. The last vestiges of the nightmare melted away.

"Jesus, that feels so good!" Kyle lifted his chin to meet the cop's gaze. Rob smiled as though he were in heaven.

"Yeah, it does..."

Kyle's fingers just barely met as they encircled Rob's shaft. He stroked thumb along the underside, then over the hood, already slick with pre-cum. He licked his lips, imagining the taste, then smeared the liquid along the stalk. The cock in his hand twitched and pulsed.

"Oh, yeah...Kyle..." Rob's strokes grew faster and more erratic. Kyle followed suit, sliding his fist up and down, the cop's foreskin stretching tighter with each moment as his cock continued to swell. Once more, Kyle remembered the vision, wondering if it would be possible to swallow such a huge organ. Or to take him inside—the notion was scary and incredibly exciting.

"Kyle, oh, fuck, uh..." Rob was reduced to grunts and moans. His eyes were screwed shut, his firm lips distorted in a grimace of pleasure. He arched against Kyle's body, grinding himself into Kyle's fist. Kyle squeezed harder, coaxing the cum up the shaft. Rob's cock throbbed in his hand like a juicy heart. Kyle slid to the base and fondled the heavy balls, which were tightening by the instant. The cock jerked and trembled against his palm.

Kyle was close, too. For a moment, he allowed himself to really feel Rob's talented fingers, pulling, massaging, every touch sending waves of delicious sensation surging through him. The man was so strong, so sure of himself, despite his earlier reticence. It has been so terribly long since anyone cared about Kyle's pleasure.

Dizziness fluttered through him. The world lurched a little. *No, not now*, Kyle pleaded hopelessly. He felt the pressure build. He hung on the edge. Reality tilted, shimmered. *No, no, no...*

"Rob," he moaned. "Look at me. Please..."

The cop heard, even through the fog of his lust. His eyes shot open and Kyle let himself go, falling into those luminous pools of blue. His cock exploded, his cum shooting out over both of their bellies. A train whistle wailed in Kyle's head, but the world held, long enough for Kyle to feel Rob's cock convulse and spew hot liquid all over Kyle's fingers.

"Oh, baby," Rob panted, fastening his mouth on Kyle's. Kyle wallowed in the wonderful sensations. Heat and wetness, above and below. Rob's tongue, Rob's taste, Rob's hard body pressed against him.

Then a black void swallowed him. No light. No feeling. No sound except for Kyle's own heartbeat, loud in his ears.

The words appeared as letters of fire, hanging in the emptiness. 'Dawson Street Holden'. As Kyle watched, they loomed closer, then disintegrated in a shower of sparks, leaving him in darkness.

"Kyle? Kyle!" Rob was shaking him so hard that Kyle's teeth rattled. "Come back!" The vision fled as swiftly as it had arrived. "Are you all right?"

Rob's brows were knitted in worry. Kyle tried to produce a reassuring smile. "Yeah, I think so. How long was I gone?"

"Ten seconds, maybe. I could tell exactly when it happened. One instant I was kissing you, and you were kissing me back. The next instant—it was as though you were an empty shell. No reaction. Nobody there. It was the weirdest thing."

"Well, I remember the kiss." Kyle lay back on the pillows, overwhelmed by an unaccustomed sense of well-being. "It was really something." He extended his arms. "Why don't you lie down and we can try it again."

Rob bent over and brushed his lips against Kyle's as if he were afraid that the younger man might break. "Not like that," Kyle laughed. He pulled the cop to his chest, revelling in the sensation of the man's warm skin against his own. Taking Rob's face in his hands, he kissed him, hard and deep. Their tongues tangled, Rob's no less forceful than Kyle's now that the younger man had taken the initiative. Rob rubbed his sticky groin against Kyle's thigh. Kyle felt his cock stir and swell once again.

Rob felt it too. He slipped a hand between their bodies to stroke the growing bulk. "Already? I don't know if I can keep up with a young stud like you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm really grateful for what you've done already. It felt wonderful. My life hasn't included a lot of pleasure."

"The pleasure was mine, believe me." Rob's face softened. "You've been with other guys, I gather?"

Kyle felt the air rush out of his buoyant mood. "Sort of." Rob's expression demanded more of an explanation. "Sometimes, when I really needed money—well, I guess that you can imagine."

"Hmm. I guess." The cop's mouth was set in a thin line. Kyle traced Rob's lips with one fingertip and was rewarded by a weak smile.

"I don't do that anymore. It's not worth it. I feel cleaner sleeping in the gutter with the bums."

"That's all in the past, Kyle. We're going to find a way to defeat your—disability. Get you an apartment, a job... I know that you can do it. We can do it."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Rob looked like he'd been slapped. Kyle made his voice softer, not wanting to hurt this generous man, naïve as he was. "But I'm willing to try. If you'll help."

"I want to help. Any way I can." Rob grinned, looking boyish and virile once again.

Tenderness welled up in Kyle's chest. The emotion threatened to swamp him. Blackness flickered at the periphery of his field of view. Struggling to hold on to consciousness, he suddenly remembered his most recent vision.

"Rob, is there a railroad in Holden?"

Rob thought for a moment. "I think so, yes. There's a freight line that runs to Pittsfield and then up to Albany. Why?"

"Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course."

"Call your headquarters. Have someone go check the tracks near Dawson Street in Holden."

Rob frowned. "We can't do that. Holden's got its own force."

"Well, get them to do it." Kyle felt his heart slamming against his ribs. How could he convince the cop to do what he asked? "Please. It's a matter of life and death."

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"No! Tomorrow will be too late." Panic swept over him. He gripped the older man's arm. "Rob, you've got to believe me. If you wait, someone may die."

"Death again. This is your disease talking, Kyle. Don't give in to this sort of madness." Rob shook off Kyle's hand. His voice was brusque. "Why don't you try and get some sleep? If you are still convinced in the morning that this is important, I'll call then."

Despair settled dully on Kyle's heart. "It will be on your head then. Your responsibility. You'll never forgive yourself." *Or me*, he added silently.

Rob's scowl made Kyle cringe. "Okay, okay. I'll humour you. This time." Grumpily, he rolled out of bed and headed out the door. Kyle could hear his voice on the phone. *Thank God*, he thought. *Maybe for once, I can make a difference.*

He threw off the covers and stretched out on the comfortable bed. His cock bobbed at his groin, eager for more of what Rob might offer. The cop couldn't suppress a grin when he returned from his call. "It's done. I hope that you're happy."

"I am. Thank you so much, Rob."

"Never mind. I know that it's been rough for you. I can't expect you to change all at once." The older man ran his fingers through his sandy hair. His grin widened. "I must say, though, that right now you look good enough to eat."

Kyle smiled back. The strange tenderness returned, mingling with lust. "Well, then. What are you waiting for?"

Chapter Six

Rob woke to find Kyle stretched out beside him, one arm flung over his eyes, the other crossed over his breast. The young man's face was relaxed, the pale brow smooth, the ripe lips parted slightly. Rob leant close, aching for a kiss. He felt Kyle's breath against his face. Better to let the kid sleep. Between the recent surgery and their activities last night, Kyle was probably exhausted.

Rob, though, felt more energised than he could remember. It had been years since he had shared a bed with someone. Not since Gina had kicked him out. After that, he couldn't risk anything like a long-term relationship. The force tolerated his sexual preferences, but only as long as he didn't flaunt them. So he had to be content with blow jobs and jack-offs from guys he met in the small hill towns around the city, towns where nobody knew him. Once or twice a year, he'd treat himself to a weekend in New York City, cruising the gay clubs, indulging himself in all the hot male flesh he could handle. It was fun, but not exactly satisfying.

He allowed himself to gawk at Kyle's lithe, perfect body. The skin was like creamy marble, with only the slightest flush of blood. In fact, he could have been a Greek statue, a youthful warrior, slender but strong. The muscled chest and moulded thighs were hairless, but curly tufts of black adorned in his armpits and groin. The hair in his crotch was matted with dried semen—Rob's and his own.

Rob's cock gave a little jump at the recollection. It had been so good, so very good. He could still taste a faint bitterness from the cum Kyle had pumped into his mouth, after a leisurely blow job that had made Rob go hard again, too. Kyle's own mouth was agile and muscular. He sucked cock with a talent unusual for his age. How many cocks had he swallowed in order to keep his belly full? Rob didn't want to think about that, though he couldn't really figure out whether he felt sympathy or jealousy.

The boy's penis nestled, half-erect, in its furry black nest. It was circumcised, pale as the rest of his flesh, but with a ruby-red helmet. As though it felt the weight of Rob's scrutiny, the cock twitched and swelled a bit more.

Unable to resist, Rob bent over Kyle's crotch. His nostrils filled with the mingled odours of sweat and semen. Behind these more blatant scents, Kyle's flesh had a smell of its own, a smoky musk that reminded Rob of autumn leaves. Saliva pooled in Rob's mouth. He extended his tongue, intending to circle the shiny crimson bulb, to wake the boy with a lewd kiss. He was interrupted by a ring from the phone.

Rob was too disciplined to just let it ring. It might be headquarters. It might be Gina, some emergency involving the kids. He rose, careful not to wake his slumbering companion, and padded out to the hall in bare feet.

"Hello." His voice sounded like gravel. It must be pretty early.

"Sergeant Murphy? This is Lois Albright from Community Relations."

"Oh, right. Good morning. What can I do for you, Lois?"

"Yesterday evening, you called the night desk, correct?"

"Yes, I did. I wanted them to check something for me."

"The train tracks in Holden."

"Right. Why?" A chill shot up Rob's spine. "Did they find anything?"

Ten seconds of silence at the other end of the line. "Two officers from Holden found a fifteen-year-old boy, screaming in pain, lying on the rails with a broken leg."

"What?" Rob didn't really want to hear anymore, but he had to know. "Was he hit by a train?"

"No, thank goodness. It seems he climbed over a fence and fell onto the tracks. The landing snapped his femur in three places."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

"The fall happened around ten p.m., according to the kid. There was a freight train due through at five past midnight. If they hadn't found him—if you hadn't sent them over there—well, I don't want to think about what might have happened."

Rob found himself gasping for breath. There was a ringing in ears. This couldn't be happening, not again. He couldn't bear it.

He tried to focus on the voice at the other end of the line. "What? I'm sorry, I missed that."

"They want to give you a citation for service. The town of Holden."

"No, that's okay. Never mind..."

"You saved the kid's life, Sergeant Murphy."

"No, really..."

"How did you know? What made you call?"

Rob pictured Kyle, stretched out in the guest room, exhausted and seductive. It wasn't possible to see the future. Was it? "Uh—somebody called me. An anonymous tip. He refused to give his name, but told me he'd seen a kid go over the barrier."

"Why would someone in Holden call you?"

"I have no idea. Anyway, thanks for letting me know."

"The chief wants you to come in and make a full report. As soon as possible."

"Yeah, right. Of course. Thanks again, Lois."

He hung up, his mind whirling. It must be a coincidence. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of accidents every day. Kyle's hallucination just happened to match one of them. He didn't even know what Kyle had seen. It might have nothing to do with a boy or a train...

He remembered the night he first picked Kyle up, the address Kyle had whispered just before he lost consciousness, the fire that Rausch had discovered and extinguished. Another coincidence?

Rob wandered into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee, a headache pounding in his skull. He couldn't pretend it was coincidence. He couldn't lie to himself. It might seem incredible, but he knew that psychic powers were real. Real, dangerous and destructive.

Mary's 'gift' had appeared around puberty, just like Kyle's. One day in high school study hall, she had started to hear people's thoughts. She had run screaming from the classroom, her hands pressed to her ears, trying to shut out the cacophony babbling in her head. She had never gone back—their mother had tutored her at home, and then she had earned her degree in accounting on-line. As soon as she was old enough, she moved into an apartment by herself. She rarely went out, trying to shield herself from the mental voices that assaulted her whenever she did.

Rob used to visit her, though probably not as often as he should have. He hated to think of her so alone. She was his kid sister, after all. She was nine years younger. She should have been married, or at least had a boyfriend. She told him that being around one or two people wasn't too bad, especially if she knew and cared about them. The last time he'd been to her place, she had been excited. She'd found someone, someone who was helping her learn to

control her power. To turn down the voices when she needed to, and to focus on one stream of thought out of many. For the first time, she had some hope of living a normal life.

Two weeks later, she had disappeared. Three weeks later, they found her body in Elm Park, with her throat slashed and her chest torn open. Her heart had been cut out.

The grisly murder had dominated the headlines at first, but as time went on and no clues were discovered, the public moved on to the next sensation. Rob didn't forget, though. He couldn't erase the image of her mutilated body lying on the bank near the lake. He had been on duty, one of the first members of the force on the scene. Two years later, he still saw her in his nightmares.

If only he'd spent more time with her. If only he had seen the danger. If only she had been an ordinary woman, without power. Rob was certain that her special abilities were related to her death.

Rob's eyes blurred with tears. His fists clenched. He'd find the murderer, someday, somehow. He had spent weeks, combing through the thin stash of evidence, poring over the coroner's report, looking for some hint that would point him towards the killer. He had kept Mary's personal things, after they cleaned out her apartment, but hadn't found any clues in the few boxes that represented the sum of her young life.

His mother couldn't bear to talk about her lost daughter. Not long after the murder, she began showing signs of Alzheimer's and was now in a nursing home. His dad, a cop like him, had been killed in a drug bust in 1995. Now he was the only person who really remembered Mary – her life, her struggles and her terrible death.

"Rob?" Kyle stood in the doorway of the kitchen, naked and beautiful. "Is everything okay? I heard the phone."

A lump of stone settled in Rob's chest. His head felt like it was about to split open. He must not allow himself to get closer to Kyle, regardless of how needy the boy was, or how seductive. He couldn't handle another brush with the kind of power Kyle exhibited. He had used all his tears grieving for Mary.

"It was the department. They want me to come in early today." It wasn't exactly a lie. "Want coffee?" Rob gestured at the percolator.

"Love some."

Rob turned to get mugs from the cabinet. Kyle came up from behind, circling Rob's torso with his arms and rubbing his erection in the crack between Rob's buttocks. Sparks sizzled over Rob's skin. Kyle nuzzled Rob's shoulder while massaging the cop's nipples. Rob's cock began to rise, despite his determination to keep Kyle at a distance.

"Cut it out, Kyle." Rob's voice sounded forced even to his own ears. "I've got to get into the shower and then to work."

"I was hoping I might convince you to come back to bed." Kyle dropped both hands to Rob's groin, gripping the cop's swelling dick in one hand while cupping his balls in the other.

"Sorry, I can't." Rob pulled out of Kyle's grasp, a bit more roughly than he intended. Kyle looked surprised and hurt. Rob busied himself pouring coffee, handing Kyle a full mug. "I'm kind of sorry I gave in to you last night. It really wasn't the right thing to do."

Kyle seated himself on a stool near the breakfast bar. Rob tried to ignore the arc of the boy's cock, pointing towards the ceiling. "It felt right to me," Kyle said softly, his eyes dark and intense under those hypnotic brows. "I thought you felt the same."

"You're vulnerable right now. You've been through some terrible experiences. You need to focus your energy on recovery. "

"Recovery. Right," Kyle repeated, irony thick as syrup in his voice. "So why can't fucking you be part of my recovery?"

"I'm old enough to be your father, Kyle. And I'm a cop. I can't allow myself to get mixed up with a psychotic street kid who thinks he can see the future." Rob winced at his own words. But he had to drive a wedge between himself and Kyle, for his own good, and for Kyle's too.

"I thought you wanted to help me." Kyle actually looked close to tears.

"I do. I will. But do you really think that sucking my cock is the kind of help you need?"

"Couldn't hurt," Kyle replied, with the ghost of a grin.

"I don't agree. I've got to maintain some authority here. You're going to need discipline to get through this. That's how I can help you. I can help you to be strong. To fight against your visions. But not if I'm jumping into the bed with you at every opportunity."

"Don't you want me?" Kyle's face darkened. Rob could see how many times the kid had been kicked, beaten, rejected. He ached to put his arms around the young outcast, to

clutch the sleek body to his own and swear to protect Kyle from the world. But Rob had to protect himself first. He took a sip of his coffee, trying to find the right words.

"Look, Kyle. You're the sexiest guy I've met in ages. But you're sick. You need to concentrate on getting better."

Kyle's brow furrowed. "I'm not sick. My visions, terrible as they are, are true. They're not some symptom that will go away with the right drugs or therapy." His face brightened. "What about the train, the tracks? The place the vision revealed to me?"

Rob stared at the bottom of his empty mug. The leaden weight in his chest made it hard to breathe. "Nothing. Dawson Street is nowhere near the Holden railroad line."

The light drained from Kyle's eyes. He slumped on the stool, hanging his head. His face was a white mask. "Another death," he muttered, as if to himself.

"Nonsense." Rob placed an avuncular hand on Kyle's shoulder, resolutely ignoring the electric charge that casual touch sent to his groin. "You mustn't believe in your hallucinations. No one died." *That, at least, was true*, Rob thought, hating himself for his deceit but knowing that he had no choice.

Kyle said nothing. He didn't move. The young man's stillness was frightening.

"I've got to get going, Kyle, but I'll be back by three this afternoon. Then we can start working on some of your real world issues. Getting you an ID, first thing, then taking you down to the division of employment to see if they've got any relevant jobs. Or maybe enrolling you in some skills training. How does that sound?"

There was no answer.

"And there's someone I'd like you to talk to. Dr. Hardy. She's a psychiatrist. She helped me after – when I was going through some tough times myself." Rob couldn't bring himself to even mention Mary's death in Kyle's company. "She's sharp as a tack, and a very warm person too. I think you'll like her. How does that sound?"

Kyle stared at the linoleum floor tiles. Rob willed him to look up, to meet Rob's eyes. It worked, in a way, though what Rob saw in those eyes scared the hell out of him.

"Sure, Rob. Whatever you say." The boy stood up slowly, as though it hurt to move. "I think I'll go back to bed."

“Okay, that’s fine. I can understand that you might be tired.” Rob scrawled his cell phone number on the back of a take-out pizza menu. “Here. Call me if you need anything during the day. I’ll probably be at my desk. And like I said, I’ll be home by three.”

He watched Kyle shuffle off to the guest room, a picture of defeat. *I hope that I wasn’t too hard on him*, thought Rob as he shaved, showered and dressed. Guilt added to the burden of suppressed lust and remembered sorrow. *But it’s for his own good. His, and mine.*

Chapter Seven

Kyle buried his face in the pillow, wishing he were dead. Why had Rob been so cruel? The man still wanted him—Kyle was sure of that—yet he was systematically pushing Kyle away. What had Kyle done to deserve such treatment? Last night, the cop had been so tender, so eager for intimacy. What happened?

Despair washed over him. What did it matter? Rob had come to his senses, that's all. The guy didn't want to get mixed up with someone who had Kyle's problems. Nobody did. Kyle was a freak, a crazy Cassandra. Fear and disgust followed him wherever he went. He should be used to it. But he had thought, for a few hours last night, that Rob was different. That finally here was somebody who might give a damn what happened to him.

My mistake. I should know better, by now. Hope was a luxury that Kyle couldn't afford, not if he was going to survive. *But why bother surviving?* he thought. *What's the point?*

In any case, he had to get out before the cop came back. He rolled off the bed, as weary as if he'd run a marathon, and started to put on some of the new clothes Rob had bought for him.

His crotch hair was stiff with dried cum. He smelt like Rob's sweat. A knot tightened in his throat. He stripped again and headed for the shower. He didn't want to take any part of the older man with him. He scrubbed his skin until it was raw, scouring away the last vestiges of the night. Still wet, he pulled on his filthy jeans and ragged jacket. His old clothes smelt sour, reeking of alcohol and unwashed flesh. Familiar. Now all he needed was a bottle to keep the pictures away. Reluctantly, he grabbed a twenty dollar bill from the roll that Rob had loaned him. He wanted to leave free and clear, but sobriety was not an option.

His stomach growled with hunger, the black coffee he'd consuming sloshing around in the emptiness. He hadn't eaten since he and Rob had shared a pizza and a couple of beers the previous evening. Rob had been so warm, so animated, encouraging Kyle to eat, laughing at Kyle's jokes. They'd both been slightly drunk, buzzed but in control. Enjoying their time together. The golden recollection was as distant and fragile as a childhood memory. A brief dream of happiness. A false vision.

Kyle depressed the button on the inside doorknob and closed the apartment door behind him. The lock clicked. *Goodbye, Rob.* Pain arced through his chest. He smeared away the moisture gathering in his eyes. Why did it always have to be this way?

Because I'm cursed, he answered his own question. *I was born to suffer. And to cause suffering for others. Like Rob. But I don't want to hurt him. It's good that I've gone.*

It was still early. The sun was just peeking over the roofs of the apartment blocks and triple deckers that lined the street. Only one or two cars passed him as he made his way along the sidewalk. Crisp leaves fluttered around his ankles, then scattered in a chill gust that sliced through his jacket as though it were made of paper. He hardly noticed. Darkness was brewing in his mind, black whirlpools flecked with points of flame. He knew the signs. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the package store up ahead, the light in its barred window indicating that it was open despite the hour.

"A pint of Seagram's, please." When he saw Kyle's money, the grizzled clerk didn't bother to ask for ID. In two minutes, Kyle was back on the sidewalk, drinking deeply from the brown-bagged bottle. The vodka seared his throat, familiar pain that made him feel slightly better. The monstrous shapes shifting behind his eyelids subsided. He headed up the Belmont Street hill towards the downtown area. Somewhere he'd find a quiet bridge or a vacant lot, where he could hide and drink until he drowned the demons cavorting in his brain.

By the time he reached the I-290 overpass, he was staggering. He tripped and slammed into a wizened black woman toting her groceries, knocking her hat onto the sidewalk. "Ah, sorry, ma'am," he slurred, giggling as he tried to replace the absurd pillbox on her grey curls.

"Crazy honky bum! Get your filthy hands off me!"

"Um, really, I apologise..." But she was already gone. He fell against the railing, still chuckling, and leant over to watch the cars whizz by, blurs of bright colour. He tilted the bottle to his lips, then realised it was already empty. "Fuck!" His drunken hilarity evaporated. He held the useless thing over the highway and released it. The clash of its shattering, the squeal of brakes as cars tried to avoid the spray of broken glass, gave him an odd satisfaction. *Maybe for once I'll cause the disaster, instead of being a helpless spectator.*

As though conjured by his thought, the vision appeared full blown, wiping out the world. There were no screams. Instead soft music droned in the background, flutes and deep

horns that rose and fell in a hypnotic rhythm. There were no flames, though the flickering patterns on the walls suggested candles were the main source of illumination. Kyle felt slick, cold stone against his naked back. He lay prone, unable to move; when he tried, coarse rope bit into his wrists and ankles.

Chill tongues of fear licked at his heart. He was trapped, bound, arms and legs spread-eagled on a surface that felt like marble. He could see the ceiling, rough-hewn beams hung with cobwebs, and the walls, piled slabs of stone joined with grimy mortar, but little else. He smelt earth, mould, damp cement.

His limbs felt heavy, as if he were drugged. There was different kind of heaviness in his groin, a familiar throbbing that told him he had a hard-on. Pleasure swelled in his cock with each beat of his pulse.

What was going on? Had he fallen in with some kind of pervert? He knew he was taking a chance every time he agreed to suck someone's cock, but he needed the money for booze and the occasional burger. Had his luck finally run out?

A face hovered over him, youthful features crowned by shining blond hair. The man's eyes were an icy blue that sent new chills racing up Kyle's spine. His sensual lips curved into a broad smile that held no warmth but which revealed pearly, perfect teeth.

"Ah, Kyle! You're awake. Excellent. The ritual requires that you be conscious throughout."

"Ritual?" Kyle's voice reached his ears as though coming from far away.

The man did not answer Kyle's implied question. "My robe, Jez," he commanded. A slight brunette wearing a miniskirt stepped into Kyle's field of view long enough to slip the scarlet satin robe off the man's shoulders. He was slender but fit, with swelling pectorals and corded biceps, all furred with golden down. He mounted some sort of steps until he was standing on the platform where Kyle was bound, straddling Kyle's helpless form.

The young man's cock was as scarlet as his robe. It arched up between his thighs, rooted in blond curls, gleaming wetly in the flickering candles. Despite his fear, Kyle grew more excited. His own cock twitched and his balls tightened.

"You're beautiful, Kyle," crooned the surfer-boy looming over him. Kyle was sure that he'd never seen this man before, yet somehow that face, that mocking smile, was familiar. "I'm going to enjoy this. Perhaps you will, too."

He stepped forward until he was even with Kyle's hips, then crouched into a squat just above Kyle's throbbing erection. The head brushed against the man's furry buttocks. Kyle's pelvis gave an involuntary jerk as pleasure shimmered through him.

As Kyle's cock pushed upward, Golden-hair pressed down, embedding Kyle's rod in his greased hole. The sudden heat and tightness sent cum rushing up Kyle's shaft. Golden-hair reached behind his back and pinched Kyle's scrotum, hard enough to momentarily erase the pleasure.

