



**Rock Bottom**

Celia Kyle

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Published 2010

ISBN 978-1-59578-638-8

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Manufactured in the United States of America

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

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

Editor  
Chrissie Henderson

Cover Artist  
Amanda Kelsey

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## **Blurb**

Sometimes life gets in the way of love and then heartache gets in the way of life. In the middle of the maelstrom, Jeremy finds that alcohol numbs the pain and keeps any pleasure at bay. For pleasure can overpower the pain and force him to forget the one he loved, the one he killed. Sometimes it takes hitting rock bottom to force a man to climb back to the top.

## Chapter One

Jeremy wondered, for a moment, if the answer to his every difficulty could be found in the bottom of a glass. He wished that the world would suddenly become his oyster with just one more shot of scotch. One more sip and Peter would be back in his life, his bed.

Jeremy dropped the shot glass on the bar and motioned for another. A quick, hot, searing drink and he'd be that much closer to a place without pain or hate or ... anything. No guilt or blame, just nothing.

Jenny, the bartender, approached. Seemed like she took her merry old time getting to him too. "I called Craig, Jeremy. He'll be here in a few for ya."

"Don't want Craig. I want another drink. Just a quick shot for the road." Just one more, that's all. Maybe he could drown the love still squeezing his heart.

Jenny shook her head and took his empty glass. "You've had enough for tonight. Just let Craig drag you home, man."

Craig. He didn't need Craig. Didn't need his ex's twin reminding him of what he'd destroyed. He didn't want anyone other than Peter, period. Maybe that was the answer. Maybe he could just be different. If he was het-Jeremy, non-Peter-Jeremy, other-Jeremy, then the guilt could disappear... Maybe.

He eyed the woman before him. She wasn't gorgeous, but pretty in a plain sort of way. Too much makeup and not enough sleep from the looks of it. Slinging drinks in this dive could age anyone, he supposed.

Then again, he wasn't any prize either. Sure, he topped out at just under six feet, but pudgy had started appearing around his middle. He'd gone soft in the last six months. Too many drinks and not enough food. Too many long nights and longer days in the empty house.

"You could take me home." He winked. Maybe his smirk and wink would work on women. Peter had always blushed when he winked.

Jenny didn't. "I don't think so, cowboy."

"No? Not up for a game of slap and tickle?" That's what it was called, right? Between a man and a woman?

Jenny dropped the towel she'd been holding and tossed his shot glass into a bin. She grabbed his hands in hers, squeezing and pulling them toward her. "What are you doing, Jeremy?" She looked into his eyes, and he feared what she'd see there. He dropped his gaze to the scarred wood bar. She couldn't know, couldn't see. "This needs to stop. I get it, I do. But drinking and coming on to me isn't going to make it all better. *Nothing* will make it all better but time. The bar appreciates your business, but I don't want to see you in here again."

She released him and stepped back. He risked a glance at her face, and shrank back from the pity. He didn't need it, didn't want it.

"Hey, Craig, thanks for coming." She almost smiled. One of those sad smiles and he hated it. Wanted to smack it off her face with the quick right hook he'd been trying to teach Peter.

A slim hand, like his lover's—but not—slid over his shoulders. "Hey, Jerr, ready to

go?" The lithe body slipped beneath his right arm. Craig's hand moved from his shoulder to his ribs, pulling him, urging him. To what? To do what?

"No. Jenny and I have a date, just after she hands over another shot of scotch. Isn't that right, Jenny?"

Craig tugged on him and he almost fell off the stool. "Come on, Jerr."

He stumbled a few steps, arm whacking the bar, feet getting crossed. "Nah, I got a date for slap and tickle with, Jen. That's what they call it, right?"

"What's that?" Craig grunted.

"Het-heter-straight fucking. I'm gonna be straight now. No more cute twinkies who die and break your heart." Craig's grip loosened and Jeremy stumbled into an empty table, the last customer's glasses and pitcher shattering on the concrete floor. He followed the glassware down, down, down to the ground and thumped his head. He felt the crack from top to tail and back again. His vision blurred. Whether from the drinks, the hit, or tears, he didn't know. Didn't really care either.

*Down, down, down...* He chuckled. Peter's favorite song from his kindergarten class echoed through his mind. *The ants go marching...* Teasing him with memories of Peter and the kids on the playground dancing and laughing and ... living.

With a groan, he pulled up to his hands and knees and reached out for Craig. Craig wouldn't leave him. Not like Peter. His head throbbed like a son-of-a-bitch.

"Come on, Jerr. Let's go." The man's voice wavered, shook. Maybe he'd had too much to drink too. Maybe Jeremy should drive. Nah, that's how he got this way in the first place. Driving was the reason for it all.

He got to his feet and resumed position, shuffling toward the door. His cheeks were wet, liquid trickling down his face, slipping down to his chin and falling on his chest. He was crying again and didn't even remember starting. He wiped the back of his hand across his face. Men didn't cry. Not real men. Not straight men.

Jeremy pulled his hand away and didn't see the expected glistening evidence of his grief. He saw red. "Blood. Red blood, Craig. I'm dying."

Peter had been red. Red from top to tail. Streaks and stripes of red everywhere. Everywhere.

"You're not dying, Jerr. Just got a bump on the head. They bleed a lot. Come on, now. I'll get you home and cleaned up." Craig pulled him over the threshold and out into the night.

It only took a few steps to reach Craig's car, a little enviro something or other. He hated the car. Big man in a little car, made him claustrophobic. Didn't know how the guy drove it round and round the mulberry bush. Pop goes the weasel! Peter popped and now Jeremy would too.

\* \* \* \*

Home, home, home. They'd made it home and the car didn't get wrapped around a tree. He hadn't popped. But there was blood. Maybe he cried red tears now...

"Come on, let's get you in the shower, Jerr. Get you cleaned up." Craig dragged him through the house.

The home was a shell of what it used to be. Even drunk, he could see that. It didn't sparkle or shine any longer. Dull. The browns and off-whites were depressing instead of soothing. The soft colors had all been chosen by Peter. The whole house ... Peter.

Jeremy tripped over a pile of clothes and collided with the wall. “Wall moved,” he complained.

“Sure it did, Jerr, come on now.” Craig pulled him away from the wall and urged him down the hallway. Toward...

“No, not there. Guestroom. Not sleeping there.” He collided with the closed door of the guestroom, scratching at the doorknob.

“Okay. Shhhh ... okay.” Craig opened the door and Jeremy tripped through, bracing himself on the dresser. His new home. “Strip for me, Jeremy.” Craig tugged on his shirt and pulled it over his head. He hissed when the collar scratched his forehead. Next, those small fingers tugged on his belt buckle.

No. No, no, no. The words echoed in his head. Pounding, fighting, screaming to be let free. No one had—not since—just no. “No!”

Jeremy turned away, hips against the dresser, hands propped on the wood and head hanging low. That extra drink would have fixed this. All of it and none of it and everything. “No. I—I can do it. ’M fine.” He couldn’t see Craig’s face, but could sense the tension. The air crackled around him, pinging and striking his skin. Skin that Craig shouldn’t see. Skin that was only for...

“Okay. Okay, man. It’s fine.”

Jeremy pushed away from the dresser and stumbled a few steps, stopping to brace himself on the bed. He sat on the mattress and fell to the side, eyes closed. “Maybe I’ll just stop here a minute.”

“We need to clean your head, at least, ’K?”

Fingers poked and prodded his forehead and he swiped at the hand. “ ’M fine.”

“I’m just going to clean up your face and then you can crawl into bed.”

The hand withdrew and Jeremy floated through dreams and memories. The floor danced and swirled beneath his feet and he brought them onto the bed. Didn’t want to get swept away in the current. It’d drag him down, down, down into the ground, to get out of the rain. He chuckled and rolled over.

Jeremy’s jeans scratched his legs, his belt buckle dug into his waist. With fumbling fingers he fought with the leather and brass. “Want pants off.” He grunted when the buckle released its hold on the leather.

His fingers felt funny. Big and awkward while he tried to find the button to his jeans. Only, it’d disappeared, like everything else. Gone. Poof! He tried to snap his fat fingers, numb but hot. He encountered cool metal. The button came back. He got it open and yanked on the zipper until the damned things were undone.

He wiggled and wobbled, pulling and pushing on the material until it inched past his hips. His ankles seemed so, so far away. As if his legs had grown and grown while he drank and drank. “Too far.” Jeremy scissored his legs, using his feet to push the jeans off. Up and down and back and forth and he got hot and queasy, moving around so much. “Want them off.”

And then they fell away and the voice of an angel drifted through the room. “They’re off, shh, they’re off.”

He opened his eyes wide in the darkness, searching for his angel. Too dark, couldn’t see. Or maybe he didn’t open his eyes. He brought his hand to his face, poking and touching, searching. “Ow.” He poked himself in the eye. They were open. Huh? “Angel...”