"Don't come yet, boy." The young man's lips thinned to a determined line. Clearly, he was trying to maintain his own control. "I'll make you come, but only at the right time. Jez?"

Kyle felt the woman stirring beside him. The other man's eyes held him transfixed like a rabbit in the headlights of a car. Candlelight glinted on polished steel as Golden-hair raised the long knife the woman had given him.

He laid the point against Kyle's breastbone, just pricking the skin. Then he tightened the muscles in his buttocks, squeezing Kyle inside his hot channel. Kyle couldn't help himself. He arched up, burying his cock more deeply in the man's ass.

Golden-hair smiled. The knife sliced into Kyle's chest. Cum surged up his stalk. Agony and ecstasy twined together as Kyle fought for breath.

"Fuck me, Kyle," the man intoned, grinding himself against Kyle's taut body. "Fuck me while I cut out your heart."

Breath rushed back into Kyle's lungs and gathered itself into a scream of terror. He screamed even as he felt blood bubbling up from his wound and cum flooding out from his exploding cock. His scream rose higher, wilder, a hurricane of sound that tore the veil of the vision to shreds. The attacker and his shining blade whirled away. Still, the scream went on, until the hoarse wail was the only thing remaining in a dead, black universe.

Chapter Eight

The day was endless. Rob sat at his desk, watching the clock and trying to look busy.

His report on the Holden railway incident had taken less than an hour to complete. He stuck to the story of the anonymous tip. After all, aside from the anonymous aspect, it was basically the truth. Certainly, he didn't want to get Kyle involved.

Then there was the phone call from the chief of the Holden police. Polite but firm, Rob had refused the citation of honour that the town pressed on him. "It wasn't me," he had repeated. "I just relayed the message from the informant. He's the real hero."

Rob's thoughts kept returning to Kyle, each time becoming more confused. Despite his attempts to deny it, he knew in his gut that Kyle probably did have some sort of psychic ability, uncontrolled and dangerous just as Mary's had been. The notion filled him with dread. He had done the right thing, pushing the boy away, trying to put some distance between them. It was better for him, and better for Kyle, too. The youth needed to learn how to take care of himself, to take charge and tame his visions before they destroyed him. The last thing either of them needed was a messy relationship that would make Kyle dependent on Rob. And if word got out to anyone on the force, it might well be the end of Rob's career. No, he'd help Kyle get his life together, if possible, but he wouldn't let himself be snared again by the boy's carnal beauty.

At the same time, he missed Kyle terribly. He kept imagining Kyle's intense, dark eyes, his ripe lips curved in that ironic smile. Though Rob had showered and changed, every now and again he thought he caught a whiff of the young man's smoky scent on his own skin. Each time, his cock immediately swelled inside his tight uniform pants. He had to force himself to think about parking ticket accounting and the forensics class he was scheduled to take next month to calm himself down.

Since there was little routine business, Rob decided to use his time investigating Kyle's background. Anything he could find out would likely contribute to improving Kyle's overall situation.

He knew the boy's birth date. He started with City Hall, which had finally computerised their records the previous year. Of course, Kyle might not have been born in Worcester at all. However, Rob quickly found the facsimile of Kyle's birth certificate—Kyle Dylan McLaughlin, born November 21, 1989 at Mercy Hospital to Cora and Richard McLaughlin. *Okay, so far so good.* Rob searched the Worcester voting records for the parents' names, but came up with nothing. So, maybe Kyle grew up outside of the city. On a hunch, however, Rob queried the Worcester death certificate data base and found Cora and Richard there—both deceased in a car accident in 1995. Kyle would have been six. He switched to the *Worcester Telegram* archives and found the obituary. Kyle was mentioned, though not by name, but no other children.

Rob felt a pang of sympathy. No wonder Kyle seemed so isolated and defensive. Who had brought him up? The digital phone book was full of McLaughlins. Once again following his instincts, he brought up the Massachusetts Department of Social Services web site and typed in his police code, then Kyle's name and birth date. In a few minutes, he was scanning through the history of Kyle's foster placements.

In ten years, Kyle had lived with seventeen different families. His longest placement was fourteen months, and as he got older, they got shorter and shorter. Clearly, nobody could handle him. At sixteen, he vanished from the DSS records. Rob guessed that the boy had been on the streets since then.

Rob sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. Why had he been so hard on the kid? He needed to get home, to apologise, to show the boy that he cared even if he felt they shouldn't fuck anymore. He leant back in his chair, squinting at the clock. Two-thirty. That was late enough.

On the short drive back to his apartment, Rob tried to suppress the excitement that hummed through his body at the notion of seeing Kyle again. Images of the boy's cock kept surfacing, no matter how hard he worked to submerge them. Finally, he gave up and allowed himself a fantasy or two. A few fantasies couldn't hurt, as long as he didn't act on them.

His key clicked in the lock. The door swung open. "Kyle? I'm back." Rob stuck his head into the kitchen, noticing the coffee mugs still on the counter. "Kyle?" The guest room door was closed. Could it be that Kyle was still sleeping?

The bedroom was empty, though the musky odours of sweat and sex hung in the air. The bed was unmade, the twisted sheets permeated with the same scents. Rob's cock twitched in his pants as he sniffed. The clothing they had purchased the previous evening lay scattered on the floor. Kyle's filthy old jacket, jeans and sneakers were nowhere to be seen.

"Damn!" Rob slammed his fist into the doorframe in frustration. The boy was gone. Rob had driven him away, with his feigned coldness, his repudiation of the intimacy they'd shared. How could he have been so stupid? *Damn, damn, damn.*

He sank down onto the bed. Kyle's intoxicating smell rose around him. Where was the boy now? How would Rob find him? This morning, he had wished Kyle out of his life, or at least out of his imagination. Now, he wanted the boy back, wanted him so badly that the pain was physical. What an idiot he had been, not recognising that Kyle was special. That Kyle was, in fact, what he needed to bring some joy into his sparse, disciplined existence.

Where would Kyle go? Rob tried to imagine himself in the Kyle's place. He knew, now, how hard his lot had been. Rob could feel the desperation that was Kyle's constant companion. Loneliness and despair smothered him. The world was a black well of pain. Even without the visions, Kyle's existence was a living hell. Why should he continue such a life?

"No! Please, no!" Rob leapt to his feet, convinced that Kyle would try to commit suicide. But how? Where? Rob had to stop him, before it was too late. He'd take the boy in his arms, show how much he cared... if only he could figure out where the crazy kid was.

The shrill ring of Rob's mobile shocked him out of his fugue. He fumbled in his pocket for the annoying article. "Rob Murphy speaking."

"Hello?"

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"This is the acute ward at Worcester State Hospital."

Rob felt something twist in his chest. "Yes, yes. What is it?"

"We found this number in the pocket of a young man..."

"Where did you find him? Is he hurt? Can I talk to him...?" Excitement and dread mingled in Rob's voice.

"You know him, then?"

"Black hair, pale complexion, right?"

"Yes, that's right. Kyle McLaughlin. He's been here before..."

"Is he okay? Can I see him?"

"He's heavily sedated. He was found wandering barefoot and half naked in the middle of I-290, weaving between the cars, screaming at the top of his lungs."

"Oh my God..." Rob swallowed his panic. "Is he hurt? I'm police sergeant Robert Murphy. Mr. McLaughlin has been—under surveillance, in my care, since we picked him up a few days ago. However, this afternoon, he managed to sneak away."

"His feet were lacerated from walking on broken glass, and his blood alcohol was so high we were surprised that he could move. He was in a very bad psychological state. Delusional. Terrified."

"Yes, he gets that way. Can I see him? I can be there within half an hour."

"He's not conscious at the moment. We gave him a double dose of Thorazine. But if you are the person responsible..."

"That's me," said Rob grimly. "I'm responsible. I'll be there as soon as I can."

* * * *

Rob took the elevator to the sixth floor of the main building where the acute ward was located. The locked door was solid steel, painted a dull green, with a small window of reinforced glass set in upper half. Through the narrow aperture he would see a long, empty corridor, pierced by open doorways. He rang the buzzer and waited. After a few minutes, a dark-complexioned face peered at him through the window. There was a click and the door swung open.

"Sergeant Murphy?" The woman was sturdy, middle-aged, wearing a beige smock and jeans.

"Yes, ma'am." Rob flipped open his wallet to display his badge.

"Thanks for coming. I'm Louella Howard, the senior attendant on this shift. I'm the one who called you."

"I'm really glad that you did. How is Kyle?"

"He's quiet now, but it took three big guys to get him settled." Louella Howard walked him down the endless hall. Everything was covered with ceramic tile; green on the walls, grey on the floor. As they passed the doorways, Rob heard voices.

"It wasn't me!" called a woman from one room. "Tell the judge it wasn't me. No, no, it wasn't me. Tell the judge..."

"Aye, aye, aye," whimpered another female voice. "Ayee! Please. Oh please."

"Fuck you, shit head," came from a third voice, this one male. Rob glanced into the room. A balding guy in a stretched T-shirt stared out the barred window. "Fuck you, I said. Did you hear me, shit head?"

Other rooms were ominously silent. A smell of disinfectant hung in the air, mingled with a hint of stale potato chips. Rob shuddered. He hated to think of Kyle, locked in here with these...people.

"I've got to sign you in first," said Louella as they rounded a corner and came to the nurse's station, a brightly-lit glass box that looked out over a larger room filled with chairs, tables and an enormous television. Two older women sat in front of the screen, one rocking back and forth, muttering to herself, the other occupied picking lint from her skirt. The attendant handed him a clipboard. Rob signed his name and wrote the date.

"That's Jem," said Louella, pointing to a hefty black man sitting and reading at a desk on the other side of the glass. "He brought Mr. McLaughlin upstairs. And got a bloody nose to show for it!"

"I'm sorry," Rob murmured, feeling that somehow this was his fault.

"Ah, don't worry, happens all the time. But that kid is a lot stronger than he looks."

"Yes," Rob replied, remembering his legs tangling with Kyle's the night before. "He is."

"Ellen's on break, but she'll be back in a few minutes. She's the shift nurse. Dispenses the meds and so on. Decides when to call the doctor."

Louella led him farther down the hall to the end. Unlike the other rooms, Kyle's had a door, which was closed. It swung open when Louella pushed it.

Kyle lay in the centre of the windowless tiled, room, on a hospital bed with the sides raised. He wore loose cotton pants and a johnny, both originally white but washed until they had turned grey. His wrists and his ankles were tied to the rails with woven cloth straps. His bare feet hung off the end of the mattress. Rust-red gashes covered his soles.

Rob rushed to the bedside, the knife of remorse twisting in his gut. Kyle's face was even paler than usual, his eyelashes sooty black against his cheeks. His brow was furrowed and his full lips twisted into a frown. He did not look peaceful.

"Poor boy's been in and out of here at least a dozen times in the last two or three years," commented Louella. "But I've never seen him this bad."

"Can you untie him, at least? I know he'd hate being restrained."

"I suppose so. He hasn't moved in a couple of hours."

The aching in Rob's chest made it hard for him to breathe. He blinked away the tears pricking at the corners of his eyes and put his hand on Kyle's bound one. "Kyle," he murmured. "Kyle, it's me. Rob. I'm here. I'm sorry for what I said, Kyle. I really didn't mean it. I was just afraid."

Kyle's lips twitched, but he did not wake.

Rob stroked Kyle's arm, marvelling at the smoothness of his skin. When he looked at the boy, he was overwhelmed – with pity, sorrow, regret, affection, and yes, desire. Under his own confused emotions, he sensed a current of feeling that seemed to flow from Kyle – the darkest loneliness, the deepest fear, such utter hopelessness that he could hardly bear it. "Kyle, baby," he whispered. "Don't worry. I'm here."

"He can't hear you, sergeant. He's gone. He'll be out for five, six hours at least."

Rob seated himself in the chair beside the bed, never letting go of Kyle's hand. "That's okay," he told the attendant. "I'll wait."

Chapter Nine

Kyle's mouth was so dry he couldn't swallow. His ears rang. Ants crawled under his skin, creating an internal itch impossible to relieve. He recognised the side effects of Thorazine. Must have been a heavy dose. He groped through a fog, straining for consciousness. Anything was better than the smothering lethargy the drug produced.

He risked opening his eyes. A yellow halo surrounded the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. The brightness made him squint. It was all familiar.

He didn't remember checking himself in. He didn't remember anything, really, after leaving Rob's apartment. His chest ached at that memory. He'd been so naïve, imagining that Rob might be different. That he might actually care.

Despair closed in around him. *I wish I'd never woken up*, Kyle mused. *I wish this was all over*. He closed his eyes again, willing the blackness to swallow him, but his mind remained stubbornly aware.

"Kyle? Can you hear me?" That voice, soft but strong. What was he doing here?

Kyle turned his head, fighting the drug-fuelled tightness in his neck muscles. It was *déjà vu*. Once again, the sandy-haired cop sat at his bedside, fidgeting with his cap, his face sombre and worried. A tiny flicker of hope kindled in Kyle's heart. He extinguished it immediately.

"Go away." He rolled to his side, turning his back on the blue-clad figure.

"Please, Kyle. Listen to me. I'm so sorry. Really, I was so stupid..."

Resolute, Kyle closed his ears to Rob's pleas. *No one is going to hurt me again. Especially not you*. He thought about razor blades and rat poison. Alcohol was too slow. He'd do what was necessary to escape from the madness, to spare himself – and Rob – any more pain.

An image of gleaming steel fluttered through his mind. Gradually the scene returned, the terrible vision that had sent him screaming into blind insanity. Enough of the drug lingered in his system that he could inspect his recollections impassively. The vivid and disturbing premonition had been atypical, a waking fit in which he personally experienced the predicted horrors. The patterns of his madness seemed to be shifting. What did it mean?

All at once, he remembered the images he had seen when he first met Rob, the pulse-pounding blow job, the joy of being on his knees serving the powerful older man. That dream had come true, at least in spirit. Saliva gathered in his parched mouth as he recalled the weight of Rob's cock on his tongue, the solid force of the other man's thrusts, the sharp flavour of his ejaculate.

Rob's hand clasped his shoulder. Kyle's cock stirred, defying the deadening effects of the medication.

"Forgive me, Kyle. Please. Look at me, baby."

It was the endearment that did it, cracked Kyle open and let the pain and desire flow in. He allowed Rob to roll him onto his back. He gazed up into the cop's sky-blue eyes, tears gathering in his own.

"Rob..." he began.

"I know. I know. I'm an idiot. I tried to push you away. I lied to you. Tell me that you forgive me. That you'll give me another chance to be with you. To take care of you."

"Why?" Kyle struggled to raise himself to a sitting position. Rob grabbed the thin pillow and tried to help. Kyle noticed the straps hanging from the chrome rails. Restraints. He must have been really crazy. "Didn't you want me? We were so good together."

"I was afraid." Rob sat back in his chair, staring at his shoes. "Afraid of your powers."

"Powers? You mean my visions?" Kyle had a hard time imagining the tough cop being afraid of anything.

Rob nodded. "I have to tell you the truth, Kyle. About the train. The Holden force found a kid on the tracks with a badly broken leg."

"Just like in my vision." Kyle took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And they saved him?"

"Of course. The next train was at midnight. If I hadn't called when you asked me..."

"But you did call."

Rob half-grinned. "I couldn't resist you."

The pressure in Kyle's chest lessened. "It didn't happen. I saw it, the disaster, but you changed the future."

"We did. That wasn't the first time, either."

"What?"

"When I picked you, just before you blacked out, you whispered an address."

"Yeah, I remember. I saw it scrawled on a wall."

"I sent a man over, thinking it might be your place. He smelt smoke. There was a fire starting on the roof. They put it out before it could spread."

"Oh my God... That's wonderful!" Kyle wanted to jump out of bed and give Rob a hug, but his limbs weren't quite up to that yet. He settled for squeezing the other man's arm. The brief touch hardened him further. "It's great! Why were you afraid? Seems like between the two of us, we've managed what I could never do by myself."

Rob's eyebrows gathered into a frown. "It's personal," he said. "But I'll tell you, later, once we get you out of here and back home."

Home. Kyle had never heard so sweet a word.

* * * *

Kyle and Rob sat across from one another in the booth at Eduardo's Cantina. Empty plates smeared with refried beans and salsa littered the rough wooden table. With one blunt-fingered hand, Rob crushed fragments of left-over tortilla chips to yellow crumbs. He wouldn't meet Kyle's eyes. Kyle reached for his nervous hand and brought it to his lips. He licked the greasy, salty valleys between Rob's fingers. Rob's cheeks flushed red. Kyle's balls tightened inside his jeans.

"Tell me," he ordered. "You can trust me, Rob."

Rob's eyes were deep wells of pain. "My little sister Mary," he began. "She was like you."

Kyle listened to the story of Mary's trials and her murder. He felt a physical ache as the other man finally shared his anger and grief. No wonder Rob had panicked. Such a sad, tortured life the woman had endured, and such a horrible death. Kyle had believed in Rob's public face, the strong, self-confident, uncomplicated cop. Now, he saw how vulnerable his lover really was.

"Maybe I can help," Kyle offered as Rob concluded his tale. "Maybe I can see something that will give you a clue."

"But you only see the future, not the past." Rob extricated his hand from Kyle's grasp and brushed his hair back from his forehead with a sigh. "How can you help?"

"Perhaps whoever killed her will try to kill again." Kyle remembered the blond man from his last prescient attack and shuddered. Could there be a link? There had been some talk of cutting out his heart, though Kyle had been so bemused by lust he'd hardly noticed.

"I really don't want anything more to do with psychic powers," Rob muttered.

"But you want me, don't you?" Kyle reached under the table and stroked Rob's thigh. The man across from him started, then grinned.

"Yeah, I do. Heaven help me, I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone."

"Well, then take me. And let me help ease your pain." Kyle couldn't reach Rob's cock, but he could feel the heat coming from the man's erection. His own trousers became tighter by the minute. "Or at least help you forget it for a while."

Kyle found it difficult to walk out of the restaurant with his groin so swollen. Rob unlocked the passenger-side door of the Saturn sedan. Kyle slipped inside. As soon as Rob had settled into the driver's seat, Kyle was on him, his tongue deep in Rob's mouth and his hand on Rob's zipper. The cop tasted of jalapeños and beer. Kyle nipped at Rob's thin lips as he struggled to extricate the cock bulging inside Rob's uniform.

"Wait, Kyle..." Rob gasped when Kyle let him come up for air. "Someone will see." The parking lot behind the restaurant was pretty dark, but headlights swept by on the side road every few minutes.

"I don't care." Kyle gripped Rob's shaft in one hand, cupping the slippery head in the other. Rob groaned. Kyle bent over and slathered the knob with saliva. Rob's hips bucked. Kyle captured the bulb between pursed lips. He sucked for a moment, then swirled his tongue over the taut skin at the tip, flicking at the sensitive underside. "I've got to have your cock." He reached into Rob's trousers and cradled the other man's hairy balls. "If anyone interrupts us, you can tell them that I'm crazy and I forced you."

Rob's laugh turned to a moan as Kyle swallowed the whole rod, taking it deep into his throat. Kyle let Rob appreciate the heat and wetness for an instant, then turned on the suction, bobbing his head up and down in Rob's lap. His mouth locked on Rob's flesh. He loved the way the silky skin stretched impossibly tight over the hardness at Rob's core. He

tongued the little ridge under the cap. He loved the way Rob shivered and slammed his dick against Kyle's palate in response.

"Oh, Kyle..." Rob arched into Kyle's mouth, all resistance apparently forgotten. Kyle sucked harder, revelling at the tension he sensed growing in the rigid stalk. He craved more, more of Rob's succulent flesh. He wriggled his hands under Rob's waistband and into his shorts, grabbing two handfuls of the other man's butt. He felt Rob's gluteal muscles contract under his palms as the cop ground his pelvis against Kyle's jaw.

Rob grunted and surged forward, taking control. Kyle let his mouth go slack, overwhelmed by the man's physicality. His own aching cock pressed against his zipper, screaming for release, but Kyle wanted to concentrate on Rob. This was more than a blow job; this was his chance to show Rob how much Kyle wanted him — and how much pleasure Kyle could provide, if only Rob would allow it. He kneaded the cop's furry ass, inching his fingers closer to the crack.

Rob's skin inside his trousers grew slick with sweat as he continued to hammer away at Kyle's mouth. Saliva leaked from Kyle's lips. Rob's scent was all around him, rising from the coarse blond hair tickling his nose. Kyle slid one finger into the slippery crevice between the man's butt cheeks and found the whorl of muscle hidden there. He pressed against the clenched entrance. Rob wailed and pushed himself farther down Kyle's throat. Kyle worked a fingertip into the tight hole. The cock in his mouth shuddered, convulsed and spat gobs of bitter fluid onto his tongue.

Kyle swallowed triumphantly. Rob raised him up and pulled him into a fiery kiss that mingled the flavours of semen and salsa. Kyle's hard-on pulsed in his jeans, a whisper away from climax. "Oh, Kyle baby," the older man murmured, nibbling at the corners of Kyle's battered mouth. "That was incredible. Nobody's ever done me like that." He licked a droplet of cum from Kyle's chin, then continued, trailing his tongue along Kyle's jaw then down to the hollow of his throat. Electric pleasure shot through Kyle's trembling limbs. His cock trembled. "I can't believe... I almost lost you...oh, Kyle!"

Rob clasped Kyle to his breast and buried his face in Kyle's neck. Kyle felt new wetness, not from Rob's tongue but from his tears. Joy and wonder ballooned in his chest as his confined cock exploded inside his jeans. Blackness flickered at the periphery of his vision. Madness threatened. For once, he didn't care.

Chapter Ten

Rob forced himself to slow down. It was pretty late, and traffic was light, but it wouldn't do to be pulled over for speeding by one of Worcester's finest. Especially with his car reeking of sex and a pretty young man strapped in beside him.

He smiled, remembering the velvet sensation of Kyle's tongue on his cock. Damn, the kid was good. It was more than just sexual skill, though. Rob had felt Kyle's concentration, his complete attention to pleasuring his partner. The vibes were so strong, Rob almost imagined he could read the drifter's mind. For the first time since he and Kyle had met, Kyle had been happy. Focused yet relaxed, comfortable, confident in his ability to evoke the most intense orgasm Rob had ever experienced. The boy seemed to know, instinctively, what turned Rob on. The memory of that single finger poking into his ass made him hard again in an instant.

He glanced over at his passenger. Kyle appeared to be sleeping. Hardly surprising, considering what he'd been through that day, physically and emotionally. Street lamps provided fitful illumination for that pale, sensitive face. For once, Kyle's features looked peaceful, a far cry from the tortured expression he had worn in the psychiatric hospital.

Rob had sat for five hours by Kyle's side, waiting for the drugged man to return to consciousness. He'd studied those elegant brows, those ripe lips, that sensual nose and determined chin. He had watched the effects of Kyle's evil dreams, the frantic movement of his eyes behind closed lids, the furrowing brow, the tightening of his mouth. Rob knew that if anything happened to Kyle, it would be his fault. He couldn't afford to save himself at Kyle's expense. He had puzzled over the overwhelming urge he felt to protect a man who was basically a stranger. Finally, he just accepted it.

Kyle was far too young for him. Kyle was either dangerously unstable or a victim of uncontrolled psychic power—possibly both. Kyle came from the streets and had probably fucked a hundred guys in order to survive. Kyle could easily ruin his career. None of that mattered. All Rob wanted was to keep the boy close.

He pulled into his parking space and killed the engine. Kyle didn't stir. Rob gave him a gentle shake. "Kyle? We're here."

The youth gave him a beatific smile. "Ah, right. Sorry, guess I drifted off. I was having a great dream." He stretched, his lithe body making Rob's cock stiffen further. "A normal dream, for once," he added. "Not some paranormal vision."

"Oh yeah?" Rob led the way up the stairs to his apartment, moving awkwardly due to his erection. He stood back from the open door, letting Kyle enter first, then closed it and threw the bolt. "What did you dream?"

Kyle came up from behind and threw his arms around Rob's chest. He rubbed the hard lump in his groin against Rob's ass. "I dreamt that your cock was inside me," he whispered.

Rob's penis leapt inside his sticky shorts. He turned to face his companion. They were nearly equal in height, though Kyle had a slighter build. He pressed his lips against Kyle's, tracing the bow-shaped outline with his tongue. Reaching down between their bodies, he palmed Kyle's huge erection. Kyle ground himself against Rob's hand. By the time they broke the kiss, both were panting.

"That, at least, is a dream that could come true," Rob murmured as he unbuttoned Kyle's shirt and unzipped the fly. The borrowed clothing was stiff with cum. They'd have to wash it well before returning it to the hospital.

Kyle's smoky scent rose from his exposed pubes. His cock jutted towards the ceiling, a rod of ivory tipped with ruby. "I think I need a shower first," he commented with a grin. "Come on."

Kyle led the way to the bathroom. Rob hastened to follow, dropping his clothes on the way. The glass door of the shower stall was already misted with steam when he stepped inside. Kyle stood under the showerhead, his back arched, jet locks slicked back from his brow and rampant cock dripping. He opened his eyes as Rob entered. Scalding spray hit Rob's belly.

"I like it hot," said Kyle, spreading suds over his chest and down his taut abdomen. "Hope that's okay." He grasped his cock in a soapy fist and pumped it a few times. Rob thought he'd cream just from the sight.

"Hot's fine with me." Rob scooped a handful of foam from Kyle's body and rubbed it over his own pecs. His nipples stood up like triggers from the mat of soapy fur. Kyle reached out to tweak one of the aching beads. A thunderbolt of pleasure struck Rob's groin.

Kyle's nipples were hidden by soapsuds. Rob trailed a finger through the lather, from Kyle's navel to his collarbone, then spiralled around Kyle's breast, exposing damp skin. He snagged the nub at the apex between thumb and forefinger and squeezed. Kyle gasped.

"Like that, boy?" He pulled Kyle's slippery body against his own, straddling the other man's thigh.

"Yeah..." Rob's cock slid back and forth across Kyle's wet flesh. He pinched the rosy head of Kyle's erection. Kyle yelped in surprise.

"And that?"

"Oh, yeah. Anything, Rob, I like anything you do to me..." Kyle whimpered with pleasure as Rob milked his cock. Kyle seemed so delicate, so malleable. Fierce lust boiled up in Rob's heart. His cock was stone. More rough than he'd been before, he turned the boy around, pressing Kyle's hips against the tiles, then flattened himself against the other man's back. He ran his erection along Kyle's butt crack, sliding over the soapy skin.

"And you want me to fuck you?" He jerked his hips, forcing Kyle closer to the wall. "You want my cock in your ass?"

"Please..."

Rob explored the crevice between Kyle's cheeks, stroking, testing. "Spread your legs. Open for me."

Kyle obeyed. Rob found the ring of muscle guarding Kyle's rear entrance and pushed, expecting easy entry. The rubbery knot resisted his invasion, but Kyle moaned and rubbed himself against the wall. Rob grabbed the soap and ran it up and down in Kyle's ass crack, then tried again. One finger entered, up to the first joint. Kyle shivered underneath him.

Damn, he was tight! "Relax your muscles, Kyle. Let me in."

"I'm trying..."

Sudden anger seized Rob. The guy was making a fool of him, leading him on. He shoved his finger deeper. Kyle wailed. Rob added a second finger, spreading them to stretch Kyle's hole. Rob thought he heard a sob above the splash of the water. "If you want my cock, you've got to let me in," he growled. "Pretend I'm one of your johns." Tearing his fingers out

of Kyle's anus, he pushed his cockhead against the soapy entrance. The boy had asked for a fuck, by God, and he was going to give him one...

"No, no, it's not like that... Rob, please. It's my first time..."

"What?" Rob roared. He whirled Kyle around so fast that the youth slipped on the tiles. Rob caught his arm just in time. "What are you talking about? You told me...."

"All I ever did was suck cock." Kyle's cheeks were pink, from embarrassment, excitement or maybe just the hot water. "Really. I never let anyone fuck me." He reached for Rob's cock, stroking it shyly. "I want you to be the first."

Rob's anger drained away as quickly as it had arrived, to be replaced by remorse. "Christ, I'm sorry. From what you said, from the way you acted, I thought..."

"I know. It's partly my fault. I didn't want you to see me as just some inexperienced kid. I wanted you to treat me like a man."

Rob's cock surged in Kyle's hand. Rob leant in to kiss those tempting lips. Kyle's knob slid over Rob's soapy abs.

"I will. You'll be my man. I'll show you how." Buzzing with new excitement, Rob rushed to rinse and towel himself off. Kyle did the same, sending occasional shy glances in his direction. Kyle was a virgin. It was almost too much to be believed. Thank heaven Rob hadn't yielded to his angry impulse. He wanted to make this perfect for Kyle, to somehow compensate for all the pain and disappointment he had suffered.

Rob seized Kyle's hand and practically dragged his companion into his bedroom. He hesitated for a moment, then flipped the light switch. Kyle might be a bit nervous, but by God, Rob wanted to see his face when they coupled. He pulled Kyle into his arms for another sloppy kiss, delighting in the sensation of the other man's rigid penis pressed against his belly. "On the bed, baby," he murmured in Kyle's ear. "Lay on your back."

"Wait." Kyle slipped from the embrace to kneel on the planked floor at Rob's feet. "I just have to taste your cock one more time." Before Rob could stop him, Kyle had enveloped Rob's cock in the steamy depths of his talented mouth.

"No...please!" Rob protested. "Stop, or I'll shoot too soon. I want to save it for your ass." Kyle ignored him, gripping Rob's thighs and gobbling his flesh like a man who hadn't eaten for days. Before long, Rob was moaning and cursing, jerking his hips to thrust deep

into Kyle's throat. A red haze of lust fogged his brain, but even so, Rob could feel Kyle's determination, his intense focus on Rob's swollen organ.

Kyle acted as though Rob's cock was the only thing in the universe that mattered. He suckled the thick baton of flesh with near-religious frenzy. His fingernails scored Rob's thighs as he struggled to take every inch of the cop's rod. The fragments of biting pain only made Rob hotter.

Cum surged half-way up Rob's stalk. "Enough!" he pleaded, gasping for control. "I can't take anymore!" He wrenched his dick out of Kyle's mouth, clenching his muscles to hold back the flood. Then he sank to his haunches, level with Kyle's kneeling figure, and kissed him until they both were trembling.

"I love your mouth, Kyle. You drive me crazy. But I want us to come together." He caressed Kyle's cheek, ran his thumb over those luscious, ripe lips. "Okay?"

Kyle nodded, giving up any resistance. He threw himself onto the mattress, his back against the piled pillows, knees up, spreading his thighs wide. "How do you want me?"

Rob swallowed hard at the view. Kyle's alabaster cock, the strawberry-hued bulb glistening with pre-cum, pointed up at the ceiling. His compact balls hung underneath, the skin a dusky olive hue. Rob's mouth watered as he imagined licking those tender orbs, cradling them on his tongue. Finally, there was the shadowy crease between Kyle's butt cheeks, furred with black down. As if he felt the weight of Rob's gaze, Kyle pulled his cheeks apart. Now Rob could see the pucker of Kyle's rear hole, hairless, pink and vulnerable. Kyle licked his lips and grinned. "You like?"

"Oh, baby!" Rob breathed, launching himself onto the bed. He buried his face in Kyle's crotch, tonguing Kyle's shaft and suckling his balls just as he'd imagined moments earlier. He swirled the tip of his tongue around Kyle's sphincter then poked at it gently. Kyle released a tremolo moan, encouraging Rob to probe deeper. A shudder shook Kyle's frame as Rob worked his finger past the first ring of muscle. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking up to search Kyle's face.

"Oh, yeah. It's just so intense..."

"Just wait, if you think this is something..."

Rob leant over to the bed table drawer and retrieved the lube and the condoms he had stored there on the first night Kyle had spent at his place. Wishful thinking, he'd told himself

then. But it was always better to be prepared. He squirted a dollop of transparent gel into his left palm and scooped some up with the fingers of the other hand. Kyle watched him, eyes wide.

"This might be a bit cold," Rob said, slathering the lube around Kyle's hole. "But I'm sure you'll warm it up pretty quick." He placed his slippery forefinger against the taut entrance and pushed gently. The digit slid easily into the greased orifice. Rob felt Kyle tense at the invasion. "Relax, baby," he crooned. "Let me inside." He inserted a second finger next to the first and wiggled them around. Kyle felt looser already.

"Oh God..." Kyle gasped.

"Too much?"

"Oh no, no. Give me more. I want everything you can give me, Rob." Still, Kyle whimpered softly when Rob added his third finger and pushed all three in past the second knuckle.

Rob paused, letting Kyle adjust to the novel sensations. Meanwhile, he grabbed a condom with his left hand, opened it with his teeth, and smoothed it over his enormous erection. He'd never been this hard. It was incredible, especially since he'd already come once in the car. He spread the fingers of his right hand, buried in Kyle's ass, stretching gently. At the same time, he squeezed a line of lube down the length of his cock, like mustard onto a hotdog, and rubbed it all over.

He knelt between Kyle's splayed thighs, fingers still embedded in the boy's butt. As Rob pulled them out slowly, Kyle clenched his sphincter as though trying to keep them inside. "Don't worry," Rob chuckled. "I've got something better for you."

Kyle's empty hole gaped a bit now. Rob positioned the slick bulb of his cock against that pursed flesh. Kyle watched him, with a serious face and luminous eyes. Rob pressed firmly. His cockhead slipped inside. Kyle's eyebrows shot up, but he made no sound. Rob jerked his hips. Kyle gave a sharp cry. Two more inches disappeared into Kyle's hot, tight ass. Rob struggled to maintain control as the other man clamped down on the cock invading his bowels.

Rob leant forward, brushing his lips against Kyle's. Kyle moaned into his mouth as Rob thrust again, filling him further. Rob laid his hand on Kyle's chest. He felt the boy's heartbeat, strong and fast. "One more push," he murmured in Kyle's ear. "Can you take it?"

"Please..." Kyle whispered. "Do it. Now."

Rob arched his back and drove his cock in up to the balls. Kyle yelled, but when Rob tried to pull out, Kyle arched up, trying to jam him in deeper. "Fuck me," Kyle groaned. "Don't hold back. Fuck me hard."

The words cut Rob loose, breaking the last threads of his control. He pulled back then rammed into Kyle with all his strength, once, twice, again, while Kyle screamed and ground his buttocks against Rob's groin. Rob grabbed Kyle's thighs to support himself as he pistoned his cock in and out.

He'd never had a fuck like this, so tight, so smooth, so purely sensual. He'd worried whether Kyle could take his whole bulk, but Kyle's asshole enclosed him like a velvet glove, a perfect fit. He bucked and moaned, piercing Kyle again and again, tension building in his balls as wave after wave of pleasure broke over him. He stopped worrying about whether he was hurting his partner. The gleaming dark eyes, locked on his own, told him that he was not.

Kyle gripped Rob's wrists, writhing in obvious pleasure. "More, more, more," he chanted, clenching Rob's shaft, rising up to meet each thrust. Kyle's pale cock danced in front of Rob's eyes. Kyle's body shook with the force of Rob's fierce onslaught. "Oh, fuck, yes. Fuck, fuck, oh, that's so good. Ream my ass with your huge dick. Ah..."

Kyle's eyes rolled up and his mouth grew wide. Sudden panic swept through Rob's mind. Was the boy having another fit? A steaming jet of cum erupted from Kyle's cock, splattering Rob's chest, and Rob laughed in delight. Kyle was simply coming, coming from the feel of Rob's cock buried in his ass.

The realisation triggered Rob's own climax. The jism churning in his balls finally boiled over. He slammed his gushing cock deep into Kyle's body, wanting the other man to feel the force of his convulsions. Kyle moaned and tightened around Rob's still hard flesh, milking spurt after spurt of cum, kindling jolt after jolt of pleasure.

Rob lay on Kyle's chest for a moment, catching his breath. Then he rolled over to relieve the weight, stretching out beside his companion's slender frame. He closed his eyes, a bit weary. He'd had more sex in the last twenty-four hours than in the previous two months.

He was roused by Kyle's silky lips pressing against his own. "Thank you, Rob." His voice was soft, almost reverent. "It was just like I dreamt."

He opened his eyes to find Kyle hovering over him, radiating happiness and contentment. "It didn't hurt too much?"

"Not too much. Just enough." Rob felt something bounce against his stomach. Looking down, he was astounded to see that the younger man was hard again. "I'm so grateful."

"And I'm exhausted!" Rob peered at the alarm clock. "It's nearly two a.m., and I've got to work tomorrow. So don't get any more ideas in your slutty mind."

Kyle gave him a lascivious grin, and stared pointedly at Rob's cock. Damn if it wasn't half-erect! "But..."

"Not tonight. No more sex."

"Can I sleep with you, at least?" Kyle snuggled down next to him, not waiting for an answer. A strange lump rose in Rob's throat as the youth's limbs tangled themselves with his own.

"Yeah, okay." Rob smoothed Kyle's hair out of his eyes. "I'd like that." Peace settled over him like a warm, fuzzy blanket. "I'd like that very much."

Chapter Eleven

Warmth. Comfort. Pearly light teasing him, inviting him to open his eyes. Kyle resisted, wanting to hold on to his sweet dreams for a few more moments, but the vague images of smooth, hard flesh evaporated in the insistent dawn. With a sigh, Kyle raised his heavy eyelids, only to find his dream come to life beside him.

Rob slept, lying on his back with his forearm shielding his eyes from the growing glow of morning. His normally determined lips were loose, curled into the germ of a smile. His muscled chest surged with the rhythm of each breath. His meaty cock poked up, proudly erect, between his corded thighs. Perhaps Rob was dreaming, too.

Kyle shifted to his side so that he could watch the older man's slumber. Rob's musky scent was like a drug. Kyle was hard in a matter of seconds. He was tempted to wake his companion with a wet kiss delivered to that deliciously swollen penis. A quick glance at the alarm clock discouraged him, however. It was barely five-thirty. Rob needed his sleep. He had told Kyle that he was due at the station by eight, and it had been nearly three when they had finally settled down together.

Lying in Rob's arms, Kyle had felt a peace that he hadn't known since he was a child. Rob was more than just physically strong. His maturity, his sense of responsibility, his resolute determination to do the right thing, almost made Kyle believe that he was safe. Perhaps Rob really could protect him against the world and his own demons. Certainly, there was some sort of psychic chemistry between them – the fact that together they had averted two disasters foretold by Kyle's curse kindled a spark of hope in Kyle's breast.

Kyle's hand hovered above Rob's shoulder. He was desperate to touch the man. But if Rob could be strong, Kyle could be, too. Careful to avoid waking the cop, Kyle stole out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

His erection had subsided enough that he could pee. A sharp twinge in his rear hole made him hard again. He reached back between his butt cheeks, exploring the cleft which was slick with residual lubricant. He felt loose, stretched. Sure enough, his finger slipped easily into the dark entrance where Rob had pierced him.

The pleasure of that slight invasion erased the residual pain. Kyle slid his finger in and out of the still-greased orifice, remembering the feel of Rob's invading bulk. God, it had been incredible! It was not just the sensations, though, the shimmering protest of strained muscle, the weight of that solid cock on his prostate, the pressure building in Kyle's balls. No, it was the connection between the two of them that had made the experience so intense. Kyle had watched emotions parade across Rob's face as the other man fucked him – fear, affection, concern, overwhelming and irresistible lust. And at the final moment, when Kyle showered Rob's chest with cum and Rob exploded in Kyle's bowels, there had been something else, something so pure and powerful that Kyle hesitated to give it a name.

Gratitude swelled in Kyle's chest. Rob had given him a precious gift last night. The cop probably didn't realise how rare were the days that Kyle woke up happy.

What can I do for him? Kyle wandered into the kitchen with the vague idea of cooking breakfast for his host, but the refrigerator was bachelor-bare. He had to be satisfied with making a pot of strong coffee. Pouring himself a cup, he perched on one of stools next to the counter, smiling at the protest from his ravaged ass.

He reviewed the previous night's post-dinner conversation, Rob's tale of Mary's telepathic powers and her brutal murder. The unsolved crime was a huge wound in Rob's heart. If Kyle could somehow gain a glimpse of the truth, Rob might be able to make peace with the horrible memories. But how? What could he do, when he was as much at the mercy of his wild extra-sensory abilities as Mary had been?

All at once, he remembered a detail that Rob had shared. In the weeks before she was killed, Mary told Rob she was learning to control her power. She had found someone who was helping her, teaching her. If he and Rob could figure out the identity of this mysterious teacher, perhaps this person could help Kyle become the master of his visions instead of their victim.

"Good morning, baby." Rob's husky voice interrupted Kyle's musings. "You're up early." The cop stepped between Kyle's splayed thighs and pulled Kyle into a fierce kiss. One hand dropped down to stroke Kyle's rapidly hardening penis.

Kyle relaxed into Rob's embrace. Rob's tongue invaded his mouth, demanding a submission that Kyle was eager to give. Meanwhile, his host's fingers danced up and down his rigid shaft, sending bolts of pleasure racing up Kyle's spine. The tightness in his balls told

him he'd spurt in moments if Rob continued his massage. He wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry when the cop released him.

"Coffee smells great. But I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. Why don't we get dressed? We'll hit the Boulevard Diner before I go to work."

Kyle reached for Rob's half-hard dick. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go back to bed?"

"Ah, Kyle..." Rob favoured him with an affectionate grin. "Of course I would. But, unfortunately, the force doesn't give me time off to butt-fuck gorgeous young men."

Kyle's sphincter clenched. Ripples of pain turned to aching pleasure by the time they reached his cock. He rubbed his thumb over the bulb of Rob's cock, then slid two fingers down the length. The rod jerked and swelled in his hand. "Seems like we need to take a shower first, don't you think?" He squeezed. Rob gasped. "You might get some people upset if you come in to work smelling like cum."

"True. I suppose that we do have time for a quick shower." Rob didn't resist as Kyle led him by his cock towards the bathroom.

* * * *

After they had consumed more coffee, and unhealthy quantities of bacon, eggs, and home fries, Rob dropped Kyle back at the apartment. He leant across the gear shift to offer a solid kiss. Kyle relished the tang of the Tabasco in which Rob drowned his over-easies.

"I'll be home in the early afternoon," Rob said, finally breaking the clinch. "And I don't want you going anywhere, do you understand?"

"What about lunch?"

"We'll eat when I get back."

"I'll have a cock sandwich, then," Kyle teased.

"Please, have some mercy. My cock is practically hard-boiled from that last shower."

"Well, as long as it's hard..."

"You little wretch! Behave yourself. I'm late already."

"Okay, okay. I know when I'm not wanted."

"You're wanted, boy. I would think you'd understand that by now." This kiss was gentle, wistful, with an underlying reluctance. Kyle sensed Rob fighting against himself. The cop still couldn't completely accept his tender feelings.

"One thing, Rob. You said you still have Mary's things."

Rob's face darkened. "Yeah. Why?"

"Would you mind very much if I went through them? You said last night that she'd found someone to help her master her telepathic powers. If I could find that person..."

Fear clouded Rob's eyes. "Well, I don't know..."

"Please. It may be the only hope for me." Kyle didn't add that it might give them some clues about Mary's fate. He knew that Rob didn't want to think about that. "I'll be careful..."

"I know you will. You probably understand what she went through better than anyone." Rob shrugged and sat back in the driver's seat. "There are two boxes, up in the closet in the guest room. Papers, books, that sort of thing."

"Great, thanks. And don't worry, I'll be fine. I promise I'll stay put. I'll miss you, though."

"And I'll miss you. Now get out, boy, before I grab you again."

Rob peeled away from the kerb, leaving Kyle laughing on the sidewalk.

Kyle let himself into the apartment with the key Rob had given him and went straight to the guest room. He seated himself on the throw rug and systematically began to remove the items in the first box, one by one.

Mostly, they were remnants of her unconventional education – math exercises, term papers, exams, all graded in a female hand that Kyle guessed must belong to Rob's mother. Then there were textbooks, assignments and printed emails from Mary's online university courses – English literature, history, economics, and deeper down in the box, bookkeeping, tax structures, corporate audits, equities and bonds, and other topics related to accountancy. Mary had been a good student. It was rare to see anything but top marks on her papers.

None of this was relevant to Mary's telepathy. Frustrated, Kyle turned to the second box, which revealed more personal things. A brightly-painted cigar box held marbles, seashells and quartz pebbles, a jay's feather and a pressed, dried rose. The tarnished silver casket contained earrings, beads, and a string of cultured pearls. There were little girl diaries clad in pink and aqua leatherette, and later, school notebooks in which Mary had kept her

journals. Kyle scanned the dates, and set aside the most recent volume, started about three years ago.

He dug out an address book. A snow-globe paperweight from Niagara Falls. A programme from the ballet *Giselle*, so old that the cover cracked and crumbled under Kyle's fingers. Finally, Kyle unearthed a framed photo, showing a much younger Rob and a girl who had to be Mary in front of an orange pup tent and a blue-green wall of pines.

The woman's hair was redder and more curly than Rob's, but she had the same fair complexion, the same straight nose and liquid blue eyes. She smiled at the camera, obviously enjoying her excursion in the great outdoors.

Rob, on the other hand, appeared to be grinning at his kid sister. He wore a black T-shirt that hugged his chest, tight jeans and hiking boots, and his hair was longer, a bit unruly, tumbling into his eyes. There were no signs of stress, no worry lines on his brow. He was absolutely gorgeous. He looked completely at ease, his arm around Mary's shoulders, the strong, proud big brother.

Clearly the siblings had been close. Kyle felt a pang of sympathy. He barely remembered his own parents. That had to be easier than what Rob had experienced.

The second box was empty. Kyle picked up the journal he had segregated and turned to the end. The last entry was dated 12 June 2007. Just a week before the author had disappeared.

"Another session with E.," Mary wrote. "My control is improving. She took me to the store in the centre of town, full of people at lunch time. All I heard was a low murmur of their thoughts, almost soothing. Then she told me to focus on the shop-keeper. As soon as E. pointed the stout old woman out to me, it seemed that I had a window into her mind – her worries about her grandson at Worcester State College, the pains in her back, her pleasure at the prospect of closing on Sunday.

"I tried thought-casting, the way we've been practicing, sending a message of reassurance. It was amazing. As I watched, the woman's scowl relaxed and she stood straighter behind the counter. She smiled at me as I purchased my little bag of hard candies. I felt a huge sense of accomplishment.

"Then three or four people crowded up from behind, and I lost my focus. The babble rose up around me. I nearly screamed. Fortunately, E. saw my distress and got me away before I made a fool of myself.

"Still, I am getting better all the time. Maybe my days of isolation are finally at an end."

Kyle re-read the last paragraph. He knew only too well how the woman had felt. His curse set him apart from people nearly as completely as hers had. Maybe there was hope for him, too. But only if he could figure out who this 'E.' was, and how to get in touch with her.

He skimmed some of the earlier journal entries. He found the day, several weeks before, when Mary first met with E., but the teacher's full name was never revealed. Not surprising. Someone who knew how to harness powers like the ones Mary and he possessed would not want to advertise that fact.

He picked up the address book and thumbed through it. If E. was listed, it would be one of the more recent additions. None of the entries looked very fresh—many, including the one for Rob, were in smeared pencil that had been erased and rewritten. In any case, he did not find any listings where the first or the last name began with E.

Kyle sighed in frustration. He searched the cigar box and the jewellery casket but found nothing. He held the journals by their spines and shook them, hoping that a loose sheet might fall out, to no avail. Finally, he picked up the photo again. *Where did you hide it?* he silently asked the pretty redhead in the picture. *Help me.*

Then he noticed a thin edge of white, peaking out between the frame and its cardboard backing. His hands shaking with excitement, he unfastened the clips that held the backing in place. A business card fell into his lap. "Elspeth Holmes," read the card in elegant script, "Consulting Witch".

He raced out to the hallway to call the number on the card. The phone at the other end rang twice, three times, ten times. Kyle refused to hang up. This was his only hope.

Chapter Twelve

"Kyle! I'm back." Rob pushed the apartment door open with such force that the knob slammed into the wall. It made an ugly dent in the plaster, but he didn't have time to think about that now. "Kyle! Sorry I'm so late. There was another bank job, Washington Federal, and they needed me to take people's statements. Kyle?" He scanned the empty living room, fighting down panic. What if the boy had gone crazy again? His bedroom door was open; he could see that the room was empty. The door to the guest room was mostly closed.

"Kyle?" Rob flung the door wide and sighed with relief. Kyle lay on his stomach across the bedspread, wearing nothing but his briefs. The taut globes of the boy's ass shaped the stretchy fabric. The sight made Rob's balls ache. Kyle rolled over lazily, giving Rob an eyeful of the half-tumescent cock bulging inside his BVDs.

"Ah! Rob! Sorry, I fell asleep."

"No, that's okay. I was just worried." Rob perched on the edge of the bed by Kyle's side. The boy's eyes were heavy-lidded. His mouth curled into a lascivious smile.

"You missed me, then?" Kyle ran one finger along the seam of Rob's uniform trousers, sampling the hardness underneath.

"Damn it, you know I did." Rob straddled the younger man's prone form, grabbed his wrists, and claimed his mouth in a kiss that left both of them gasping. Still pinning Kyle to the bed, Rob nuzzled his way down the side of Kyle's neck, then licked a slow, wet path to the boy's nipples. "All I could think about, all day, was you," he growled, catching one of the rosy nubs between his teeth and wringing a moan from Kyle's lips. "I couldn't get up from my desk because I had a constant hard-on." He flicked at the other nipple, then swirled his tongue inside Kyle's navel. Kyle bucked his hips, rubbing himself against the bulge in Rob's pants. "You tease!" Rob hooked the elastic waistband and pulled Kyle's underwear down until it caught under his balls. Kyle's rigid cock shot up like an arrow. Rob painted the rosy bulb with hot saliva, then spiralled round the shaft.