“Right here, Jerr. Just close your eyes and be still. I’ll take care of you.” Gentle fingers stroked his hair. Yeah, his angel would take care of him. It didn’t hurt when he was near.

“Don’t leave.”

“Jeremy.”

*No, no, no.* “Stay, please.”

“Okay, shh.”

A wet cloth bathed his forehead and he leaned into the touch. His angel, taking care of him. Always.

The touch disappeared and then returned on his other side, bed dipping and covers shifting in the darkness. The soft whisper of cloth mixed with the sound of their breaths. Huh? His angel breathed. Did angels need to breathe? He’d always thought of them as not having to deal with earthly trappings. But it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

Jeremy pulled on the covers, inching toward his angel, his savior. He stopped shifting when skin met skin, and he sighed, snuggling into the warmth of the bed and body next to him. Peter hadn’t left him. It’d all been a dream. A bad dream, nothing more.

He pulled his lover close and rolled into him, putting his head on Peter’s shoulder like they’d slept so many nights before. Yes, a bad, bad dream. Too many drinks is all. Too many.

Peter felt so good, so right and warm in his arms. They’d just lain down after a quiet night in of talking and drinking and just being. Regardless of the amount he’d drunk, his cock responded like it always did. It filled, heavy and aching, throbbing between his legs with the beat of his heart. His lover wasn’t in on the game just yet, but it happened that way sometimes.

Jeremy nuzzled Peter’s hair, inhaling his lover’s scent. Sweet musk with a hint of vanilla filled him, enticing him. Different, but almost the same. Softer and sugary, innocence incarnate. He grinned at the thought. Peter was far from innocent. They both were.

He stroked and petted Peter’s shoulders and back, rolling the smaller man beneath him. Peter tensed and then melted into his touch, his hands loving him in return, exploring him as he explored his lover.

He nudged his knee between Peter’s legs, rubbing his cock against his lover’s hip and urging a response from Peter. He kissed and licked his way up Peter’s neck, nibbling the tender spots, those spots that only he knew. Jeremy found Peter’s nipples, pinching and pulling the tiny nubs. He grinned against Peter’s neck at the gasping moan he got in response.

Peter’s cock hardened between them, growing thick and long, and Jeremy hated his lover’s boxers that kept them apart. Peter slept nude. Or did he?

Didn’t matter. His dick throbbed and he knew Peter’s did too. He didn’t have the energy for fucking or loving tonight. He just needed. Needed love and heat to drive the nightmare away. Tomorrow morning, tomorrow, he’d love Peter like he deserved. Sweet and slow. Make his lover beg and cry to come. Yeah, tomorrow.

Jeremy squeezed his eyes, panting and groaning into Peter’s mouth, their gasps mingling and mixing. They breathed each other’s air, the very essence of each other passing between their mouths. Pant and rub and pet and, God, he wanted to come. He

wanted to shoot his load on Peter, rub his come all over his lover so they'd always be part of one another.

His orgasm pushed closer. "Gonna come, baby." He wanted Peter with him. Needed it, and Peter gasped and grunted in response. His baby was close too.

The electric tingles of pleasure skimmed his nerves, shimmering along his spine. The sparks settled in his balls, burning and pushing for release. He rubbed harder, faster, pushing and sliding over the cotton fabric until he came, the pure ecstasy of coming washing through him in waves. Ebb and flow, swirling and twirling through his body from head to foot. "I love you. Peter, love."

He jerked and tensed against his lover, Peter coming right on his heels. Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Just a bad dream, a nightmare. Peter was with him, right there with him.

"What?" The soft voice sung through the night. So like his angel, his Peter.

"Love you so much, Peter. So much." He closed the meager distance between their mouths, slipping his tongue between Peter's lips for a tiny taste. Just one sip...

Jeremy's world spun and flipped. Up became down and down became left and his back collided with the carpeted floor with a thump, head smacking the ground for the second time that night. Maybe he'd just stay down here in the dark. He didn't have the energy to climb into bed again. Why did Peter throw him out?

The bedside lamp flicked on and Jeremy squinted against the intrusion, hand in front of his face to shield him from the light. His eyes adjusted to the soft glow, and he looked into a pair of pale green eyes like new grass after a spring rain.

Peter's eyes were blue.



## Chapter Two

The devil. He lived in the details—those tiny specs of humanity that differentiated one from another—the minutia that lurked beyond the grasp of an inebriated mind.