"First, I'm going to suck your impudent young cock until you're right on the edge. Then I'm going to flip you over and ram my dick into your ass, as deep as it will go."

"Please, Rob – wait..." Kyle struggled futilely against Rob's strength.

"What is it? You don't like my plan?" Rob sat back on his heels, loosening his grip on Kyle's wrists. "You'd rather suck me instead?"

Kyle grinned. "Either way sounds good. But we have an appointment. It's important."

"More important than fucking?"

"Maybe. I found her. The woman who was helping Mary. Her name is Elspeth Holmes and she lives in Petersham. We're supposed to visit her this afternoon."

"What time?"

"She said to come before sundown. That it might not be safe after dark."

"What the hell?"

Kyle shrugged. "I didn't know what to say. But I read Mary's journal, about how Elspeth taught her to subdue the voices in her mind and to concentrate her talent on one person at a time. I really think that she might be able to help me, too."

Rob sighed. Tackling Kyle's affliction was, in fact, more important than satisfying their mutual lust. He checked his watch. "Okay, it's three fifteen now. The sun sets around five these days, and it takes about an hour to get to Petersham. That might be too rushed for a decent fuck. But," he added, peeling off his trousers, "I think we can manage a quick blow job."

He arranged himself on the bed in a classic sixty-nine. Kyle's ripe dick bobbed in front of him. His own cock hovered inches from Kyle's lips. As he swallowed the silky length of the boy's tool, Kyle drowned his own cock in wet heat. Rob pumped his hips, ramming himself down Kyle's throat. Kyle shuddered and drove his cock deeper, mashing the bulb against Rob's palette.

Rob sucked with all his might. Kyle tasted salty and a bit sour. His smoky scent rose from the curly black hair tickling Rob's nose. Hard flesh pulsed against Rob's tongue. Rob knew that Kyle was close. He turned up the suction, wanting only to give back some of the pleasure the other man had bestowed on him. He was close himself, but that didn't concern him. All he craved was Kyle's cum.

Kyle dug his fingernails into Rob's butt. The pleasure wound tighter and tighter. Rob's balls felt full enough to literally explode. *You first, boy*, Rob thought, half crazy with lust. *Then I'll let go.*

Kyle pulled back. A shudder ran through his body. Rob gulped, following the retreating rod, bearing down with tongue and teeth. Kyle gave a strangled cry and went limp. Cum shot down Rob's throat, nearly choking him. He swallowed a great gob. Kyle's cock loosed a fresh flood.

Yes! Rob let go at last. He jerked against Kyle's lips, spurt after spurt surging up his stalk and pouring into Kyle's talented mouth. The release was so intense that for a moment everything went black.

He came back to find Kyle's flaccid cock nestled against his cheek, leaking a thin stream of fluid. The pale thighs in front of his face were mottled with the imprint of Rob's fingers. *I didn't realise I was being so rough*, Rob thought. *I've got to be more careful.*

Kyle wasn't moving. Was he okay? Rob levered himself into a sitting position and peered down at the young man.

The lean body curled into a foetal position. Kyle's eyes moved frantically behind his closed eyelids. His lips pressed into a narrow line. His whole body was tense, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Kyle? Kyle! Wake up!" In a frenzy of terror, he gripped the boy's arm, trying to shake some life back into the immobile form.

Kyle did not respond. "Please, baby. Come back," Rob pleaded, shaking harder. Bruises were rising on Kyle's alabaster skin. Seeing the damage he was doing, Rob let go. He felt the sting of gathering tears. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. Wake up, Kyle."

He smoothed the hair away from Kyle's brow and laid a desperate kiss on the ripe mouth. He tasted the bitterness of his own cum.

Kyle stirred and slowly opened his eyes. "Rob. You're here," he whispered.

"Of course I'm here. You were the one who was gone." Rob helped the young man to a sitting position. "Was it another vision?"

Kyle nodded. "Yeah. But strange. Different. I was sucking your cock. I was coming. Then all at once it wasn't your cock, it was someone else, everything fuzzy and vague. The next thing I knew, there were flames."

"Another disaster?"

"Maybe. But I saw myself..." Kyle stared at his hands, looking confused.

"Trapped in the fire?"

Kyle finally met Rob's gaze, his eyes full of anguish. "No. I wasn't trapped. I could hear screams and smell burning flesh. And I knew that I was the one who had set the fire. I caused the disaster."

The boy was clearly overwhelmed with guilt. "Never mind. It might not be true."

"All of my visions come true." Rob had never seen Kyle so miserable.

"Not all of them. Remember the boy and the train."

"Yes, but..."

"And the fire that didn't happen, the one you saw the night I picked you up."

Kyle's face relaxed slightly. "You're right. Since you came into my life, what I see doesn't always come true."

Rob felt a huge sense of relief. They had weathered another crisis. Then he glanced at his watch. It was nearly four. "We've got to get moving if we're going to make it to Petersham by sunset."

Kyle was already pulling on his jeans. "We've got to make it. I have this feeling that it's more important than ever."

* * * *

The last rays of the sun slanted between the evergreens lining Route 2 as Rob turned onto the country road marked 'Petersham Centre'. "Five and half miles along Route 32, she told me, then turn right on Quail Hollow Lane." Kyle looked up from the map to meet Rob's eyes. Rob turned on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "What's the mileage now?"

"Just over five miles."

"That must be it. There's supposed to be a sugar house on the corner."

Rob swung the car onto the one-lane gravel road. Gloom closed around them as they drove deeper into the forest. Rob felt as though they were being watched. He had switched on the headlights half an hour ago, but they hardly seemed to penetrate the murk.

"How far on this road?"

"Half a mile. There's supposed to be a driveway with a mailbox, on the left. Number 33."

The car crunched over the rough surface. Time slowed to a crawl. Rob craned his neck, trying to glimpse the indigo sky through the looming trees.

"There. It says 'E. Holmes'." Kyle sounded excited. Rob tried to banish his own sense of foreboding.

The drive led to white clapboard cottage, the windows ablaze with golden light. Rob parked under the sweeping boughs of a giant spruce. He nearly grabbed Kyle's hand as they climbed the porch steps together.

The door opened before they knocked. A plump woman with grey hair and a merry face smiled at them from behind wire-framed glasses. "Welcome, Kyle." Her voice had a foreign lilt, an unexpected music. "I'm glad that you made it safely. And you must be Sergeant Murphy. Please, come in."

As she turned her attention to him, Rob's tension evaporated. She held out her hand.

"I, of course, am Elspeth Holmes. You may call me Elspeth."

"Consulting witch," said Kyle, with a cheeky grin.

The woman gave them a whimsical smile. "Well. That's how I market myself. Though as you probably understand, I must select my clients extremely carefully. Sit down, sit down," she urged, pointing to several comfortable looking chairs on either side of a brick hearth. One was occupied by a tuxedo cat with white whiskers, who looked up and yawned as they entered. "Crowley, can you make room for our guests?" The feline licked at his paw for a while, feigning disinterest, before stretching and vacating the chair. He curled up on a cushion under the window.

"I've just made tea. I'll go and fetch it," Elspeth continued. She bustled out of the room, leaving Rob and Kyle alone.

"She's not what I expected," Kyle whispered. "I thought she'd be — I don't know — more stern. More serious. On the phone, she sounded quite forbidding."

"She was probably just testing you, trying to figure out how much you knew, and whether she could trust you." Kyle had told Rob about the hidden business card. "Clearly she wants to keep her — um — practice quiet."

"Can we trust her, though?" Kyle seemed to have picked up Rob's old anxiety.

"Mary clearly did."

"And Mary died..."

"Here we are..." Elspeth Holmes set down her tray on the table between them. "Milk? Lemon? Sugar?"

"Two spoons," said Kyle.

"I'll take mine plain," added Rob.

The so-called witch handed each one of them a porcelain cup and saucer. "Here you are. Have a cookie. They're home made."

"Thank you," said Rob, biting into a moist round of oatmeal, raisins and nuts.

"Delicious," he commented, his mouth still full.

"You're very kind." The woman sat back in her rocker, balancing her own cup on her lap. "Now, Kyle, tell me more about your problem."

"Wait," Rob interrupted. "First, tell us about Mary. When was the last time you saw her? Do you have any idea what happened to her?"

Elspeth's snowy brows drew together in a frown. "I haven't any clue. I was expecting her on the morning she disappeared. She never arrived. She used to come by bus — she couldn't drive, of course, with her talent — and stay with me, two or three days at a time, so that I could supervise her practice." The woman set her cup down on the floor and leant forward. "I called her a dozen times, at home and on her mobile, but there was no answer. I couldn't understand it. It's true, she was close to completing whatever training I could give her, but it wasn't like Mary to just break off like that. I was quite worried. Then, when I read about it in the papers... Well, I had to ask myself if there was anything that I could have done. To save her, you know."

"I read her journal," Kyle broke in. "She made it sound like you had helped her a lot."

"Mary's powers were incredibly strong. Fortunately, she also had wonderful self-discipline. It was fairly easy for her to learn how to channel and modulate her talent."

"Do you think that her powers had anything to do with it? With her death, I mean?" It was hard, even now, to talk about Mary, but Rob forced himself to ask the necessary questions.

"I'm not sure. I read that her heart had been excised. That's definitely an element in some black rituals. Black magic, I mean. But I haven't seen or felt anything unusual. If someone in the area were indulging in the dark arts, I think that I'd know."

Rob wondered how she'd know. "In the weeks before her death, you probably saw her more often than anyone else. Did she mention anything? Anyone she might have met?"

Elspeth rubbed her forefinger along the bridge of her nose, her eyes half-shut. "When we first began, Mary was frightened and miserable. As she started to make progress, she reacted with a sort of euphoria. It struck me, more than once, that she was behaving like someone in love. But I didn't question her. After all, she was an adult, and her romantic life was her own business."

Mary in love? Rob was sceptical. Because of her enforced isolation, Mary had been something of an innocent.

"There was nothing in the journals I read about a lover," Kyle commented. "But then, Mary was obviously good at keeping secrets."

"In any case, that's all I know. Believe me, I'll contact you if anything else occurs to me." The woman's face brightened as she offered the plate. "Have another?"

"Yes, please," said Kyle. He devoured the cookie in two bites.

Elspeth removed her glasses and fixed Kyle with an intense stare. "Now then, what about you, Kyle? Tell me about your powers."

Kyle launched into a description of his visions – their history, their characteristics, the sleeping and waking versions. Rob watched, wanting nothing more than to jump him and carry him off to bed. But he had to give the boy a chance. For once, Kyle didn't sound bitter or cynical as he discussed his curse. Mary's story, perversely, had given him hope.

The witch seemed particularly interested in Kyle's accounts of the recent cases where he had seen enough to prevent the prefigured disasters. "It seems as though you've begun to control the prescience on your own," she commented.

"Not on my own. It only happens when I'm with Rob."

Elspeth Holmes turned her cool grey eyes in Rob's direction. "What do you think about that, Sergeant Murphy?"

Rob felt slightly dizzy. His mouth went dry. "I doubt that it has anything to do with me," he finally managed to respond.

"I wouldn't be so certain of that, Sergeant. Psychic powers tend to be genetically linked."

"I've never had any kind of power. I'm boringly normal. And please, call me Rob."

"Well, maybe you're right." She swung back to Kyle. "Do you think that you could deliberately induce one of your visions?"

Kyle gave a nervous laugh. "I don't know. I've always tried to avoid them."

"You told me that you often see flames."

"Right. That's true. And hear yells. And smell roasting flesh." Kyle was beginning to become agitated. Elspeth Holmes rose and fetched a brass candlestick from the mantle. She lit the candle and placed it on the table in front of Kyle. She dimmed the other lights.

"Now, I want you to concentrate on the blue core at the centre of the flame. Then try to see a fire somewhere else. Send your mind out, seeking the fire. And don't be afraid. We're here. We'll keep you safe."

Kyle turned to Rob, a look of desperation on his face. "I really don't want to..."

"You've got to trust me, Kyle. I can't help you without that trust." Elspeth spoke with quiet authority.

"It's up to you, Kyle," Rob soothed him. "But it can't hurt to try. I won't let anything happen to you, baby."

Kyle sucked air into his lungs then released it slowly. "Okay. Here goes." He stared at the candle flame, his dark brows knotted together.

"Let your mind roam," Elspeth murmured. "Follow where it leads you."

Inside the little parlour, all was silent. Outside, Rob heard the November wind, rustling the trees. He realised he was holding his breath.

"Ai!" Kyle suddenly wailed. "No!" Elspeth was at his side in an instant, her gnarled hand on his shoulder.

"What is it, Kyle? What do you see?"

"It's...it's a school I think. Desks. Chairs. All on fire. Flames pouring in the windows. Thick smoke. Children crowding together at the door. One little girl—her hair is burning—the teacher tears off her own sweater and wraps it around the girl's head, trying to smother the flames... They're all crying, the teacher too... Something explodes...no, please, no!" Kyle thrashed and strained to get away from Elspeth's grip, but she held him tightly.

"Kyle, listen to me. Don't run away. Don't black out. Rise up and look around you."

"No, I can't, it's so hot...the screams, I can't stand them..."

"You can. Let your mind guide you. Look around. Where are you, Kyle?"

"Uh—I don't know, I've never been here. It's a school, one storey, at the end of a dead-end street, and it's burning, burning..."

"Stay in control. Travel up the street, to the intersection with the main road. Do you see a sign? A street sign?"

"Um—ah—Happy—no, Hapgood Road." Elspeth looked over at Rob. Rob frantically racked his brain, trying to remember whether there was a Hapgood Road in any of the nearby towns. Princeton? Berlin? Sterling! That was it. He reached for his cell phone. Elspeth shook her head.

"Well done, Kyle. We know where you are. We can stop the fire. You can leave now. Just let it all slip away. Come back, Kyle. Come back."

A violent shudder shook Kyle's body. He slumped back in his chair. Elspeth stepped back. Rob was at his side in an instant.

"Kyle! Kyle, baby!" He squeezed the boy's hand. Kyle's velvety brown eyes met his.

"I did it." There was wonder in his voice. "I took control of the vision."

"I strongly suspected that you could," said Elspeth. "But I didn't think that you'd believe it without a demonstration. Now you need to practice, to exercise and strengthen your powers." She turned her attention to Rob. "I gather you recognised the location."

"I think so. I'm pretty sure that it was Sterling."

"Call the appropriate authorities and have them check out the school before it opens for classes tomorrow. It's likely that they'll find a gas leak." Elspeth wiped her hands on her full skirt. "Well, that was quite intense. I think I'll go make supper."

"Oh, we couldn't impose," Rob began.

"No imposition. I'm assuming that you'll stay the night."

"Really, no, we have to get back..."

"Nonsense. It can be dangerous to go wandering in the Quabbin Valley after dusk." She smiled at Rob, still kneeling by Kyle's chair. Her merry laugh filled the room. "Don't worry. I have a lovely guest room, with a big double bed."

Rob discovered that both he and Kyle were blushing.

Chapter Thirteen

"Somebody's messing with the space-time continuum." Jezebel removed her headphones and looked back over her shoulder, trying to get Stefan's attention. He glanced up from the technical journal he was skimming.

"What?"

"Look. Here. And here." The woman pointed to a complex line graph on one of the three enormous LCD monitors that surrounded her, a flickering column of numbers on another. A dizzying array of tables, figures, images and text flashed across the screens, changing from second to second. A map rose to the foreground, to be replaced a moment later by a newspaper clipping and then a scrolling table in which certain values oscillated between red and black. "These discontinuities – you see? – they're not what I'd expect. The normal time currents are suddenly diverted, swinging wildly away from the forecast paths. Here – at the start of this week – and then again, a couple of days ago. Somehow, someone or something is wrenching the flow away from its trend, sending it in new directions. It shows up all over the place – here, in the stock prices, and here, in the daily accident statistics. Even here in the temperature flux, for Christ's sake!"

Stefan nodded, though he didn't see the discrepancies Jez pointed out. He had written the software she used for her analyses, gathering real-time feeds from every source she asked for, splashing the results across her screens in a kaleidoscope of information, but he couldn't make sense of it the way she could. That was her gift, the one he'd felt when he first found her shooting up in that dark alley two years ago. In some other age, she would have read the patterns in tea leaves or animal entrails. Now, she scanned for truths in the hurricane of bits generated by the modern world.

"What does it mean? Should we be interested?"

"Maybe." Jez leant back in her chair and rubbed her tired eyes. "It could be a sign that there's a pre-cog out there somewhere, seeing the future and then trying to alter it." Jez hadn't known much about psi powers when he had rescued her, but she learnt fast.

"A pre-cog!" Stefan's heart raced at the thought. Imagine what he could do, if he knew what the future would bring. Make almost unlimited amounts of money, for one thing, though at this point he hardly needed more wealth. But there were far more subtle possibilities. Elections, for instance. Knowing the results ahead of time would allow him to easily manipulate them. Or disasters. He could hold whole cities hostage. Better still, he could be hailed as a hero, the only man who could save lives and salvage hopes when everything seemed to be lost.

"Stop judging me," he snapped as he caught the thread of Jez' thoughts. "Think of all the good I could do with that kind of power. Especially combined with the abilities I've already gathered."

"Think of the risks, Stefan." She swivelled her chair around to face him. "The last transfer nearly drove you insane. I had to sedate you for more than a week."

"I didn't expect her powers to be so strong. I just wasn't used to it. Once I got the telepathy under control, there wasn't any problem." He gripped her shoulders, staring into her eyes. "You're supposed to be my assistant, not to mention my lover." His hands dropped to her pert nipples, tweaking them through her black jersey. "I don't want your guilt-trips."

"I didn't say a thing." Jez squirmed at the stimulation as he gave one nub a cruel pinch. He knew her so well.

"You can't hide your thoughts from me and you know it. You don't approve."

"Of course I don't approve. I love you, Stefan. I don't want to see you hurt. Quite aside from the dangers of your taking on more power, murder is bad news, psychically speaking. It upsets the total energy balance in ways you can't predict. You might be able to circumvent the laws of men, but you can't, ultimately escape the higher Law that governs us all. There are always consequences."

"Yes, that's what my parents always said. 'Obey the higher Law,' my father would intone. That meant being satisfied with the crumbs while everyone around me had powers I could only dream of. When they died, that was the first time I had any respect for the higher Law. Nature had punished them for their contempt of me."

"Please, Stefan... Ow! Ooh..." Stefan seized her by the hair and dragged her to her feet. He fastened his mouth to hers, forcing his tongue between her lips. At the same time, he thrust his hand through the hole in the crotch-less tights he insisted she wear, deep into her

soaked pussy. He felt her pulse quicken at his assault. He heard her thoughts become scrambled and incoherent with lust. He broadcast an image of her naked body, strapped to the bondage table in the basement. She moaned into his mouth. He swirled his fingers in her wetness and she convulsed around him.

When he finally released her, she sank back into her chair, trembling. He gave her his sticky fingers to lick. "How can we find her? Or him?"

"Who?" Jezebel's usually sharp mind was still a bit foggy.

"The pre-cog, of course, you kinky cunt."

"Don't call me a cunt, Stefan." Her eyes darkened. He loved her when she was pissed off.

"But that's what you are, aren't you? Look, your tights are sopping. Or do you prefer 'slut'?" He tickled the bare flesh between her spread thighs and she smiled in spite of herself.

"Slut's okay. I like slut."

"My slut," Stefan sighed, bending to kiss her again.

"Your slut," she agreed when she could breathe once more. She sat back in her chair. "We might be able to triangulate among the time-lines. See where they would have converged if they hadn't been knocked off course."

"Do it, then. Find this person for me. And I'll reward you." He sent her another brief picture, her body lashed to the St. Andrews cross with a huge dildo protruding from her ass. She shuddered with delight and turned back to her screens.

Meanwhile, Stefan had an idea of his own. Elspeth Holmes, the witch who had so conveniently assisted sweet Mary in managing her telepathic abilities, might know something worthwhile about this latest psychic talent as well. Perhaps he'd pay her a visit.

Chapter Fourteen

"Oh, Rob... Oh yes!" Kyle crouched on all fours, his knees gathered under him, his butt in the air. He braced himself, forearms and forehead pressed against the handmade quilt, as Rob's cock slid gradually into his well-greased ass. There was no pain—Rob had taken care to loosen him thoroughly, with blunt, slippery fingers—only pleasure so intense that it was scarcely bearable. The sensation of fullness grew as Rob pushed deeper. Kyle clenched his muscles around the thick rod invading him. Rob moaned and jerked his hips, filling Kyle completely. Kyle relaxed. Rob's huge dick seemed to swell, stretching him further.

"Kyle baby, you feel so good. I don't think I can last long."

"That's okay," Kyle gasped. "Don't worry about that. Just fuck me. That's all I want, to feel you move inside me."

Rob answered by withdrawing his cock halfway. Before Kyle could protest, he slammed it back in with a force that rattled Kyle's teeth. "Oh..." he sighed as Rob thrust again, grinding his scratchy pubic hair against Kyle's butt cheeks. "Oh yeah!" Again and again, Rob pulled back then buried his meat in Kyle's ass, with a smooth, powerful rhythm that matched Kyle's ragged breathing. Every stroke seemed to go deeper. Rob's balls slapped against Kyle's butt. The smell of their sweat mingled with the lavender Elspeth used to scent her pillows. Kyle spread his thighs wider and arched his back, wanting everything that Rob could give him.

The cop gripped Kyle's thighs, holding him steady. Kyle couldn't move, even if he'd wanted to. All he could do was take the pounding the older man gave him. Rob's strength thrilled him. Pleasure shot through him each time that implacable cock drilled into his ass—bright sparks tingling along his spine, dark pulses coiling in his bowels. Kyle's aching cock bobbed against his belly with each stroke, smearing him with his own juices. *One fingertip on my dick would be all it would take, he thought. It would shatter like a Prince Rupert's drop.*

Kyle wanted more. Despite the force of his thrusts, Rob was holding back. Kyle could tell. "Please, Rob," he urged. "Let go. Fuck me the way you want to. I can take it."

"I don't want to hurt you. You're not used to this..."

"I want it—everything you've got. I want you to ream my ass until I can't walk."

Rob paused, his dick sheathed in Kyle's rear. Kyle could feel Rob's pulse against his inner walls. The cop leant his chest against Kyle's back and licked his neck. Kyle shivered as pleasure raced down his spine to his cock.

"Are you sure?"

Kyle arched up, forcing Rob deeper. "Please. Take me."

Something shifted. Kyle could feel it in Rob's body. The older man ran his fingers through Kyle's hair, smoothing it back from his brow. He dragged Kyle closer, his fingernails raking Kyle's thighs. Kyle took a deep breath.

"I love you, Kyle," Rob whispered, as he rammed his cock in so deep that Kyle felt it hit his pubic bone.

Before Kyle could breathe out, Rob skewered him again, and then again, much faster and harder than before. Each time, Rob felt bigger. Each time, he went deeper, tearing into Kyle's flesh, possessing him completely. Kyle gasped, tears gathering in his eyes, tossed about like a rag doll in the fury of Rob's fucking. Kyle's asshole grew raw, burning with each entry. The pain became heat. The heat became pleasure. Kyle writhed on the stake that impaled him. He was a martyr, consumed in the fires of lust, going gladly to his end.

"Kyle!" Rob was coming. At the thought, Kyle's cock exploded, hot fluid spurting upward onto his chest and chin. Rob pitched forward, crushing Kyle to the bed. His dick pulsed like a second heart as he shot his cum into Kyle's welcoming ass.

Kyle felt Rob roll off to the side. Kyle toppled over in the other direction, stretching out his legs and easing the kinks out of his hip joints and knees. Rob gathered Kyle to his chest and nuzzled his hair. They lay together in the dark as their breathing slowed to normal.

Outside, the wild wind shook the trees and rattled the window frame. Kyle shivered. Rob flipped the quilt over their bodies. Kyle had never felt such peace.

"I meant it, you know," Rob whispered finally. "It wasn't just the sex talking."

"Meant what?" Kyle pretended not to understand.

"When I said I loved you. I didn't realise it until that moment, but God help me, it's true. I can't fight it anymore."

Kyle didn't dare to speak.

"I want you to stay with me, baby. I want to protect you. Together we'll fight this — this curse, as you call it. When we were fucking — when I was inside you — I swear I knew exactly what you were feeling. I've never had anyone surrender themselves to me so completely. For the first time, I really felt how horrible your life has been, and how much you need me."

"I do need you," Kyle said finally. "I'm not sure that I know what love is, but if I'm capable of it, then I love you, Rob."

Rob captured Kyle's mouth in a searing kiss. For long minutes, he wouldn't let Kyle go. There was desperation in that kiss, as though Rob feared losing him.

"Don't worry. I'm sure that Elspeth can help me. You called the police in Sterling, right?"

"Yeah. I didn't give them my name. I hope they believed me."

"I'm sure they did. You're very persuasive." Kyle circled Rob's nipple with his fingertip. Rob chuckled.

"That tickles."

"Oh yeah?" Kyle reached between Rob's thighs and gave the already thickening rod he found a solid squeeze. "How about this?"

"Not exactly a tickle...."

Kyle pushed Rob onto his back then rolled on top of the older man's body. Rob's warm skin, his musky male scent, even the tackiness of half-dried cum, all of it gave Kyle an intense sense of well-being. "I do love you, Rob," he murmured, licking the salt from Rob's throat. "I'm going to miss you during the next few days."

Elspeth had instructed Rob to leave Kyle in her care until the weekend. "He needs to concentrate on his training," she had said with a twinkle in her eyes. Sex would be too much of a distraction.

"Yeah, I don't know how I'm going to stand it."

"You can jack off, at least." Kyle was stroking the older man into full erection. "I can't even do that, according to Elspeth, without 'dissipating my psychic energy'."

"Well, I'll be thinking of you when I do."

"You'd better," Kyle warned, crouching above Rob and rubbing the head of the other man's cock against his distended anus. "Meanwhile, right now, I want you inside me again." He winced as the rod passed the abraded flesh at his entrance, but he kept pushing.

"No way," Rob laughed, pushing Kyle off onto the mattress. "You'll injure yourself."

"But Rob..."

"You heard me, boy. No more fucking tonight." He bent over Kyle's prone form and swirled his tongue over the young man's cockhead. "A blowjob, of course, is something else altogether."

Kyle stopped fighting and let Rob bring him to new levels of bliss.

A chill gust howled in the chimney, drowning out their moans.

* * * *

"Relax, Kyle. Breathe in. Now out. In. Out. When you breathe out, let everything go. Your tension, your fear. Just release it and allow your breath to carry it away. Focus on your breathing. Inhale. Exhale. There's nothing else in the world but the rhythm of your breath."

Elspeth's voice was soothing and hypnotic. Kyle sat with his eyes closed, trying to follow her instructions. Once or twice, the blackness rippled ominously, a vision threatening to explode into his consciousness. Listening to Elspeth's calm chant, breathing slowly, he allowed the disturbance to drift away.

"Good, very good. Now, Kyle, I want you to send your mind out into the future. This time, though, don't look for flames. Seek out a different kind of light, one that makes you glad rather than fearful."

Kyle guided his thoughts into the channels Elspeth had revealed to him, the invisible routes leading from now into the unknown. There was the newly-familiar sensation of movement through the darkness. Far away, points of warm gold twinkled in the blackness. He steered his mind in the direction of the lights.

The air was chill and fresh. A tranquil melody filled his head. He heard voices, adults and children. The sparkling lights adorned an evergreen two storeys tall, with shiny red globes suspended from its boughs and a silver star on top. The grey stone tower of City Hall rose behind it, spotlit against the night sky. A crowd surrounded the tree, bundled up in coats and gloves, holding hands and singing at the top of their lungs. He could see their breath, white in the cold. He could feel their excitement, their joy.

"'Silent night'," he began to sing under his breath, caught up in the vision.

"Where are you? What do you see?" Elspeth's gentle probes did not disrupt the sensory impressions.

"On the Worcester Common. There's a Christmas tree. Lights. Singing..."

"Excellent. Now, try to find out when. The way we practiced."

Kyle traced back along the route he had followed, letting the time flow through his mental fingers. Two days, three days, a week... "I'm not sure, but I think it's sometime around the end of this month. Maybe the twenty-eighth or the twenty-ninth."

"Good job, Kyle! Come back now. Let the vision go."

He found that he was slightly reluctant to leave the scene, to relinquish the peace and the positive energy flowing around him. *Don't be lazy*, he thought. *Rob wouldn't like that*. He turned his back mentally on the oversized tree and was swept back into his body, sitting cross-legged on the floor on the glassed-in porch that Elspeth called her 'sunroom'.

He opened his eyes to find the matronly witch searching the newspaper, while her cat peered at him with glowing yellow eyes.

"Ah yes. Here it is." She pointed to an item in the Calendar section of the *Telegram*.

"Tree-lighting ceremony and kick off for the Christmas shopping season. Saturday November twenty-eighth at six p.m." She beamed at him. "Well done. You're making tremendous progress."

"Thanks." Kyle stood up and worked the kinks out of his knees. He swept his eyes over Elspeth's back yard, trying to adjust to the light. It was barely three-thirty in the afternoon, but the sun had already sunk behind the thick ranks of fir bordering her property. "I'm pretty pleased myself. So when can I go back and see Rob? It's been three long days."

Elspeth laughed merrily. "How about tomorrow? You're doing so well, I think you can spend the weekend with him without my worrying that you'll derail your training. But I'd like you to come back on Monday. Next, we'll concentrate on searching the future for a specific person rather than a general concept."

"Maybe I should try to see what Rob will be doing tonight," Kyle teased. She was obviously a powerful witch, with a rich knowledge of the psychic realm. Nevertheless, she made him feel completely comfortable, even when it came to his passion for another man.

"Do you really want to know?" Elspeth grinned back at him. "Seriously, I'm quite sure that he's waiting eagerly for your return. His feelings for you – they're strong and true. I can guarantee that."

Kyle felt something leap inside his chest. "Yeah, well, I hope that you're right. Because to be honest, I'm crazy about him. If anything happened...if it turned out that he didn't care after all...well, I don't think I could bear it."

Elspeth smoothed his long hair back from his forehead. "I don't think you need to worry about that. I'm not prescient, but if you can conquer and control your visions, and I think that you can, I predict that you and Rob will have a long and happy future together."

She wiped her hands on her apron. "I'm going to get dinner started. I was thinking of making pot roast, if that suits you."

"Sounds yummy." Kyle felt energised, buoyant. Maybe it was his vision of Christmas cheer. Maybe it was Elspeth's reassurances about Rob. "I think I'll take a walk, if you don't mind. Get some exercise."

"Go ahead. Just be sure that you're back before dark."

"Will do. See you in a while." Kyle put on his new parka and the gloves Rob had loaned him and stepped onto the porch of the cottage.

The afternoon was clear but cold. There'd be frost tonight. Kyle could tell by sniffing the air. He swung out the driveway and turned left, heading back up Quail Hollow Lane towards the village centre.

He strode along the gravel road, snug in his warm clothing, humming a Christmas song. His breath hung in white clouds in front of his face. He reached Main Street – Route 32 – and considered turning around. The shadows were getting longer by the minute, though a few rays of sunlight still slanted through gaps in the trees. Moving felt so good, though – his lessons with Elspeth involved long hours of virtual immobility. He kept going, driven by restless energy, past the Congregational and the Baptist churches, the shuttered country store and the white-shingled houses clustered around the village green.

His eyes adapted to the dimness as dusk approached. He didn't realise how late it had become until he heard the bell in one of the churches behind him chime five.

Damn! Elspeth will have my hide. Kyle wheeled around and began to retrace his steps at a faster pace.

The two-lane road was lonely and mostly empty. A pickup truck clattered by, laden with metal scrap, then vanished into the gloom. It was much colder now that the sun had disappeared completely. Kyle hurried along, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets.

An engine roared behind him. A low-slung sports car raced up and screeched to a halt on the opposite side of the road. "Want a ride?" called the driver out the window. "It's a cold night."

"I'm not going far," Kyle answered. The voice was young, urban, cultured. Not one of the local farmers. "Just down the road, maybe a mile."

"Me, too. Why don't you get in? It's not a good idea to be out here on the highway after dark."

Kyle crossed and pulled open the passenger door of the sleek vehicle. "Are you sure it's no trouble?"

"No trouble at all. Just tell me where you want me to let you off."

"Thanks." Kyle settled into the bucket seat. "Cool car." He caressed the leather dashboard.

"It is, isn't it?" the driver laughed. "My latest toy." The dim light made it difficult for Kyle to make out the man's features. He seemed to be no more than a few years older than Kyle, with a slender build and fair hair. "I'm Stefan, by the way."

He offered his right hand to Kyle, steering with his left. The man's skin was warm and dry. He wore some sort of cologne, a slightly bitter scent that reminded Kyle of fresh mown grass. "Kyle. Pleased to meet you."

The car sped along the pavement, hugging the curves. "Likewise. You're not local, are you?"

"No," Kyle laughed. "I'm — um — visiting someone. She lives on Quail Hollow Lane."

"Elspeth Holmes?"

"Yes, that's right. Do you know her?"

"I'm headed to her house right now. She's an old friend of my family."

"What a coincidence," Kyle commented. "Hey, here's her street!" Stefan swerved onto the narrow lane just in time.

"I haven't seen her in a while." The rough surface forced Stefan to slow down. Kyle breathed a sigh of relief.

"She didn't say anything about expecting guests."

"I wanted to surprise her." Kyle could feel Stefan smiling at him in the darkness. He felt suddenly, uncomfortably warm. "And how do you know her?"

"Friend of a friend. She's helping me with some — research. About the town, its history, that sort of thing." Stefan made Kyle a bit wary. In any case, Kyle knew that he shouldn't reveal anything about Elspeth's business as a psychic consultant. If Stefan really was what he claimed, he might already know — but Kyle wasn't about to tell him.

Stefan chuckled. "Elspeth is a font of wisdom. Her family has been in Petersham for generations — since colonial times, or so I've heard. So you're a student?"

"Um — yeah, right. Elspeth's quite amazing. She's helping a lot with my project. She's a fabulous cook, too." Stefan turned into Elspeth's driveway and cut the motor. Kyle relaxed slightly. "I'm sure she'll want you to stay for dinner."

"That would be great. I'm looking forward to seeing her. And that will give you and me a chance to get acquainted."

Something about Stefan's voice bothered Kyle. He just couldn't get his mind around it, though. Whenever he tried to focus, he felt vaguely confused. Maybe it was the after-effects of his last session with Elspeth.

Elspeth waited on the porch, coat-less, a frown twisting her normally placid features. "Kyle! Where have you been? I was worried..."

"I'm fine, just fine. I walked a bit farther than I'd planned, that's all. But then this gentleman came by and gave me a ride..."

Stefan stepped out of the shadows. "Hello, Elspeth. It's been a long time."

"Sam!" Elspeth's face remained serene, but Kyle heard shock in her voice.

"I'm called Stefan now. Stefan Aries."

Elspeth laughed, a bit coldly. "Stefan, is it? Well, whatever you say. Where have you been? I haven't seen or heard anything from you for seven years. Not since your parents..."

"Forgive me for staying away." A look of pain crossed Stefan's handsome face. "I hope that you'll understand. After the accident... Well, I couldn't bear to be around anyone who

was close to them. I didn't want to think about them. I was in Europe for a while studying, and then in California starting my company. Trying to lose myself in my work."

"Yes," said Elspeth, more gently. "I understand. I remember now, I saw your picture on the cover of a magazine, two or three years ago. Entrepreneur of the year."

"I'm one of the youngest millionaires in the U.S.," Stefan said with a laugh tinged with bitterness. "Do you think that my parents would have been proud?"

"They were proud of you whatever you did, Sam – I mean, Stefan. I should hope that you would have realised that by now."

"Yes, well, I don't want to talk about them anymore." Kyle heard momentary petulance in the young man's tone, then a return to smooth control. "All the way over here, Kyle was praising your cooking. Do you suppose that I could join you for dinner?"

"Of course, of course, come in out of the cold. I'm sorry I didn't invite you right away." She held the door open for the two young men. "I was just so surprised to see you. And you've met Kyle already. Lovely."

"Well, met in some sense. The car was dark. We didn't really get a good look at each other." He turned to Kyle, holding out his hand. His eyes glittered like chips of ice. "Kyle, it's a pleasure. Any friend of Elspeth is a friend of mine."

Kyle searched Stefan's handsome face. High forehead crowned by thick blond hair; aquiline nose, ripe, sensual lips. Anglo-Saxon or Eastern European. He was sure he'd seen this face before. He just couldn't place where. Perhaps he'd seen that same magazine cover, though he certainly didn't recall. His thoughts were oddly jumbled. He realised that he was tired – exhausted, in fact.

"Glad to meet you too," he managed. "Thanks again for the ride. You saved me from Elspeth's wrath."

"From more than that," she scolded. "I've told you, the Quabbin Valley is haunted. By all the souls whose graves were relocated when they made the reservoir, and worse things, too, things that were here before the white men came. Only fools walk about in the dark here."

Kyle looked over at Stefan, seeking support.

The blond god shrugged. "She's always been like this. Ever since I was a boy."

"It's true," she insisted. "But never mind, don't believe me. I just hope you don't find out some day how right I am." She noticed both young men grinning at her and laughed. "Anyway, supper's already on the table. Go wash your hands, then come in and eat."

Stefan rested his hand on Kyle's shoulder. The gesture was simultaneously disturbing and arousing. "Come on, Kyle," he said in that well-oiled, self-satisfied voice. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

Chapter Fifteen

Rob sat on the floor in Kyle's room, surrounded by Mary's belongings. Steady rain beat against window. *Glad I don't have to drive tonight*, Rob thought. *The roads will ice for sure. Probably snowing up in Petersham*. For the hundredth time, he pictured Kyle, alone in the big four poster under the eaves of Elspeth's cottage. God, he missed the boy! The past three days had been an eternity! Sure, they'd talked every day – Kyle excited by his progress in controlling his power, Rob happy as long as Kyle was. That didn't soothe the ache in Rob's chest or relieve the tension in his balls. *Tomorrow*. Tomorrow morning, he'd go to pick up his lover.

Kyle's heady scent still hung in the air, faint but unmistakable. Rob drew a deep breath. His cock stiffened. It had been difficult to fill his time, waiting for Kyle to return. Work had kept him busy. He'd finally been assigned to the case of the most recent, mysterious bank robbery. But the nights at home alone had been awful.

Tonight, he had decided to re-read some of Mary's diary. He had skimmed the notebooks right after her death, looking for clues, but he could scarcely bear it. She wrote the way she talked. Her words had reminded him, over and over, that he would never speak to her again. Now that Kyle had breached the wall Rob had built around Mary's memory, though, he had been curious. He wanted to better understand what Mary had experienced, in order to help Kyle.

He reviewed the final entries once more. He had never realised that Mary could project thoughts as well as hear them. She probably hadn't known herself, not until the witch instructed her. What a devastating ability that would be, in the wrong person! You could more or less control someone else's actions by mental suggestion. Mary, of course, would never have misused such power, but what if there were other people around with similar talents?

Rob's cop sensibilities recognised the criminal potential in such an ability. His thoughts returned to the bank job. It was a crazy idea, but what if someone had influenced employees at the bank? Suggested that an employee should go to the vault, extract the cash, and hand it

over? The amounts were small enough to be more or less routine. Other staff would not be suspicious. Afterwards, a mental adept such as Rob imagined could presumably suggest that his victim forget all about the transaction.

Rob shook his head. Bizarre notion. Still, it was worth checking the security camera footage from several of the banks. If the same individual showed up as a customer in multiple institutions in the week or so before the thefts – well, this would definitely support Rob's theory, strange as it was.

On Monday, he'd order copies of all the recordings. It would be tedious work, but Kyle had said that Elspeth wanted him back on Monday to continue his training. Rob would welcome having something time-consuming to distract him from his unsatisfied desire for Kyle.

Kyle. What was he doing now? Rob stripped the coverlet off the bed and lay on the bare sheet. The scent was stronger now, musky and seductive. Rob unzipped his fly and released his rock-hard penis. It swelled further in his hand, fat and demanding. Rob hadn't jacked off since he left Elspeth's – it seemed selfish, to relieve his own needs when Kyle had been forbidden any sexual activity. Now, however, he couldn't help himself.

He closed his eyes as he stroked up and down the shaft. Kyle. Pictures flickered in his mind. Kyle's deep-set, laughing eyes. His kissable mouth. The taut globes of his pale ass, flexing, as Rob drilled into his bowels. That night in the witch's cottage, Kyle had held nothing back. He had surrendered completely. Rob had felt the other man's joy, rising above the fevered swell of sexual excitement. Kyle belonged to Rob, and he wanted Rob to know it.

Rob gripped tighter, jerking at his rod, his eyes squeezed shut. He could see Kyle clearly in his mind, stretched out on Elspeth's homemade quilt, stroking his own erection. He could feel the boy's emotions – the vast depths of his loneliness, the fever of his lust, the love swelling up to drown everything else. For a moment, Rob almost believed that Kyle was here, beside him. It was Kyle's hand on his cock, milking him, coaxing the cum up from his balls, offering an angelic smile while working Rob's dick with the devil's skill.

"Kyle!" Rob yelled. His tortured cock convulsed, forcing out thick gouts of semen that landed on his stomach and on the sheets. Pleasure burst from his groin and raced through his entire body. His image of Kyle faded, yet somehow his lover still seemed close, trembling

from a simultaneous release. "Kyle," he whispered, drifting off into sleep, cradled in the warmth of the young man's love.

* * * *

Kyle had never felt so tired, yet somehow he couldn't sleep. Pain pounded in his temples. He was sweating even though the room was cold. He had thrown off the quilt and lay naked on the chill sheets. Perhaps he was coming down with something.

Lurid shapes danced on his closed eyelids, not his usual visions but abstract blobs and swirls, surging up then vanishing away. His mind was fogged, almost as though he'd taken drugs. The delicious dinner Elspeth had served them lay heavy in his stomach.

Meanwhile, his cock jutted towards the ceiling, pulsing in time with his headache. He'd never been so horny. Three days without coming. Three days without Rob.

Rob. The thought soothed him. He relaxed and the pain in his head receded. Only a few hours until Rob came to rescue him from this loneliness and frustration. He ran his hand down the length of his erection. His cock trembled like some captured animal.

The last time they'd fucked, Rob had said he loved Kyle. Could Kyle believe him? Elspeth told him Rob's feelings were sincere. Was the wise old woman right? Or was it all wishful thinking? Could anyone really love him, queer and cursed as he was?

He remembered Rob's hands on his ass, Rob's cock ploughing him, practically splitting him apart. God, that had been so hot. His penis swelled further at the memory. No matter how rough and abandoned Rob became, he never seemed to lose the connection. Kyle always felt the older man's presence, his concern.

I love you, Rob. Kyle pumped himself slowly, focusing on a mental image of the cop's lean, strong body. *I'm yours, forever.* It didn't take more than a few strokes before cum was spilling over his fingers and dripping down into his pubic hair. Kyle sighed in delight, the last vestiges of his headache fading away.

Now he felt the chill. Plus he had to pee. He pulled on his briefs and a T-shirt and stepped into the small hallway at the head of the stairs. Elspeth slept across the hall. The bathroom was to his left. He entered without turning on the light, shut the door, and emptied his bladder, then washed his hands and cleaned up his privates.

As he opened the bathroom door, he smelt new-mown grass. He slammed into a hard, naked chest. A powerful hand gripped his shoulder. The fog rolled back into his thoughts.

"Sorry, Kyle," whispered Stefan. "I didn't know that you were there. I just came upstairs to take a piss."

Kyle had forgotten Stefan, sleeping on the sofa downstairs. Elspeth had insisted that he stay. The youthful millionaire hadn't resisted.

"That's okay," Kyle murmured, confused and embarrassed. Stefan had not released him. In fact, the other man was massaging Kyle's deltoid, sending messages of pleasure to his brain – and his balls. His recently-emptied cock stirred and stiffened. "Go ahead, I'm done." He backed away from the Stefan's shadowy form, into his bedroom.

The other man followed and closed the door behind them. Kyle managed to extract himself from Stefan's grasp. He sank down onto the bed. "What are you doing?" The lanky blond towered over him. A faint luminance came from the window, Elspeth's porch light reflected off the new snow. Stefan was grinning.

"I have a confession to make. I don't need to pee. I'm here for you."

"What do you mean?" Kyle pretended innocence, but he understood completely. Stefan's swollen dick wove back and forth in front of his eyes, fascinating him like a snake. Kyle's cock was hard too, though Kyle could have sworn he didn't feel any desire for the brash young man.

"Don't pretend you don't want me. I've been watching you all evening. You couldn't take your eyes off me."

"No, I – Really, I was just trying to figure out where I've seen you."

"Hard cocks don't lie, Kyle." Stefan's hand shot out and grabbed the bulge in Kyle's underwear. He gave it a vigorous squeeze. Kyle moaned in spite of himself. "You see?" The blond reached for Kyle's hand and clasped Kyle's fingers around his own cock. "I want you too. I'm not afraid to admit it."

A bolt of paralysing lust shot through Kyle's body as he fondled Stefan's erection. Pictures came unbidden, not his normal visions but equally clear. His tongue lapping at Stefan's slippery bulb. His mouth swallowing the entire rigid length. His butt-cheeks marked by Stefan's fingernails. His asshole stretched wide by Stefan's cock.

Stefan brushed the tip of his penis against Kyle's lips. "Suck me," he encouraged. "You know you want to."

Kyle did want to. He could imagine the smooth skin and the hardness underneath, sliding over his lips. He could almost feel the knob pressed against the back of his throat. A potent musk rose to his nostrils from Stefan's pubes, man-sweat with an undertone of apricot soap. His own cock stiffened further at the notion of tasting this perfumed flesh.

Stefan wound his fingers into Kyle's hair and tried to force his rigid dick into Kyle's mouth. "Don't keep me waiting, boy," he growled. His rough handling broke the spell holding Kyle in thrall. The lewd images evaporated, replaced by an image of Rob's face. The ache in Kyle's balls died away.

"Stop it!" Kyle stood and pushed Stefan away. The other man stumbled backwards, slamming into the bureau by the door. "I told you, I don't want you. I have a man already, someone who sees me as more than a hunk of meat."

Stefan rubbed his elbow. In the snow-light, Kyle could see his eyes narrow and his lips tighten into a frown. His voice, however, remained casual and friendly. "Okay, okay, Kyle. Sorry that I read you wrong. I won't bother you again."

"Never mind." Kyle felt embarrassed by his vehemence. Something about this guy put him on edge. "I apologise for pushing so hard. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine, just a bit of a bruise." Stefan's melting smile made Kyle feel even worse. "No hard feelings. Okay?"

"Okay, sure. No hard feelings."

"Goodnight then, Kyle. I'll see you at breakfast."

Stefan slipped out the door without waiting for an answer. Kyle lay back on the bed, his heart pounding like a bass drum. Something about that guy...

Drowsiness settled on him like a heavy blanket. He yawned and brought the quilt up around his shoulders, folding his arms to his chest for warmth and burrowing into the feather pillow. His fingers still smelt like cum. The scent reminded him of Rob. He drifted into slumber with a smile on his lips.

* * * *

"Jez, it's me." Stefan shielded the phone with one hand and spoke in a hushed tone. He didn't want to wake Elspeth.

"Stefan? It's two in the morning!" Jez did not try to hide her annoyance. She'd pay for that later, he vowed.

"Never mind. I wanted to talk to you. I've found him."

"Found who?"

"The pre-cog." There was a ten-second silence at the other end of the line.

"Where? Who is he?"

"Right here at Elspeth's house. She's training him. He's a young guy, quite cute—no more than twenty, I'd say. This is going to be fun."

"Stefan..." She stopped, knowing that it would be futile to argue with him. He was pleased. "So now what?"

"I tried to seduce him." Although his mind-reading didn't operate at a distance, he knew that Jez would be squirming with jealousy. He grinned to himself. "He's definitely gay, with a tight ass even you would appreciate..."

"And?"

"He's stronger than most people. He managed to resist my suggestions. Basically, he threw me out of his room." The memory of Kyle's rejection marred Stefan's sensation of triumph. "Apparently he has another lover and clings to some notion of fidelity."

"Poor baby. I guess you're not irresistible after all." Oh, he'd punish her for that sarcasm. Just wait until he got home. "What will you do now?"

"I'll just have to find another way. Perhaps he'll accept me as a friend even if he won't fuck me. I'll figure something out."

"I'm sure that you will, Stefan." Jez sounded tired, but sincere. He wouldn't be too hard on her. After all, he needed her help with the ritual. "Anyway, thanks for calling. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait. Don't hang up."

"Stefan, please..."

"Go get the nipple clamps, the stainless steel clover leaves. And that new silicon butt-plug."

"But..."

"Are you going to disobey me?"

"No..."

"No what?"

"No, Sir. I won't disobey you."

"Go get the toys, then. I'll stay on the line."

He heard Jez rummaging in the box he kept in their bedroom.

"I've got them, Sir."

"Good. Are you naked?"

"Of course. As you require."

"Pinch your right nipple until it stands up tall. Now squeeze the handle and fasten the jaws on your tit." Stefan heard a satisfying gasp at other end of the line. "Is it on?"

"Yes, Sir." Jez' voice was already husky with lust.

"Now the other one."

"Ow — it's fastened."

"Does it hurt?"

"You know that it does, Sir."

"And are you wet? Never mind, you don't have to answer. I'm sure you're soaked. Dip your fingers into your cunt. Now smear your juices over the plug. No lube for you tonight."

"But, Sir..."

"Kneel on the bed so that I can see your ass and your pussy." Stefan could imagine the scene perfectly. He stroked his cock with loving hands. "The weight of the chain hanging down makes your nipples throb, doesn't it?"

Jez just moaned.

"Reach back and spread your cheeks for me. That's a good girl. Now work the plug into your asshole."