Blue and green, light and dark, rough grabs and whisper-like caresses ... all different, yet the same. Memories and reality mated with fantasy, all crowding Jeremy's mind. Up turned into down, or had down turned into up? But up is up and down is down in every town, right? That's what Barney said. Jeremy didn't know, couldn't decide. He thought he was up high, but how could someone look down at him then? Unless they could fly.

The devil had come. He had burning green eyes lined in smoke, and dirty blond hair that created a curtain around his face. But most of all, he had a hate-filled gaze. Good. The devil should hate him. Loathe him. Detest everything that had ever been good and right and beautiful in him. He already hated himself, why shouldn't the devil join in?  
*Come to the party, man.*

The devil's hand connected with his cheek, the smack of flesh against flesh breaking the silence. "Bastard," the devil hissed.

Jeremy couldn't argue. With this and that and the other ... any name in the book fit.

The face disappeared back over the edge of the bed, and Jeremy followed, using the bedpost for support when his legs threatened to give out beneath him. The devil was fighting with clothes, snatching and tugging, grumbling and growling. Looking everywhere but at Jeremy. The devil's green eyes were still ablaze, familiar, but not.

First he was gifted with an angel, and then the devil banished him with his wicked, wicked wonderful ways. Here and gone again, like everything in Jeremy's life. The same, but not.

"Where y' going?" Couldn't talk. Now his tongue was swollen like his fingers, big and clumsy. And someone had shoved cotton in his mouth.

The devil stared at him, eyes narrowed until they appeared almost black. "Fuck. You."

"Did that, didn't we? Or was that my angel and you kicked him out. You seen him?" Jeremy wavered and swayed on his feet before tipping forward like a felled tree. He landed with a bounce that sent his brain pinging around his skull, face smashed into the sheets. "Can you send me back m'angel? So sweet, soft. Such soft hands." He managed to wave a hand toward the devil. "You can go, just send me my angel back."

Jeremy was waking up now. The haze from his drinks was lifting, peeling away the layers. He didn't want to wake up. Not ever.

\* \* \* \*

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Jeremy marched to the beat of Peter's drum, head pounding in rhythm with his heart. *Peter...* Maybe if he went quack, quack, quack, three little Peters would come swimming back. No, that's not right. Only two could come back. Twins, but not—Peter and Craig.

Slivers of the night before pieced together in his mind. Like tinkling shards of glass,

they sang while reconnecting. Flashes and snippets of memories fought for dominance through his alcohol induced haze.

He remembered starting at Kelly's, he'd only had a couple there. The bartender was a big ol' Irish bulldozer who cut him off after two beers and six shots. Good thing Jeremy's hotspots were within stumbling distance. It sucked to drink at home alone, so he shuffled on.

By the time he'd gotten to The Hole, things were a little fuzzy. Everywhere he looked, buildings blurred and melted into the ground. The sidewalk shifted beneath his feet, growing and grabbing at his legs. Two blocks—he at least managed to make it two blocks.

Mike was behind the bar for the first hour, Jeremy was pretty certain. A big, beefy bear of a man with a shaved head and mile-wide shoulders. Eye candy for the early guys, couples who wandered in for quick drink before dinner. Jenny. Jenny must have come on after Mikey. After that, things got really blurry.

Jeremy groaned and rubbed his face on the sheets, wiping away the drool covering his chin. He'd have to do a load of laundry. Sheets smelled like stale beer and sex. The sex had to be his imagination, though. His mind craved those highflying feelings he'd had with Peter. He hadn't—not since Peter left.

Jeremy rolled over and his stomach flipped with him, sloshing like a ship on the sea. A few deep breaths calmed the hurricane brewing in his gut.

He needed a drink. Nothing hard and heavy. Just a quick buzz to take the edge off, to soothe the savage beast, so to speak. He had to have a beer in the fridge. Or did he drink them all? Couldn't remember, and if he had his days right, it was Sunday. Meant even if he called now, delivery wouldn't happen until after noon. Fucking bureaucrats with their fucking laws. A man should be able to have a drink when he wanted.

Jeremy pushed himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the mattress, head thumping along with every other ache in his body. His head really was pounding this morning. More so than usual. What'd they sell him last night? Normal bottom shelf kicked his ass, but not this bad.