"Ooh — ow!"

"Is it inside you?"

"Yes...yes, Sir." Jez could barely speak, torn as she was between the pain of the clips and the pleasure of having her rear hole stretched and filled.

"All right then. I'm going to jack off. You are not to touch your pussy."

"Please, Sir..."

Stefan ignored her tearful voice. "At the moment I come, I want you to tear off the clamps. Then you may come, too, if you can do so without touching yourself."

Without waiting for her acknowledgement, he gripped his rod and began to beat off in earnest. He visualised his sharp, sweet Jezebel, on her knees, struggling to endure the bite of the clamps and the invasion of the plug without coming. If he were there, he'd spank her while he pumped at his cock, making it even harder for her to stay in control.

He was close. He jerked frantically, urging the cum up from his balls, desperately wanting to come, but somehow unable to do so. Jez moaned into the phone, but this proof of her torment was not enough to bring him over. Frustration marred his self-congratulatory good humour.

The picture of Jez faded. He replaced it with an image of the succulent young Kyle, in the same position – on his knees, rump in the air, pleading with Stefan to let him go. He was tied to the bed, his tender balls dangling between his spread thighs, his tight pink rear hole beckoning. Stefan imagined the tight grip and the cries of pain as he forced his cock through that tempting gateway. At the last minute, he stifled a yell as he exploded all over his hand.

Jez must have heard him. She wailed in distress – the blood rushing back into her nipples would be agony – then gave a cry of ecstasy as that very pain took her over the edge. When his breath slowed, he listened again. She was whimpering, but she had not hung up. She was waiting for her next instructions.

"How was that, Jez?"

"You know, Sir. You don't have to make me tell you." She didn't realise the limitations on his stolen gift. Actually, though, he did know, because he knew her. For Jez, pain and pleasure were inextricably linked.

"Quite right. You may hang up now and go to sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night, Sir."

"Good night, baby."

Stefan lay in the darkness, listening. The house was completely silent. There was no indication that anyone had heard him. He probed for Kyle's consciousness. All he could catch was noise – shapes, colours, random scraps of conversation. The kid must be dreaming.

He'd better get some sleep himself. Tomorrow, he needed to come up with a way to lure Kyle into his clutches.

Chapter Sixteen

Rob struggled to stay focused on his driving. Route 2 had been ploughed, but the country highway was full of curves and the bridges might well be icy. He guided the car through a glittering winter wonderland. The trees lining the road were edged in pearl. The sky was a turquoise bowl overhead. The morning sun was a disk of hammered gold, making everything sparkle.

Kyle sat beside him, bundled up and buckled in, but as far as Rob was concerned, the boy might as well have been naked. Every time he glanced over at Kyle, the lump in his jeans got bigger. He'd split the seams of his pants if this continued.

He breathed in, a heady nose-full of Kyle's distinctive scent. Despite the numbing cold, despite the layers of clothing the young man wore, the car seemed drenched in the boy's musk. It was driving Rob absolutely crazy.

Kyle watched the scenery, probably sensing Rob's distress and not wanting to provoke him. The boy seemed a bit shy, even embarrassed. Well, the intensity of their first kiss had startled them both. When he kissed Kyle, the world literally went away. He was aware of nothing but Kyle's touch, Kyle's taste, Kyle's love that surrounded and supported him. He completely forgot the presence of Elspeth and the blond stranger. Kyle was his only reality. When they had finally released each other, they were both shaking. Rob had never experienced anything like it, and he suspected the same was true of Kyle. No wonder they felt awkward.

They'd left in a rush, barely polite. In their eagerness to get back to Rob's apartment, they'd refused offers of coffee and breakfast. The one-hour trip from Petersham to Worcester seemed endless, especially since the state of the roads demanded extra caution.

Rob's erection throbbed, painful and demanding. He guessed that Kyle was hard too, though with the bulky jacket and scarf, he couldn't tell for sure. Kyle felt Rob's gaze. He raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question and his full lips curled into a smile, but he didn't speak.

Rob couldn't stand it any longer. They were coming down the hill into Gardner. There was a rest area near the city line. Rob yanked the steering wheel and the car swerved into the exit lane, cutting off a truck easing up from behind.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kyle yelled. The rest area hadn't been ploughed yet. The Saturn skidded for several yards before it came to rest in a parking spot. Rob scrambled out, then came around to open the passenger-side door. "Come on. I just can't wait anymore."

The lot was deserted. Wind rustled the tall pines sheltering the building that housed the toilets, knocking clumps of snow onto the windshield. Rob grabbed Kyle's hand and practically dragged him out of the car.

"Rob, it's probably locked."

"I'll break down the door if I have to." Rob was desperate. But the men's room was open, although the electricity appeared to be off. Wan light entered via a dirty window near the ceiling. He pulled Kyle through the door and pressed him against the tiled wall, devouring his mouth. Kyle responded with equal passion. Rob ripped open the snaps on Kyle's jacket and grabbed at his crotch.

"I'm sorry. I've got to have you. Now. I can't concentrate. I can't drive. All I can think about is you." He unfastened Kyle's belt and unzipped his fly, then yanked the jeans down around Kyle's knees. The young man's cock sprang out, huge and ready. Rob cradled it in his hands, then squeezed hard. Kyle groaned.

"Rob, what if somebody comes?"

Rob chuckled as he wrestled with his own cold fly. "Somebody is going to come — you and me!"

"No, really. If a state trooper came in to take a leak and found us here — you might lose your job."

"I don't care. I can't help it. Honestly, if I don't fuck you right now..." Rob didn't bother to finish the sentence. He turned Kyle to face the wall, bracing the other man's hands against the cold ceramic surface. He wrapped his arms around Kyle's chest and rubbed his cock back and forth in the boy's ass crack. Kyle whimpered and ground his butt against Rob's hardness, until Rob was sure he'd explode.

"Do it," Kyle gasped, as Rob reached down and gripped his partner's cock around the base. Kyle bent forward, presenting his rump. Rob spit on his fingers, then slipped one into the crevice between those pale globes. He probed the tight knot of muscle guarding Kyle's entrance.

"I've got a rubber but no lube," he whispered, wriggling his digit into Kyle's rear hole. Kyle writhed in response. "Nothing but spit."

"I can take it." Kyle caught his breath as Rob inserted a second finger. "I can take anything you give me. Just loosen me up first." He pressed his butt back, burying Rob's fingers more deeply.

"Oh, baby. You are so fucking hot." Rob had three fingers in Kyle's anus now and he could tell the boy loved it. Kyle clenched down, then relaxed as Rob spread his fingers apart. Rob rolled on the condom one-handed. He spit on his palm and rubbed the wetness up and down his rod. It was cold – the whole place was freezing – but there was a furnace burning inside Kyle's ass.

He positioned his knob against the stretched loop of muscle. For a moment, he thought that he'd come, just from the feel of Kyle's silky hole kissing the tip of his dick. Kyle arched back, improving the angle. Rob pushed steadily. He watched the thick shaft disappear inch by inch into Kyle's body.

"Oh, God!" He was in, all the way in, buried inside his lover. Cum surged up his stalk at the sight of Kyle's hole stretched by his huge cock. He struggled for control. "Are you okay?"

Kyle just nodded. He clamped down on Rob's cock as Rob began to withdraw, triggering scalding waves of pleasure. Rob slid back into the steamy tunnel of flesh, deeper than before. Kyle whimpered with delight.

"You like me to fuck you." Rob pumped in and out of Kyle's butt. Kyle trembled with each stroke.

"Yeah, oh yeah...oh!" A rough thrust drove the breath from Kyle's lungs.

"This is all I could think about for the last three days. I didn't think I'd survive. I need you, Kyle. All of you. Every – day. All – the time. Always. Like this – fucking – connected – together – screwing – so hot – so tight – oh, Kyle!"

In the frigid toilet, Rob's cum felt like boiling oil. Incandescent pleasure burnt everything away except the feeling of Kyle shaking around him, pouring his own cum into Rob's palm.

They collapsed onto the wet, muddy floor, holding each other tight.

Kyle recovered before Rob. He helped the older man stand, tucked the other man's penis into his jeans and zipped him up. "I missed you too, Rob." He laughed. "I just thought it might be more comfortable to wait until we got back to your place."

"Don't worry. We'll do it again. When we get home."

"Home." Kyle rolled the word around on his tongue. "Do you mean that?"

"I do. It's our place now, not just my place. Home." The rusty bathroom door creaked as it swung shut behind them.

Rob unlocked the passenger side for Kyle, then climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. He tried to back out of the parking space. The wheels spun uselessly. "Damn! I can't get any traction." He noticed Kyle's grin. "Why are you looking so smug?"

"Wages of sin." The boy laughed. "You couldn't control your lust, and now we're stuck."

"Oh give me a break! Anyway, I think I have some sand in the trunk."

"I'm just teasing you." Kyle raised one eyebrow. "On the other hand, if we're really stuck here, I can think of something we can do to while away the time."

The sound of a car made them both turn. The black and grey shape of a highway patrol cruiser pulled around off the ramp and into the parking lot. A burly trooper in a heavily padded parka approached the Saturn.

"Having trouble, gentlemen?"

"Uh—not really." Rob's voice sounded brisk and no-nonsense, despite his nervousness. "We came in to use the facilities. I was just going to see if I had any sand to help us get out."

"Shouldn't try to drive on unploughed roads unless you have four-wheel drive or chains." He gestured at the metal links festooning his own wheels.

"Um, well, officer." Rob glanced over at his companion, who was valiantly struggling to keep a straight face. "It was something of an emergency."

With the trooper's help, they managed to get back on the road. By the time they pulled into Rob's driveway, it was snowing again. "Early winter," Rob commented. He leant over to plant a kiss on Kyle's lips. "I'm glad that you're not on the streets anymore."

"Me, too. Actually, there's nowhere I'd rather be than here. With you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Rob hung their sodden jackets and put their wet shoes out on the balcony. He feasted his eyes on Kyle's lean form. "You're kind of dirty," he said finally. The knees of Kyle's jeans were plastered with muck from the rest stop floor. A smear of mud decorated the boy's pale cheek. Cum had formed a white crust on the front of his shirt.

"You're not exactly clean yourself. What do you think about taking a shower?" Kyle was already half-naked. His flawless cock was hard again. Of course.

"I think that's a brilliant idea." Grinning in anticipation, he let his lover pull him towards the bathroom.

Chapter Seventeen

Monday morning. Rob had been dreading it all weekend, the day he'd have to say goodbye to Kyle and send the boy back to Elspeth for the next phase of his training. He had driven Kyle to the station to catch the seven a.m. bus that passed through Petersham on its way to Pittsfield. He hated to send his lover off alone, but he had the early shift at the station this week.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" he'd asked, reluctant to let Kyle get out of the car.

"Of course I'll be all right. Except for missing you." The boy leant over the gearshift to take possession of Rob's mouth. Swept away, Rob didn't even consider the fact that passers-by might see them. "It's only three days, anyway. Elspeth thinks that by that time, I won't need her guidance anymore. I'll see you on Wednesday night. Then Thursday – we'll spend Thanksgiving together."

"Seems like forever to me. Anyway, I'll call you tonight."

"I'll be looking forward to it. But I'd better go. It's five to seven."

The boy swung his backpack over his shoulder and headed for the platform. His breath made white clouds in the frigid air. Rob had watched until the bus pulled out of its bay, an ache in his chest. Three days. Damn, it was going to be hard.

God, but it had been a wonderful weekend! Long hours in bed together. Lots of intimate showers. A fancy dinner at The Sole Proprietor, Rob's favourite seafood restaurant, to celebrate Kyle's birthday. The fact that Rob remembered had literally made Kyle cry. A greasy Mexican feast at Eduardo's. On Sunday, they had taken advantage of a few hours of chilly sunshine to walk around the lake in Elm Park. Rob hadn't been there since Mary's death. The joy he felt in Kyle's presence almost cancelled out his grief. And Kyle had not experienced a single vision during the whole two days. The boy was jubilant.

Rob's cock felt a bit raw from all the sex they'd shared, but he could hardly complain. Anyway, he'd have almost three full days to recover.

Good thing he'd postponed his kids' visit, though. It would be pretty difficult to hide his feelings about Kyle from sharp-eyed, ever-curious little Jennie.

Rob turned back to his computer monitor. He loaded the next DVD of imagery from the bank security cameras and tried to focus on the task at hand.

He had started with the footage from Washington Federal, the most recent victim of the mysterious thief, reviewing the pictures from the camera trained on the bank entrance. Wash Fed, like most of the banks in the city, audited their vault once a week, so Rob had asked for recordings from the previous five days. He fast-forwarded over the many minutes when there was no one in the frame. Whenever someone entered, he'd freeze the action and peer at the person's face, trying to memorise the features for later. He also set a bookmark in the video file.

It had taken him until lunch time to review the Washington Federal recordings. He was hungry but didn't feel like stopping. For one thing, he wanted to look at the next bank while his memories were fresh. He asked Bill Rausch to pick him up a BLT. Meanwhile, he loaded the disk of recordings from Bay State Savings.

Five days before the discovery of the theft. No one looked familiar. Four days. He thought he saw someone he had seen before, a woman. She turned out to have been at the bank the previous day as well. Nothing odd about that. He continued with the images from three days before the robbery. His stomach was growling, and he was starting to feel sleepy. *Should've asked Bill to get me an espresso, too*, he thought. The coffee at the station was barely drinkable.

Someone entered the bank, a young man, blond and well-dressed. Rob froze the action and examined the image more closely. The face was in profile, but it definitely rang a bell. Tagging the spot, he went back to the Washington Federal files and flipped through his bookmarks. *There*. Two days before the theft. There was no question that it was the same man. He wore more casual clothing, but the facial expression was the same, a broad smile showing perfect teeth and an air of self-satisfaction.

It could be a coincidence, of course. The young man might have accounts at both banks, although the two branches were located on different sides of town. Rob popped out the Bay State disk and loaded the one from Fidelity Trust. If the same guy showed up there, Rob would definitely have grounds for suspicion.

Three days before the Fidelity theft was discovered, the security system caught the fair-haired man entering the branch in question. He looked straight at the camera, with a smug

grin that Rob found particularly annoying. Tricky bastard. How did he do it? Was it really a case of psychic coercion, or was there a more mundane explanation?

Bill arrived with Rob's sandwich. Rob continued to stare at the suspected perp, chewing automatically but not tasting a thing. Probably he should check the recordings from the other two banks before he took any action, but his gut told him the guy would show up there too.

Who was he? Rob clicked on the zoom button. The face filled his screen. There was something familiar about those features. He'd seen this guy before, and not just in the grainy security camera images.

Rob sighed as he swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, crumpled the wrapper and tossed it into the trash. He could print the shot and take it around the banks to show to the clerks and the tellers. They'd probably remember such a handsome, prosperous-looking customer. If the guy had any brains, though – and he obviously did, given the fact that he'd gotten away with his game so far – he would have used fake ID.

He stared at the image. The man in the photo seemed to stare back in challenge. Where the hell had he seen this face before? He closed his eyes, trying to think, unquestionably drowsy. Hardly surprising, given that he and Kyle had stayed up fucking till past two and he'd set the alarm for six. He wondered what Kyle was doing at that moment. Was he thinking about Rob at all?

His mind drifted back over the last two days, kisses, cuddles, blow jobs and more. *Ah, Kyle.* He fantasised about climbing into his car and driving out to Elspeth's, just showing up at the cottage. Surprising him.

It hit him all at once, while his mind was occupied with lustful images of Kyle. The blond young man who had been at Elspeth's on Saturday morning, when Rob had come to pick Kyle up. The guy who had watched so coolly while he and Kyle devoured each other. Rob had been totally focused on Kyle, but his subconscious had registered the man's physical characteristics. About six feet, late twenties, hair like spun gold, blue eyes. Well-built, though too preppie to be Rob's type. Elspeth had introduced them, but Rob hadn't been paying attention. What was the name? Stuart? Steven?

Stefan, that was it. Stefan Aries. Rob remembered now, recalled noticing the odd surname.

He brought up the state criminal database and typed in the name. There were no hits. Rob was not surprised. He tried Google. His screen filled with links to *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *People*. Rob skimmed a few of the articles. Apparently Stefan Aries, in addition to be handsome and buff, was very smart and very rich. Why in the world would he rob banks?

He had no trouble finding Aries' address, on Academy Street in one of the most up-market parts of the city. *I think I'll pay Mr. Aries a visit*, he thought, slipping his digital voice recorder into his trouser pocket and attaching the wireless mike to the underside of his shirt collar. *Who knows, maybe the guy has an explanation for his presence at each of the branches that was robbed. Though I wouldn't bet on it.* Rob yawned. He'd better pick up that espresso before confronting his suspect. Given what he'd read about Stefan Aries, he was going to need a sharp mind.

* * *

Rob drove his own car rather than taking a cruiser. 6 Academy Street turned out to be an imposing brick mansion fronted by an acre of lawn. There wasn't any fence or gate, but there must have been security cameras. Before he could ring the doorbell, the front door was opened by a slight, dark-haired woman wearing a tight black turtleneck and a very short skirt. A frown twisted her pretty features.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

Rob flashed his badge. "I'm Sergeant Robert Murphy. I'm here to see Mr. Aries. Is he available?"

"What do you want to see him about?"

It was clear that the woman didn't trust cops. He could feel her fear and hostility. He smiled, trying to disarm her suspicions. "I'd like to discuss some aspects of an investigation that I'm involved with. I thought that he might be able to help me figure some things out."

The knotted brows relaxed a bit. She must be used to people consulting Aries, trying to pick his brains. "Wait here. I'll check whether he'll see you." She closed the door in his face.

She left him alone on the stoop for at least five minutes. He stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together. It was still cold, colder than normal for November. The sky was capped by heavy clouds. It might very well snow again. He thought about Kyle up in Petersham,

several hundred feet higher elevation than the city. *Hope that he's warm enough there at Elspeth's...*

"Mr. Murphy? Stefan will see you." She led the way into the house. "He's upstairs in his office, on the third floor. The first door off the landing." Rob was surprised that she let him go up on his own. Apparently if Aries cleared him, there wasn't a problem.

He knocked on the indicated door. "Come on in," Aries called. The young man sat with his back to the door. His vast teak desk faced a fan-shaped window that framed the leaden sky. He swivelled to face Rob, favouring his visitor with a warm smile.

"Officer Murphy. Please, sit down." Aries pointed to an expensive-looking sofa upholstered in black leather. "Can I get you tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be great, thanks." He had gulped down a double espresso in the car, but he thought he could still use more caffeine.

Aries pressed a button on the intercom. "Jez, two coffees." He turned back to Rob, staring for a few moments as though refreshing his memory. "Oh, right. You're young Kyle's...friend."

Rob blushed to the roots of his sandy hair. This guy had seen that epic kiss. Talk about putting Rob at a disadvantage...

"Don't worry about it, Rob – can I call you Rob?"

"Um – yeah, sure. Go ahead."

"As I said, you have no reason to be embarrassed. I admire a man who's so open with his feelings. And I gather that Kyle thinks you're pretty special."

"Well, I don't know. I hope so..."

"Believe me, I know from personal experience that he belongs to you." The blond youth smiled archly. What the hell did he mean by that? "Don't worry about my sharing your – preferences--with anyone. It will be our secret." He adopted a conspiratorial tone. "I like a bit of young cock myself, every now and again."

A brief flash of anger made Rob's cheeks hot again. He stifled it as quickly as he could. He wasn't here to talk about his sex life.

"Ah, here are our beverages. Thank you, Jez."

The girl placed her tray on a table by the couch. "Will there be anything else, Sir?" Rob saw something like adoration in her face.

"No, we're fine. You can go back to work. I'll call if I need you."

When they were alone again, Aries wheeled his desk chair over to the table and poured two cups from the Italian-style filter pot. The rich odour of roasted coffee beans made Rob's mouth water. "Milk?" Aries asked.

"Just sugar. Half a teaspoon. Thanks." Rob took the mug. It tasted at least as good as it smelt. He enjoyed another delicious swallow or two. "So, Mr. Aries..."

"Stefan."

"Right. Stefan. I wonder if you'd mind if I asked you some questions." Rob took his notebook from his pocket, surreptitiously checking that the recorder was switched on. He ran his eyes over a page of notes, refreshing his memory. Despite the coffee, he felt more drowsy than ever.

"You want to ask me about the bank jobs," said Stefan, his voice brimming with confidence.

"What? How did you know...?"

"Someone was bound to put two and two together eventually. You're smarter than I gave you credit for. But it was fun keeping everyone guessing for so long."

"So you admit that you were responsible?" Rob blinked a couple of times. His eyelids felt like lead. Something was wrong. This was too easy.

"Sure. It was me." Stefan laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Pretty cool, wasn't it?"

"Um – but why? You've got plenty of money."

"Just to prove that I could. To drive everyone crazy – it did, didn't it? And of course, to test out my powers."

"Your powers?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Rob. You of all people. Mary's big brother."

"Mary?" Rob knew he sounded like a parrot, but his mind was so muddled he couldn't seem to frame a thought of his own. His lids drifted shut. He forced them open. "You knew Mary?"

"Very well," Stefan replied, his voice suddenly heavy with menace. "Intimately. You might say that no one knew her better than I did."

Horror rose like bile in Rob's throat. "You... Do you know anything about her...her death?"

"She used to tell me about you." Stefan ignored Rob's question. "Her big brother the policeman. She was so proud of you." Rob slumped onto his side, no longer able to remain upright. Something in the coffee, drugs, poison...

Stefan crouched down beside the sofa so that Rob could see his grinning face through the gathering mist. "Yes, Rob, Mary loved you a great deal. Almost as much as Kyle does."

With a silent scream, Rob slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter Eighteen

Relax. Concentrate. Kyle mentally replayed Elspeth's counsel. For the first time since the witch started to train him, his powers were giving him trouble. He focused on the photograph of Mayor Wilson, trying to direct his mind into the politician's future. Elspeth didn't want him to use anyone he knew well for this exercise – the emotions might overwhelm his control. However, he couldn't stop thinking about Rob. The distinguished face of the greying mayor kept morphing into Rob's sandy-haired, blue-eyed visage.

Darkness flickered on the edge of Kyle's awareness, warning signs of an impending rogue vision. Kyle stood, stretched and gazed out into the backyard, breaking the rhythm of the gathering panic, as Elspeth had taught him. The ribbons of blackness faded away. He sat on the braided rug once more, settled his thoughts, and resumed the exercise.

Having fixed the mayor's image in his mind, he closed his eyes and searched for a path into the future. A week, two weeks, a month... What would happen to Mr. Wilson on Christmas? A picture began to coalesce – first the light, rosy and warm, then the colours and the sounds, finally the shapes. A hearth piled with logs, burning merrily. A family gathered around the warmth. Children, playing board games and running their toy trucks around on an oriental carpet. There, the mayor himself, in a green sweater, laughing and drinking what looked like eggnog.

Kyle tried the trick Elspeth had taught him, willing himself up and away from the scene to take in the details of its location. He saw a substantial brick house with a circular driveway, surrounded by a snow-covered lawn. He swooped in to read the house number. 1326. Good. He could check to verify that his vision was accurate.

He relaxed and allowed the vision to fade. Elspeth's lessons were definitely helping. He wondered where she found the knowledge she imparted. She claimed to have no special powers of her own, but obviously she understood how his prescience worked, or at least how to manipulate it. He had seen her 'office', a cramped space just off the living room. The four walls were lined, floor to ceiling, with books. More volumes were stacked on the desk and

the window sill. "There have been people like you throughout the centuries," she had told him, "and people like me who observed and studied them."

Something dark rippled at the back of his mind. *No*. Kyle refused to allow the unbidden vision entrance to his thoughts. He breathed deeply and focused on the peaceful image of Crowley curled up and slumbering in Elspeth's rocking chair. The shadows skittered away, but his new self-confidence was badly shaken. He'd been so sure he was free of his curse.

He had to be patient. And to practice. He pulled another picture from the stack Elspeth had provided – the familiar face of a popular singer – and prepared to repeat the exercise.

The telephone rang, back in Elspeth's living room. Kyle tried to ignore the annoying sound. She would answer it. Sure enough, the ringing stopped. However, he couldn't help listening to the muffled fragments of her conversation filtering into the sunroom. The words weren't audible, but he sensed that she was upset. *Never mind*, he told himself, turning his mind to the photograph.

In a moment, though, Elspeth herself interrupted him. Her forehead was creased with concern. "Kyle? There's a call for you."

Kyle jumped to his feet, scattering the pile of photos. "Is it Rob?" He hadn't expected to his lover to call until after supper, but the thought of hearing Rob's voice immediately raised his spirits.

"No." He had never seen Elspeth look so serious. Her lips pressed together in a scowl. Her usually warm eyes were cold and stern. "It's Stefan Aries."

"Stefan? Why would he call me?"

"He wouldn't say. But his tone of voice gave me a bad feeling. I told him that you were busy. He insisted that it was urgent, that he had to talk to you."

Kyle recalled his nocturnal encounter with the suave young entrepreneur. He blushed, remembering how his body had betrayed him. Was Stefan trying again? Stefan was attractive, Kyle had to admit that, but nobody could compete with Rob. Somehow he had to convince the guy that he really wasn't interested.

"Never mind. I'll talk to him." He followed Elspeth into the main part of the house and picked up the old-fashioned black handset. "Hello?"

"Good afternoon, Kyle. How are you?"

"Um – I'm fine. Working hard on my research."

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear that." Kyle could imagine the smirk on Stefan's face, the flash of his white teeth. Why didn't he get to the point?

"What do you want, Stefan? I'm kind of busy." In the few seconds of silence that followed, Kyle could have sworn that the room temperature dropped five degrees.

"I can appreciate that. But I thought you would want to know that I have Rob."

A wall of blackness loomed in Kyle's mind. Impatiently, he thrust past it.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"Rob's my prisoner, Kyle. He came to my house, asking nosy questions. Now he's tied up in my dungeon. I'm not sure what I'll do with him, but I guarantee that it will hurt."

"What? Let him go, you bastard!" Kyle's hands clenched into fists. Stefan outweighed him, but Kyle had learnt a few things about fighting in his years on the streets.

"Come to me, and I'll consider it."

"Stefan, you know I don't want you... I told you. You're not going to make me change my mind. Please, don't punish Rob because of me."

"If you ever want to see your precious Sergeant Murphy again, you'd better be here by six tonight. And then we'll see whether you want me or not."

"But..." Kyle was already reviewing the possibilities. How would he get there? Could Elspeth drive him? Were there taxis in Petersham? Should he call the police?

"By the way, if you bring the police into this, Rob will be dead before they get here. I've killed before and I won't hesitate to do it again. Don't think you can fool me, either. I'll know. In case you haven't already figured this out, I can read people's thoughts. Just like Mary."

Stefan chuckled, obviously enjoying Kyle's discomfort. Read people's thoughts? No wonder Kyle had felt so confused around the guy. Stefan had been messing with his mind, projecting thoughts, the way Mary had described in her diary. "Give me the address," Kyle forced the words out through gritted teeth. "I'll be there."

"6 Academy Street. Six o'clock. I'll be looking forward to seeing you."

"Fuck you," Kyle snarled, and hung up. His whole body was shaking.

"What is it? What did he want?"

"Rob. He's in danger." Kyle could barely talk. "Stefan has him — wants me. Says he'll do something terrible to Rob if I'm not there by six." No wonder he had been fighting dark visions all day. They were probably visions of Rob's terrible future.

Panic threatened to drown him. "What can I do? Stefan — he says that he'll know if I call the police. That he has the power to read minds."

Elspeth frowned. "Stefan? But Stefan never had any special abilities. His father was a gifted telepath, and his mother was clairvoyant, but somehow he didn't inherit their talents. Even as a child, he was bitter about that. Stefan is not a mind-reader."

"It's true. I know it is. I felt him probing my thoughts, rearranging and making suggestions, the other night. I just didn't realise what was going on."

"But how...?" Elspeth's eyes grew wide with horror. "Oh, my Lord. Mary. He stole Mary's powers. Oh, the poor girl." She buried her face in her hands.

"Is that possible?" He remembered what Elspeth had told Rob that first day, that she had some notion Mary was in love. Stefan could have easily seduced an innocent like Mary. "How?"

"There are methods. Rituals recorded in tomes devoted to the Black Art, passed down from medieval times. Oh, Stefan, Stefan, how could you be so foolish, so wicked..." Kyle had never seen the witch upset before. She was close to tears. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Hey, calm down. Please, Elspeth — we'll figure something out."

"You don't understand. There are various ways to take over someone's psychic or magical abilities, but they all have one feature in common- the original owner of the talent must die."

"Oh, God." Kyle sank into the chair behind him, literally knocked off his feet by sudden comprehension. Stefan had murdered Mary in order to acquire her powers. And now, he wanted Kyle's abilities as well. All at once, Kyle recalled the vision that had nearly killed him on the day he ran away from Rob's apartment. Bondage, sex and sharp steel. No wonder Stefan had seemed familiar that first evening.

But Kyle knew now that his visions did not always predict future events. The future was mutable, for those who had knowledge of what was to come.

His panic drained away, leaving an icy calm in its wake. "We need a plan. Some way for me to hide my thoughts from the bastard. Then I'll pretend to go along with him, at least until Rob is free. After that...well, I'll think of something."

"I could teach you a cloaking spell, but he'd probably detect that." She pondered the possibilities. Kyle's new composure had rubbed off on her. Her expression was determined rather than wounded and guilty. "The best thing would be for you to deliberately adopt thoughts that he'd expect. Keep something strongly in the front of your consciousness. Sub-vocalise – repeat your chosen thought over and over to yourself. Telepathy is not infallible – it's a bit like a cell phone, depending on the strength of the signal. Send out a strong signal and he won't pick up the weaker, more fleeting thoughts."

"Like my thoughts about how I am going to defeat him," said Kyle grimly. "Anyway, I know what I can use to fill my mind. Rob."

* * * *

Kyle stood on the sidewalk where the taxi had dropped him, checking out Stefan's property. Quite a palace. It was quarter to six, well past dusk. The house was dark other than lighted window on the top floor. Was that where the bastard was holding Rob?

He wondered whether Stefan could sense his presence. Mary's diary had suggested that the strength of her telepathy waned quickly with distance. Well, no use waiting in any case. He started up the shovelled path to the front door, marshalling his thoughts. *Rob? Where are you, Rob? I'm coming, lover.*

As he approached, someone turned on the light over the door. The door opened while he was still on the steps. Stefan gave him a predatory smile. He wore a gorgeous robe of red silk. Kyle remembered seeing it before. *Rob*, he chanted silently. *I want you.*

"Come in. I'm so glad you could make it."

Kyle stifled the curse that rose in his mind. *Rob. I'm here. I love you.*

"You didn't give me much choice," he snarled. Stefan took his arm in a proprietary fashion and led him into a sort of study off the foyer.

"No, I guess I didn't. Still, I hope that you'll forgive me." He took Kyle's coat and tossed it onto a chair. Then he began to unbutton Kyle's shirt. "I'm still hoping that we can be friends. Close friends."

Kyle tried hard not to shudder as the other man brushed his fingertips over his bare chest. *Rob. Rob.* "Release Rob first," he said. "Then you can do whatever you want with me."

"Oh really? How delightful." Stefan unzipped Kyle's fly. Kyle was appalled to see that he was half hard. His traitorous body responded to Stefan's caresses even though his mind was totally occupied with thoughts of his lover. The blond stroked him and he swelled further. Stefan pushed Kyle's trousers down to the floor. Understanding what was required, Kyle kicked off his shoes then stepped out of his jeans.

"Has anyone ever tied you up?" Stefan asked, fondling Kyle's ass.

A picture flashed through Kyle's mind – the hospital, the restraints they used when he got really crazy.

"No, I don't mean like that. I mean, for sex. Ever since the first time I saw you, I've been imagining how you'd look, blindfolded and bound to my punishment table. Your skin is so pale – my black nylon ropes will contrast so nicely. I want to see your muscles strain against your bonds. I want to hear you scream when I take you."

Rob. Rob. "Sounds...interesting. But first I want to be sure that Rob is okay."

"Rob, shmob. Is he all you can think about?"

The sudden outburst startled Kyle. Did Stefan really care what Kyle thought?

His captor swallowed hard. When he spoke again, his voice was smooth and controlled. "Your dear Rob fine – so far. I've got him on the St. Anthony's Cross, down in the dungeon. I think you'll agree that he looks quite delicious."

Stefan pressed on a knot in the wood panelling. A section of the wall swung open on silent hinges, revealing a spiral stair. "After you, my young friend." Kyle had no choice but to descend. The wrought iron was cold under his bare feet. The stairway ended before a door of heavy wooden planks. Echoes of Stefan's knock rolled through the cellar.

A petite, sharp-featured woman with jet black hair answered. Kyle recognised her from his vision. *Rob, where are you?* he mouthed desperately, hoping Stefan hadn't caught the stray recollection.

"Our guest has arrived, Jezebel. Let's make him comfortable."

Kyle scanned the dim, earth-scented room. Where was Rob? Candles flickered in alcoves hacked out of the stone and masonry walls, but the dark shadows lingered in the corners. Much of the wall area was covered with red velvet drapes – to muffle sound, Kyle guessed, as well as to provide an aura of decadent luxury. Whips, paddles, knives and other

instruments of torture hung on the bare areas, in elaborate displays designed to evoke fear as well as for convenience.

"Urgh! Umph!" The sounds of strangled speech came from the left wall. Two massive beams crossed like an X were bolted to that wall. Kyle's lover hung there, suspended on the cross with what looked like leather thongs, his mouth stuffed with a red ball gag and his scrotum encased in a tight cage of leather straps.

"Oh, Rob!" Kyle pulled out of Stefan's grasp and ran to the cross. He unfastened the straps that secured the gag. Stefan did not try to stop him.

Rob spluttered and coughed as the ball came out. "Kyle baby! You shouldn't have come."

"What was I supposed to do? He said that he'd hurt you. He didn't, did he?"

"Only my pride," Rob replied with a grim smile. "But that doesn't mean he won't. Mr. Aries is really not someone to be trusted."

"Nonsense. I always keep my word. I promised that I'd release you, and I will. After I've had some fun with little Kyle, of course. Having you watching will just make it hotter." Stefan turned to Kyle. "Up on the table."

"No. Not until you untie him." The thought of having Stefan touch him in Rob's presence made Kyle's skin crawl. "This is between you and me. I'll give you what you want, but leave Rob out of it."

"Ah, but he's already part of it. It's too late. On the table. Now. Before I get angry."

Stefan tried to force Kyle's body onto the marble-topped pedestal. He was strong, but Kyle was desperate. He twisted out of the other man's arms and ran back towards the cross. The cuffs holding Rob to the cross fastened with snaps. He had Rob's right arm free in a matter of seconds. He was working frantically on the left cuff when Stefan yanked him away by his hair and dragged him across the floor. The pain in his scalp made him see stars. *Rob*, he thought. *I'm sorry.*

"Bad boy," Stefan scolded. He tightened his grip on Kyle's hair and pulled him to his feet. Kyle dangled helplessly in front of his tormentor. "I thought you were going to behave. That we have a bit of good time." He plunged a hypodermic into Kyle's shoulder. Almost immediately, Kyle started to feel numb. Stefan gave an evil laugh. "You know, the way Mary and I did."

The last thing Kyle heard was Rob's cry of anguish.

Chapter Nineteen

"You bastard! You fucking sicko! I'm going to cut your nuts off and stuff them down your throat, Aries." With his free hand, Rob ripped off the other wrist cuff. He stretched sideways and managed reach one of the knives hanging on the wall next to the cross. Before Aries could stop him, he had sliced through the ankle cuffs. "I swear, you're going to pay. I'm going to hurt you so bad, you'll beg me to kill you."

He grabbed Aries by the throat and pushed him up against the rough wall. Kyle's limp body slumped to the floor. Rob applied the point of his blade into Stefan's cheek, just breaking the skin. A ruby drop welled up from the tiny wound. "What should I do first? Cut out one of your eyes? Slice out your tongue?" There was a noise behind him. "Don't try anything, girlie, or I swear I'll gut him like the pig that he is."

"It's all right, Jez. Back off." Aries sounded remarkably calm for a man with a knife in his face. "Settle down, Rob. You don't really want to hurt me."

Rob had a sense of something foreign invading his mind. Tendrils of peace and light twined through his angry thoughts, surrounding and smothering them. He struggled to hold on to his rage in the face of Aries' suggestions. "I do want to hurt you. I want to see you bleed. I want to make you suffer."

Frustration flickered across Aries' face, followed by a brief flash of fear. Rob pricked him again, just under his chin. A trickle of crimson ran down over Stefan's collarbone and onto his gold-furred chest. Stefan smiled, a bit sadly.

"I do suffer, Rob. Do you have any idea what it's like to be me? I grew up powerless and despised, robbed of my birthright by some twist of fate. My family, their friends, the whole community of the gifted, looking down at me. Pitying me. I had to do something to set things right. To restore the balance."

Despite his fury, Rob couldn't help but understand. He could feel Aries' emptiness. He had a vivid, visceral sense of the young man's desperate need for recognition. His lost, lonely years in Europe studying the black and the white arts, gaining knowledge but never the

power he craved, the power he saw in all those around him, the power that he had been denied.

Bitterness, envy, and underneath it all, the desire for love. All that Stefan Aries had ever really wanted was to belong.

It was awful and overwhelming. Rob groped for his anger, but it had vanished, washed away by the inexorable tide of Aries' feelings.

"You see, Rob. You feel it. I know you do." Gently, Stefan grasped Rob's wrist. Rob allowed him to take the knife. "I have to do this."

The sting of a needle entering his butt roused Rob from his empathic fugue, but it was too late.

* * * *

Someone was trying to wrench Rob's arms out of their sockets. The ache in his shoulders cut through the fog in his brain, tearing him out of drugged slumber and into painful reality. Even before he opened his eyes, he understood that he was bound again. Coarse rope bit into his joined wrists, then pulled upward.

He forced his heavy eyelids open to find that he suspended from the ceiling. He stretched, reaching for the floor, but his efforts were futile. At best, his big toes brushed the concrete. He couldn't get enough contact to offload his weight or relieve the excruciating pull on his arms.

The scents of sandalwood and musk permeated the damp air. Aries and his girl were huddled over some kind of altar in one corner, chanting in some foreign language and burning things on a small hearth. Stefan poured something onto the embers and flames leapt towards the ceiling, heightening the shadows. He tossed some dark unidentified object onto the fire. The smell of incense was replaced by the disgusting odour of charred hair. The woman's soprano and Stefan's baritone rose and fell together. The two seemed completely focused on their ritual, ignoring, for now, their captives.

Kyle lay on his back, trussed and tied to steel loops embedded in the marble platform. He did not move. Rob suspected that he was still unconscious. The boy looked beautiful in his restraints. Rob didn't normally find BDSM imagery arousing, but he had to admit that the

jet strands criss-crossing Kyle's chest looked incredibly erotic. On the other hand, Kyle always looked hot. His cock stood tall, pointing at the ceiling. Perhaps this was some effect of the drug – Rob realised that despite the pain in his shoulders, he was hard too.

Despair settled over him. How were they going to escape? Aries was a madman, brilliant and cruel, who would do anything to assuage his feelings of inadequacy. He had slaughtered Mary – Rob choked down a sob as he finally admitted this to himself. Next, he would sacrifice Kyle. And Rob? He was simply in the way, a minor complication. Aries wouldn't think twice about killing him, despite the fact that Rob was a cop. But Rob guessed that Stefan Aries would want to have some fun first – for instance, forcing Rob to observe the rape and murder of his lover.

Rob groaned and fought against the rope holding him prisoner. Aries heard and turned to smile at him.

"Ah, Rob. You're awake. That's good. We're just about to begin the main part of the ceremony. You'll get to watch as Kyle gives me his gift. That will give you some idea of what you can expect."

"Me?" Rob had resolved not to give Aries the satisfaction of answering, but surprise got the better of him. "I assumed you'd just shoot me or poison me or something equally simple."

"Now, that would be a waste." Stefan strolled over to confront Rob. "You have your own gift, you know." He reached down and gave Rob's cock a casual squeeze. "So I'm going to fuck you too."

"What are you talking about? I don't have any kind of psychic talent."

Stefan laughed in delight. "Oh, but you're wrong. Talent runs in families. Mary had an incredible talent. It would be quite surprising if you didn't have some power of your own."

"You're crazy. Delusional."

"Not at all. I was born with a kind of talent, too – the ability to detect psychic abilities in others. You're an empath, Rob. You have the ability to sense and experience the true emotions of others. Perhaps not as useful as reading minds or seeing the future, but I'm certainly not going to throw it away."

An empath? Rob wanted to deny it. Then he remembered how he had nearly killed Aries, and the tide of emotion that had stopped him. He thought back to what it was like

making love to Kyle, how he seemed to understand exactly what the boy was feeling. He remembered talking to Gina, how hard it was because he always felt her love and her shame. Maybe, just maybe, it was true.

So where did that get him? He slumped into his bonds, hopeless. Aries stroked his erection a few times, making him squirm, then turned to his other captive.

"Kyle," he called softly. "Time to wake up."

The boy stirred and tried to stretch. "What... Where... Get away from me, Stefan!"

"Don't be silly. It's time for us to fuck. Jez?" His slender accomplice stepped forward on command to take his robe. "You're beautiful, Kyle. I'm going to enjoy this. Perhaps you will, too." He climbed onto the stone pedestal and crouched above Kyle's rigid prick. "Let me into your mind. Don't fight me. We'll climb to the peak together."

Rob didn't want to watch, but he couldn't look away. Stefan squatted and pressed his buttocks against Kyle's cock. Simultaneously aroused and disgusted, Rob watched Kyle's gorgeous cock disappear, inch by inch, into the madman's ass. Kyle shuddered and arched against his bonds, driving himself deeper into Stefan's bowels.

All at once, Rob felt it, the sweet invasion of Kyle's rod, stretching him wide and filling him completely. Pleasure vibrated in his anus, throbbing, building, setting up a circuit between his cock and his rear hole. The voluptuous sensations were incredibly real. It was Stefan, Rob realised – he was experiencing Stefan's emotions and sensations. Sure enough underneath the pleasure there was a sense of triumph, exultation at having won the game. And under that, the bitter undercurrent of Stefan's need, which Rob knew would never be satisfied.

"Don't come, boy, not yet. We'll come together – just as I'm cutting out your heart. Jezebel, the sacrificial blade."

"Sir..." The girl stepped out of the shadows. "Don't do this. You can still stop."

The sound of Aries' slap rang through the dank basement. "Are you disobeying me, cunt? Why would I stop? This is the moment I've been waiting for. Give me the knife."

"No, Sir. I can't. It's for your own good. The screens, the signs – they all tell me that you should not continue. It will be your undoing. The fates..."

"Shut up, you filthy slut. I make my own fate." He climbed off Kyle's cock, picked up the girl like she was a rag doll and threw her against the wall. She gave strangled cry and

then was silent. Aries retrieved the knife from the corner altar and laid it on the stone next to Kyle's naked body. "Now, where were we?"

Rob writhed in ecstasy as Kyle's cock slid back into Stefan's ass.

Chapter Twenty

A choked moan escaped from Rob's throat. Concerned, Kyle turned towards his suspended lover. "Look at me, Kyle. Only at me." Stefan leant forward with Kyle's staff still embedded in his ass, pinching Kyle's erect nipples, demanding Kyle's attention. The madman's eyes glittered like chips of blue glass. Kyle searched their depths and found no trace of humanity.

"You're mine, now. You'll be mine forever." He tensed his rectal muscles, sending shocks of unwelcome pleasure sizzling up Kyle's stalk. "Your power will live in me. When I soar through time, exploring the future, I'll think of you. I'll remember how your sweet, hot cock felt, filling me up." He squeezed again. Kyle bit his lip, trying not to cry out. He didn't want to give Aries the satisfaction of knowing how aroused he really was. *Rob. I love you. Don't believe my treacherous body. There's only you.*

Stefan gave his face a slap that slammed his head back against the marble. "Forget about him, damn you! Focus on me!"

Kyle turned his attention to his stinging cheek, trying to ignore the pressure building in his balls. He would not climax, no matter what Stefan did. The villain had said they had to come together in order to complete the ritual. No way. He would die before he'd empty himself into the devil's ass. *Rob...*

Stefan used his well-muscled thighs to ride Kyle's hardness, up and down. Kyle felt himself swell further. Stefan grinned. Kyle teetered, inches from the brink. Stefan reached for the knife. "Open your body to me, Kyle. Open your mind."

The man on top of him ground his butt against Kyle's groin, taking Kyle's cock as deep as it could go. Kyle remembered his lover, hanging from the ceiling, forced to watch the obscene proceedings. He gritted his teeth and fought for control.

Stefan's mind probed Kyle's, seeking a weakness. Now that Kyle knew what the other man could do, he recognised the intrusion, the confusing meld of his own thoughts with those of another. He tried to close himself in, using images of Rob as his fortress. Stefan reached back between Kyle's raised thighs to finger Kyle's hole. Kyle tensed at the

simultaneous invasion, physical and mental. The cum gathered at the base of his shaft. Stefan felt the change and raised the knife.

Though his body was ready to boil over, Kyle's mind remained oddly cool. *Rob. No one but you, baby.* Kyle's old vision returned to him, that horrible moment when he'd first seen Stefan. He recalled the exquisite mix of pain and pleasure as the sorcerer had sliced into his chest. The picture held no terror now. He smiled. Perhaps he was about to die, but he had conquered his curse.

The blade pricked his skin. Stefan milked his cock while twisting a finger in his rear-hole, coaxing him towards the edge. Stefan's thoughts licked at his brain, hungry and triumphant. Kyle's mind shrank from the hideous mental caress.

Suddenly, a desperate hope dawned in Kyle's breast. He knew what he should do.

He closed his eyes and sent his mind out into the future. *Show me the worst. Pain and suffering. Death and disaster.*

The first vision hit almost immediately. A squeal of tearing metal, the sickening jolt as the plane stalled then plummeted towards the ground. The hiss of air rushing from the cabin then the gasping, struggling for breath, his head slammed against a bulkhead, his arm snapped from the impact of a suitcase tumbling from above, screams swept away by the roaring wind.

He yelled in pain, trying to escape, forgetting he was bound. Then he was engulfed in flame, his clothing, his hair, his flesh all burning, the agony blending with the earlier vision. Another scene – the spatter of gunfire around him and the wails of children, followed by an explosion that blinded and deafened him. His guts were ripped from his belly. He smelt sulphur, vomit and shit. Eyes and ears torn away, still he heard the screams and saw the flash of the bombs.

Water filled his lungs, icy cold, dragging him into darkness. Vicious knives twisted in his chest as he was pummelled and kicked to the ground in a dank, stinking alley. A roaring river of snow buried his body and crushed the air from his lungs. Glass shattered and his body launched into a long, terrifying fall, tumbling through chill emptiness to smash into bloody pieces on the pavement.

Vision after awful vision assailed him. He yelled and moaned and thrashed against his bonds, sharing the future pain of a thousand doomed souls. He had opened the gates of the

future, and a million hells marched through. Kyle embraced the madness, knowing that it was necessary, his last chance at survival.

New screams assaulted him, a high-pitched keening that tortured his ears. Somehow Kyle knew the sound was not in his head. He pushed the visions away, struggling through the layers of pain and fear to open his eyes.

Stefan crouched on the floor in the middle of the dungeon, clutching his head and howling in obvious pain. His every muscle was taut as though he had lockjaw. He had bitten his tongue. Blood dripped from his lips, which were twisted in a grimace of anguish. "No, no, no!" he wailed, his words trailing off into babbling and nonsense. He clawed at his chest, drawing more blood, and yanked at his golden hair, pulling out large clumps scalp and all. "Help, help me, mama, papa...fuck shit damn hell fuck fuck fuck...oh, please..."

He stood and whirled around, his eyes wild. "It burns, oh it does, I'm burning up..." He swooped down to pick up the knife, waving it around his head. Kyle cringed, but Stefan soon dropped the blade and staggered over to the corner altar.

A whoosh of air. A muted boom as fire exploded on the hearth. Stefan emptied another bottle of oil onto the surging flames, which licked up towards the curtains. He laughed madly, capering naked in the firelight. Then he thrust his arm into the heart of the blaze, loosing a yell that froze Kyle's heart.

Stefan's hand was on fire. The room filled with the stench of charred flesh. Still, Stefan laughed and danced. "Fuck you all!" he cried. He raced for the door, threw it open and disappeared up the stairs.

Smoke curled up from the smouldering drapes. All at once, they burst into flame. The fire crackled and snapped, licking at the roof beams. The temperature rose as the blaze spread. Kyle was slick with sweat. As he strained against the ropes that lashed him to the table, he thought he felt something give.

"Kyle, baby? Are you all right?" Rob's voice was comforting even in the midst of the chaos that surrounded them.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm used to the visions, but I was betting that Stefan might not be able to handle it."

"You were right. Well done." Chain clanked as Rob struggled with the pulley supporting his weight. "We've got to get out of here somehow."

"I...might be able...to slip out from these ropes..." Kyle sucked in his stomach and tried to wriggle down towards the foot of the table. "They seem to be loosening – maybe stretching in the heat..." He managed to move a few inches.

"Concentrate on your wrists. If you can get a hand free, you may be able to untie the rest."

"Good point." Kyle clasped his thumb to his little finger and pressed the other three fingers together, forming his hand into the shape of an arrow. Gently, he pulled backwards, working his way under the rope looped around his wrist. He extracted his hand up to the thumb joint, then got stuck. "Damn." The soles of his feet were hot. He raised his head. The wooden stairs leading up to the platform were burning. The thickening smoke was making it harder to breath. "Oh, hell. It's no use." He sank back onto the marble. It seemed that Stefan would win after all.

"Don't give up, Kyle. You can do it." Rob's encouragement helped Kyle fight off his despair. He began again, patiently working his hand back and forth, gaining a half an inch, then an inch.

"Got it!" Once one hand was loose, the rest of the rope sagged and loosened further. Despite his Dom pretensions, it appeared that Stefan was something of an amateur when it came to bondage. In a matter of minutes, Kyle was free. He jumped off the table, avoiding the smouldering stairs, and grabbed the knife Stefan had discarded. A few minutes of dedicated sawing and Rob's arms dropped to his sides like bars of lead. Kyle wrapped himself around his lover, burying his face in Rob's furry chest.

"Baby, I'd love to hug you back, but my arms won't work."

"Never mind, let's get out of here." Kyle grabbed Rob's hand, leading him towards the door. A shadow crossed his lover's face.

"What about the girl?" Rob knelt beside the crumpled body, which fortunately leant against bare wall rather than burning curtains. "She's still breathing. We can't just leave her."

"I'll carry her." Kyle lifted the inanimate form of Stefan's accomplice and slung her over his shoulder. "Come on."

The iron stairway was hot enough to blister their palms and the soles of their feet as they climbed. Obviously, Stefan had kindled a blaze above them. Sure enough, the curtains

in the study were alight. Flames made filigree patterns on wood panelling. The marble floors, however, were still cool enough to walk on.

A plastic garbage bag sat in the foyer near the front door. On a hunch, Rob checked inside. "Our clothes! Stefan must have planned to get rid of them after he did us in." Kyle set down his human burden, who still hadn't shown any signs of life, and struggled into his trousers and shirt, wincing as the fabric touched his burns. Still suffering from the effects of his suspension, Rob had even more trouble. Kyle held the shirt while Rob awkwardly inserted his arms. Then Kyle fastened the buttons, planting a kiss on Rob's chest before each one. They threw on their jackets, not bothering to zip them.

A crash came from upstairs, followed by an unearthly howl. "Stefan," said Rob, his face a mask of pain. "I can feel him. Let's go. Before it's too late."

Kyle hoisted Jez to his shoulder again and threw open the front door. They tumbled out onto the stoop, then navigated the icy path, slipping and sliding, until they stood on the sidewalk.

The mansion was a dark bulk, but curtains of flame billowed from every window. The harsh November wind whipped their hair into their faces, carrying the scents of wood smoke and roasting meat. Sirens echoed in the distance. Kyle felt the girl he was carrying stir.

"Stefan..." she moaned. She thrashed in Kyle's arms, so he set her on her feet, supporting her with one arm. Jez shivered in the frigid air. She gazed up at Kyle's face, blinking in confusion. Then she caught sight of the inferno that had been her home. "Stefan!" she keened, struggling against Kyle's grip. "No!"

"Jez, you can't do anything for him." Rob's voice was gentle and full of sorrow. Kyle understood that his lover was sharing Jezebel's pain. "It's too late."

"No! I've got to save him. Let me go!" Jez raked her fingernails down Kyle's cheek. Startled by her sudden violence, Kyle released her. She stumbled towards the house, but slipped and collapsed in the snow. Simultaneously, an explosion blew the roof off the house, ejecting a trail of sparks into the night sky. The walls collapsed inward, in slow motion, and were swallowed by the flames.

"Stefan..." she whimpered, burying her face in her hands. "I'm so sorry, Sir."

Rob was by her side, helping her to her feet. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, clearly still stiff. She buried her face in his jacket. "You warned him, Jez. You saw the risks he was taking. You did your best."

The girl just wept. Rob wept with her. Kyle watched the two of them, his heart so full that he thought it would burst in his chest, until the authorities arrived and led them all away.

Chapter Twenty One

Rob thought he'd go crazy if he had to wait any longer.

First, there had been the hospital, where they were treated for burns, scrapes, cuts, contusions, exposure and possible poisoning. Jez had been admitted for observation. Rob and Kyle were released.

Next came the visit to police headquarters, where they'd made statements and answered endless questions. By unspoken agreement, neither he nor Kyle said anything about psychic powers or magic rituals. Rob handed over the voice recorder, which hopefully had captured Stefan's gloating about the bank jobs. He also suggested that interrogating Jez, once she recovered, might throw some light on Mary's brutal murder.

There were phone calls to be made, to Elspeth and to Gina, who had heard that Rob had been kidnapped and was waiting up anxiously for news. And they had to eat something — Kyle had been trembling with hunger by the time the guys at the station had brought in the pizza.

It was all necessary, Rob knew, but it had taken hours. It was past midnight by the time Bill Rausch dropped them off at Rob's apartment. Rob's shoulder joints were still too damaged for him to drive safely.

Kyle fished in Rob's pocket for the door key. "Somebody's hard," he teased as he let them in. "Must be the effect of the drugs."

Rob flattened Kyle against the wall as soon as the door closed. "You're my drug, baby. I'm completely addicted." He tore open Kyle's shirt, scattering buttons, and cupped the slight swell of his breast, flicking the nipple. He played with the taut nub while he devoured Kyle's mouth, loving the way the boy shuddered under him. "I've got to have you or I'll explode."

Rob's fingers travelled down his lover's chest to his belly then snaked into his trousers to capture the rigid shaft hiding there. Kyle's cock seemed to leap into his hand, eager for his touch. He stroked it once or twice then grew frustrated with the constraints of clothing. With a growl, he used his other hand to unzip Kyle's jeans and yank them down to his knees.

Kyle's rod sprang to attention, Rob's fist clutching its base. Rob sank to the floor and swallowed the whole length.

"Oh, Rob," the boy breathed, as Rob swept his tongue along the velvety skin. Kyle tangled his fingers in Rob's hair, holding tight while Rob consumed the cock he'd been imagining all night.

He circled the bulb then dived back down, sucking hard. Kyle moaned. Rob slid his lips up and down the shaft, gathering the fluid leaking from the tip on each upward stroke. Kyle trembled in his mouth, not thrusting, not demanding anything, allowing Rob to do whatever he wished. Rob engulfed the rod of. Peace. Contentment. Despite the boy's raging hard-on and the fact that Rob had stopped him at the very edge, Kyle was completely satisfied.

Rob took Kyle's sweet flesh once again, licking and sucking down the shaft until his nose was buried in the fragrant thicket at the root. The complex aroma made Rob's cock jump inside his pants. Kyle's distinctive musk dominated the mix, but there were other scents, too — wood smoke, sweat, sandalwood and the faintest hint of Stefan's bitter cologne. He didn't want to think about Stefan. But as he sucked Kyle's dick and felt the boy writhe with pleasure, he couldn't erase the memories of that arrogant, sad young man impaled on Kyle's cock. He'd shared Stefan's lust; he had been infected by it. Now he remembered the awful pleasure of Kyle's cock invading him, the unspeakable delight of feeling Kyle move inside his body.

He wanted those feelings again. He wanted to experience them first hand, not filtered through the prism of someone else's emotions.

Kyle's cock jerked against his tongue. He was close. Rob backed off. Kyle sighed, letting go of Rob's head and looked down at him with a gentle smile, happy to receive whatever Rob had to give. Rob knew what his lover was feeling.

"God, that feels so wonderful. Why don't we go to bed?" Kyle didn't wait for an answer. He pulled his legs out of his pants and headed for Rob's bedroom. Rob followed, his swollen penis clamouring to be released from his trousers. He stopped briefly to strip, leaving his clothes in a messy pile on the floor.

Kyle was already stretched out on the bed, his knees up and his butt cheeks spread. A condom and the lube lay beside him on the pillow. He stroked his cock with one hand; with

the other, he fingered his rear hole, smearing it with the slippery gel. "Take me, Rob," he whispered, his eyes wide with lust. "I'm yours."

Love, gratitude, shame, embarrassment – one emotion followed another, leaving Rob confused and unsure. He climbed on top of Kyle and seized his mouth. Kyle locked his legs around Rob's waist and pulled Rob's pelvis against his own. Rob's aching dick rubbed against Kyle's meat. It was almost too much.

"Baby..." Rob began, when they broke for air. "Tonight...um, well, I'd like something different."

Kyle's eyes held something like adoration. Rob blushed. "Whatever you want, Rob. No matter what it is." Kyle searched his face, apparently looking for clues. "Don't be embarrassed. You can tell me. Do you want to tie me up? Is that it?"

"No, nothing like that." Rob hesitated. The image of Kyle bound in Stefan's dungeon surged back unbidden, sending a fresh rush of heat to his cock. "Not tonight at least."

"What then?" Rob watched understanding dawn in Kyle's eyes. "Ah, I see. You don't want to take me. You want me to take you."

Rob nodded, still unable to put his request into words. He lay down beside Kyle, who raised himself up on one elbow and searched Rob's face.

"You sure? I'm just as much a virgin at fucking as I was at being fucked."

"Not completely...Stefan..."

"He doesn't count. You know that." Kyle captured Rob's cock, giving it firm, lazy strokes. Rob raised his knees and spread his legs, exposing his balls and his rear hole. Kyle took the hint. He abandoned Rob's dick and teased his way down the inside of Rob's thighs, barely touching the sensitive skin. Rob shivered with delight. His cock gave a little jump each time Kyle's fingertips made contact. When a finger circled his puckered entrance, he groaned in anticipation. The finger pushed its way through the rubbery ring of muscle and pleasure blossomed in his rear passage.

"I don't want to hurt you," Kyle said with a grin as he worked his digit in Rob's butt. It was obvious that Rob was a long way from feeling any pain.

Rob grabbed the lube from the pillow, offering it to his partner. "Fuck me. Please. I want to feel you inside me."

"Whatever you want, Rob." Kyle squeezed some of the slippery gel onto his fingers and returned to his exploration of Rob's hole. "How does that feel?" He pulled his fingers apart, opening the tight channel.

"Incredible, baby. But I want your cock."

Kyle answered by donning the rubber and slathering it with lube. He positioned himself between Rob's splayed thighs, his cock arcing up from his groin in an elegant curve.

Rob felt the smooth, slippery knob rub against his sphincter. "Oh..." Before he could articulate his pleasure, Kyle pushed the head inside. Then he stopped. For long moments, the boy waited, watching Rob's face with a half-smile on those delicious ripe lips. The thick shaft stretched Rob's entrance, but he was barely full. "Stop teasing, boy," Rob growled. "Give me it all."

Kyle jerked his hips. His dick slid into place like a key entering a lock. The cock felt bigger than it looked, a massive sausage of flesh expanding in his bowels. It was outrageous, glorious, almost too much to bear. Dark pleasure rose from deep in Rob's gut and spiralled up his shaft. He clutched at the sheets.

"Oh, baby..." Kyle started to move inside him. With each smooth, powerful thrust, Kyle went deeper, waking sensations Rob had never experienced. His whole body vibrated with pleasure. Kyle's strokes made his earlobes tingle and his nipples ache. He'd been butt-fucked before, a few times, but never with such deliberate care.

"Touch yourself," Kyle murmured, plunging in and out of Rob's ass like a well-oiled machine. "Don't hold back. I want to feel your cum on my chest. I want to taste it."

"You too," Rob gasped. "Fuck me hard. Hard as you can. I can take it."

Kyle obeyed. He picked up his pace, slamming his meat into Rob's butt so fast that Rob hardly had time to catch his breath. With each stroke, Kyle's cock seemed to swell. Before long, it would explode. Rob relaxed and opened himself completely. *Take me*, he thought, revelling in the unaccustomed surrender. *Take everything*.

Rob fisted his own shaft in time with Kyle's pounding, smearing the fluid from the slit up and down its length. Kyle was in a frenzy, his eyes screwed shut, his lips pressed together. Again and again, he drove his cock home with a force that shook the bed and Rob's body. Now each stroke ended with a flicker of pain – even Rob's well-stretched hole couldn't

completely accommodate such a savage invasion – but the sharp sensations of tearing flesh only pushed Rob higher.

The tension coiled tighter. His excitement climbed endlessly. At his core, though, Rob found a circle of quiet. His spirit embraced his lover. Kyle's heart was an open book. Rob felt the boy's feverish lust and his urgent desire to please, his youthful pride in his virility and his gratitude for Rob's trust. Under it all flowed a profound sense of joy.

It was that joy, as much as the physical stimuli, that carried Rob away. His passion peaked. The tension suddenly dissolved. Cum surged up his stalk in an inexorable wave, spraying Kyle's breast with a fountain of jism.

Kyle opened his eyes at the sensation. "Oh, Rob!" His back arched. He could go no deeper. Rob felt the bulk in his rectum expand and convulse, then the heat of his partner's cum filling the condom. That heat burnt away every doubt, every fear. Everything except the love.

Kyle collapsed on Rob's chest, panting. Rob remained surprisingly alert. He stroked the sleek, dark hair. He could see the pulse in that pale neck, slowing down, and hear the boy's breathing as it became more regular. He sensed the moment when the Kyle's spent cock slipped from his distended rear hole. He did not feel empty. Far from it.

Kyle lay motionless in Rob's arms for many minutes. Rob wondered if he should be alarmed. He scanned Kyle's emotional state. No, there was no problem. Kyle was floating in an ocean of satisfied bliss. Let him rest. There was no hurry.

Finally, the young man raised his head and smiled into Rob's eyes. "Wow! That was – well, indescribable. Indescribably good."

Rob took possession of Kyle's ever-tempting lips. A few drops of Rob's cum adorned Kyle's cheek. Rob licked them off, then plunged in for an even more intense kiss.

"Did I do all right?" Kyle asked when Rob finally let him speak. "Did you – was it good for you?"

"Do you really need to ask that, baby?" Rob rubbed the traces of his cum into Kyle's chest. His cock stiffened.

Kyle put on a mischievous grin. "No, I guess not." He reached between them to grasp Rob's swelling dick. "I can see that just thinking about it turns you on." He nibbled at Rob's

mouth while stroking him to full hardness. "Now do you think you might be able to return the favour? I'm all greased and ready..."

"Wait a minute! Let me recover." Rob sat up and leant against the headboard.

"You look recovered to me..." Kyle cradled the fat erection poking up from Rob's groin.

"Seriously. I need to talk to you." Rob patted the pillow. Kyle reluctantly released Rob's cock and settled beside him. Rob couldn't resist pulling him into another kiss.

"I like the way you 'talk'." Kyle chuckled when Rob finally let him go.

"Sorry. You're just too tempting." Kyle raised one eyebrow in mock surprise. "And you know it, damn it!"

Kyle sat up straight and folded his hands in his lap, covering his half-hard dick. "My apologies," he said, suppressing a giggle. "What did you want to talk about?"

Rob swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "Kyle, we're in Massachusetts..." Kyle looked puzzled by this obvious statement. Rob forced himself to continue. "That means... Well, what I want to say is...I want to marry you."

"Marry me? Are you kidding?" There was scorn in Kyle's voice, but Rob thought he caught a glimmer of excitement underneath the scepticism. "We've only known each other two weeks!"

"After what we've been through together – it feels like forever. Doesn't it?"

Kyle gave a slow nod. "Yes, but that's only one problem. You're thirteen years older than me, Rob. Almost old enough to be my father."

"That doesn't matter to me. As we get older, the difference will seem less and less. Anyway, guys marry much younger women all the time."

"And what about your job? I got the impression that the force had a kind of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

"Fuck the force. If they can't accept me as I am, I'll go elsewhere. The thing that matters most to me is being with you."

"And your kids? Your ex?"

"They'll adapt. Gina threw me out because I was sleeping around. I think she'll understand when she meets you..."

"Yeah? Are you sure? A twenty-year old from the streets, without even a high school diploma? With a history of psychiatric problems?"

"That's over now. You're in control. You can get your GED. Get a job or go to college. You've got a future now, Kyle. A future that I hope will be with me." Rob searched Kyle's face, suddenly anxious. "Why do you keep coming up with all these excuses? You don't want marry me?"

Kyle's face turned grim. "Rob, all I want is to be with you. For the rest of my life. But I don't want to see you making a decision that you'll regret later. I couldn't stand to see you unhappy, especially because of me. I'd rather continue on alone."

"I won't regret it. I'm sure about this, one hundred percent." Rob gathered Kyle into his arms and peppered his face with kisses. "You're what makes me happy. As long as we're together, I can handle whatever the world throws at us." He pulled back, holding the boy at arm's length. "Tell me. Will you marry me? Yes or no?"

Fear. Disbelief. Relief. Joy. Kyle stroked Rob's cheek. "If you're certain, then yes. Of course I'll marry you."

Unexpected tears gathered in Rob's eyes. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"I hope you feel the same way in a few years."

"I will. I know I will. I love you, Kyle. More than life itself."

"And I love you. I don't think you realise how much, not yet. Over the years, I'll try to show you."

"Over the years." Rob wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Oh baby! I do like the way that sounds."

Kyle flipped over onto his stomach and raised himself onto his knees. He wiggled his ass in Rob's face. "Good. Now that that's settled..."

Chapter Twenty Two

Snow had been falling since the morning, feathery flakes that padded the blue-green boughs of the firs and settled like a white quilt on the tumbled stone wall behind the cottage. Now, in the gathering dusk, the precipitation had finally tapered off. The pillowy drifts glowed with some inner light.

Kyle had cleared the driveway and the path twice already. The dry snow was so fluffy that huge shovels full weighed almost nothing. He tossed the powdery stuff over his shoulder, building the piles on either side of the steps. They were already taller than he was. Stray crystals wafted through the still air, sparkling in the lamplight.

It was cold enough to freeze the hair in his nostrils. His fingers were numb inside his gloves. He didn't care. Nothing could spoil this marvellous Christmas Eve. He just hoped that their guests wouldn't have any difficulties because of the weather.

After the frigid outdoors, the inside of Elspeth's house felt tropical. Kyle shrugged off his parka and placed his boots outside on the porch. A cheerful fire crackled on the hearth. 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' played softly on the radio. From the kitchen came the rich smells of roasting turkey and fresh-baked apple pie. Saliva gathered in his mouth.

Elspeth looked up from chopping vegetables as he entered. "The snow seems to have stopped for now," he said, grabbing a crisp chunk of raw carrot. "And I heard the plough go up Quail Hollow while I was shovelling."

"Let's hope they don't block the drive." She dumped the vegetables into the top section of a double-boiler. "There, that's done. I don't need to start those until after the ceremony."

"The drive looked okay." Kyle sat at the table and took old woman's hand. "Elspeth. I want to thank you again for doing all this."

"Nonsense. I'm a justice of the peace. Performing marriages is one of my responsibilities."

"But cooking dinner and hosting the party aren't. Seriously, you're doing Rob and me a huge favour."

"I wanted to do something for you. To make up for my blindness." Elspeth frowned and shook her head "I should have known what Stefan was up to. I should have seen how years of bitterness and envy had twisted his spirit. If only I had realised...maybe I could have saved him. Maybe I could even have saved poor Mary."

"Don't blame yourself. I know you're wise, but you're only human. And Stefan... Well, he was obviously a brilliant guy. Not easy to second-guess."

"Have they found any remains? It would be good to bury him with his parents – to reconcile them after all these years."

"Not a trace. Rob says the authorities are pretty mystified. The fire was intense, but there should be some evidence. Bone fragments or teeth. There seems to be nothing left."

"Hmm." Elspeth's brow knotted. "He couldn't have escaped?"

"Anything is possible, I suppose. But it doesn't seem likely. We heard him on the upper floors when we left. His body was already burning. And he was totally mad, screaming, babbling, gleefully setting things on fire." Kyle stared at his hands, the guilt welling up once again. "It was my fault. I made him crazy, showing him the horrors in my mind. I killed him, as surely as if I'd set the fire myself. One more victim of my curse."

"You had no choice. There was no other way to save yourself – or Rob." Elspeth lifted his chin, raising his eyes to hers. "You're a good man, Kyle. You had no way of knowing that the visions would drive him to suicide."

"Yes, I did. I knew only too well the effects of my 'gift'..."

"You're being melodramatic. Stefan's mind was already warped. Anyway, you've got to let go of this old notion that you're cursed. You've already learnt how to keep the dark visions from taking control. In time, you'll learn to use your talent to benefit others, if that is what you want."

"I'd like that," Kyle said. Gradually, the weight lifted from his heart. "I'd like that very much."

Rob's footsteps rang on the uncarpeted stairway. "What would you like, boy?" He bent down to place a juicy kiss on Kyle's mouth.

Kyle laughed and winked at Elspeth. "I can't tell you in front of her."

"Don't think that I'm a prude just because I'm an old lady."

Rob gave her a grin, then tousled Kyle's hair. "Never mind. I know you well enough to guess what you'd like."

Kyle gave his lover a long look of appreciation. Rob wore a tailored charcoal grey suit that made him look more like a banker than a cop. His mustard-yellow silk shirt and matching pocket hanky rescued the costume from being too sombre. His tie was the real surprise, a whimsical Christmas novelty item with grey and gold reindeer prancing across snowy fields. Kyle would never have expected Rob to don something so...cute. "Wow! You look sharp! I never thought I'd see you like this."

"I believe in getting dressed up, for very important occasions." Rob gave him a look that turned him to jelly. "I can't imagine anything more important than today."

Kyle realised he was blushing. "I'd better go up and get dressed myself. The guests should be here soon."

They were expecting only a few people: Gina, along with Will and Jennie, who already seemed completely comfortable with their new 'Uncle Kyle', Bill Rausch and Julio Rodriguez from the force, Jimmy Pestrowski, Rob's best friend from high school who'd been his best man when he married Gina. Rob's mother was in no condition to attend. Rob assured Kyle that she wouldn't understand anyway.

Kyle had no one. He had briefly considered asking Jezebel to join them. He guessed that she was, like him, entirely alone. He had seen her once since the night of the fire, at the police station. Her eyes were dark wells of pain. He wanted to reach out to her, to thank her for trying to stop Stefan, to tell her he was sorry. The look of hate she gave him hurt like a physical blow.

Finally, he'd decided to invite Louella Howard, the attendant from the hospital. She probably knew him better than anyone except Rob and Elspeth. The woman had hugged him and assured him that she would be honoured.

"Do you want some help?" Rob swung his arm around Kyle's shoulder.

"Help?"

"Getting dressed?" Rob's blue eyes twinkled. "You know, tying your tie or whatever."

"The kind of help I'd get from you... Well, I'm sure that it would be fun, but we don't want to keep our guests waiting all night." Kyle brushed his hip against Rob's crotch and

discovered the expected hardness. He headed for the stairs, hoping that Elspeth hadn't noticed the prominent bulge in his own pants. "Later. You can help me get undressed."

"I'll look forward to it," Rob called after him.

* * * *

Elspeth had decided to marry them in the sunroom. The big glass panes were laced with frost filigree. Candles flickered on all the sills. Outside, the half moon turned the fresh-fallen snow to a glittering blanket of white.

The witch and justice of the peace wore a long red skirt and a white blouse with an antique silver brooch at the throat. She stood with her back to the yard, holding her book. Kyle and Rob faced her, holding hands. The guests clustered around on both sides, some sitting, some standing, all of them smiling. Crowley surveyed the proceedings from his usual spot in the rocker.

Elspeth looked around the room. The murmur of conversation died away. Silence reigned. Kyle's heartbeat was loud in his ears, but as the moment of peace lengthened, his pulse slowed, his breathing deepened, and his anxiety evaporated. This was not a dream, not some product of his fevered imagination. This was real, his true future. He could trust it. It would not fade away.

Rob squeezed his hand. Kyle looked up, into eyes so full of love he thought he'd drown. *Yes*, he broadcast to his lover. *Anything. Always.*

"Robert Francis Murphy, do you take this man, Kyle Dylan McLaughlin, to be your lawfully wedded spouse..." Elspeth began.

"I do," Kyle heard Rob say, in a firm, confident voice, for the assembled and for the world to hear.

Yes.

About the Author

I became addicted to words at an early age. I began reading when I was four. I wrote my first story at five years old and my first poem at seven. Since then, I've written plays, tutorials, marketing brochures, software specifications, self-help books, press releases, a five-hundred page dissertation, and of course, erotica. I'm the author of four erotic novels and two short story collections. I also edited the ground breaking anthology *Sacred Exchange*, which explores the spiritual aspects of BDSM relationships, and the massive collection *Cream: The Best of the Erotic Readers and Writers Association*. My short stories have appeared in more than two dozen print collections edited by erotica luminaries such as M. Christian, Maxim Jakubowski, Mitzi Szereto, Rachel Kramer Brussel, and Alison Tyler. In my so-called spare time, I also review books and film for the Erotica Readers and Writers Association and Erotica Revealed, and feature as Celebrity Author at Custom Erotica Source .

My lifelong interests in sex and the written word became serendipitously entwined nine years ago when I read my first Black Lace book by Portia da Costa. Her work inspired me to take my fantasies out of the closet (and private email files) and expose them to the world. The rest, as they say, is history (although granted, no more than a minor footnote!).

I've always loved travelling; my husband seduced me in a Burmese restaurant by telling me his foreign adventures. Since then, I have visited every continent except Australia, though I still have a long travel wish list. Currently I live with him and our two exceptional felines in Southeast Asia, where I pursue an alternative career that is completely unrelated to my creative writing.

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