He scrubbed his hands over his face, pushing the hair out of his eyes, and winced when he hit a tender spot. When he brought his hand down, flakes of dried blood covered his fingertips. A quick stumble and near fall brought him up against the dresser, and he got a good look in the mirror at the real reason behind the party in his skull. Big ass cut started above his eyebrow and crept into his hairline. Dried blood caked in his hair and stained his skin. Didn't remember getting that.

The wall helped him get to the kitchen, home of food and beer. He was more interested in the beer than the food. Sun streaming in through the window above the sink shot slivers of heat and pain through his eyes. *Too early.*

Two more steps brought him to the door of the fridge, and he pulled it open. The gift of life only seconds away. He tugged on the handle and cool air wafted over his nude body. His balls drew up with the change in temperature. He scratched his sac, moving his hand over his lower stomach. Itchy. He grabbed a beer with his left hand, and kept rubbing at his belly with the right. Damn.

Jeremy placed the beer on the counter, pulled his pudge out of the way, and looked down. White flakes. White flakes all over his stomach, in his pubes. His heart picked up double time, the pain in his head increasing tenfold with his blood pressure skyrocketing.

Didn't want to think. Didn't want to know what the dried flakes on his stomach and cock meant.

Memories or fantasies or imagination. The slivers twinkled in the light, drifting out of the nothingness alcohol created and dancing in the morning sun. Teasing and tempting, the little white flakes formed the glue that held the shards together. One, two, three. They fell into place and he heaved.

His stomach tried to do what his mind couldn't, purge it all and throw it out by force. Amazing how the threat of vomit can make a body obey. It makes the hung-over feel suddenly straight and sober.

Nothing came up the first time—he hadn't eaten anything since yesterday. Maybe the day before. Again and again, his stomach tightened, tried to crawl up his throat and abandon him out of loathing. Sour bile mixed with saliva and dripped into the stainless steel sink, turning the shiny surface a hazy yellow.

With each tightening of his throat, rush of air out of his lungs and squeezing of his abdomen, he tore through his memories. *Think, think, think.*

He didn't, not anymore, not since Peter... He just didn't. Not with his own hand. Hell, he didn't even get morning wood anymore. But ... but his stomach was covered in dried come and the tiny slivers of last night told him that he hadn't been alone when the mess was made.

He braced himself on the counter, breath heaving and saliva pouring from his lips. *Drip, drip, drip.* Like life draining from him, pouring from him while the events of last night drifted in, taking their place. *Drip, drip, drip.*

The knob on the sink turned easily, and he cupped his hands, letting the cold water fill them to the brim. Jeremy buried his face in his hands and prayed that the liquid would wash everything away. Instead, it seemed to bring events to the surface.

Tender hands. Glasses breaking. Crying blood. Fingers wiping the tears away. His angel. His Peter. And the worst of all—green eyes. They should have been blue.

He hadn't, but he had. His throat tightened until he couldn't breathe. Eyes burning like the fire he'd witnessed last night.

Ruined. Jeremy had ruined Peter's last memory with something sick and twisted created by the haze of alcohol. The last touch of Peter's lips had been replaced with the fire-like sting of scotch followed by the softest hint of silky-soft kisses. The final glance, the soul-deep look they'd shared, had turned into one of hate and fiery eyes. The sting of a slap.

He lowered his head to the counter, tears clouding his eyes dripping onto the tile floor. He'd lost Peter. Tossed his lover away without a second glance. His heart hurt, stabbed over and again with the shards of his memories.

Jeremy reached for the towel he kept next to the sink, and encountered paper instead of terry cloth. Oh God, he didn't want to know what he'd touched. His counters were normally bare except for the towel, and paper meant someone truly had been in their home last night. He hadn't been alone, it wasn't the scotch fucking with him, and the fingers stroking paper meant he'd have to face it. Everything.

He raised his head and stared at the piece of white clutched in his hand. Reality, staring him in the face. With his other hand, he grabbed the towel and wiped his face before confronting the inevitable.

With fumbling fingers, he unfolded the tiny slip of the end of his life.

*Lose my number.*  
*C.*

### Chapter Three

God had been waiting a long time to strike him down dead. His first chance had come behind his father's shed at fifteen. His ma caught Jeremy and his friend making out one Saturday afternoon.

It'd been his first kiss. His first *real* kiss. One of those lip locks that made his prick jerk and take notice at what was going on. The first time the thing between his legs reacted to more than his own hand. Girls ... girls hadn't *ever* done that for him. From the first time he popped a boner at fourteen, and the other boys whispered about copping a feel on the slut down the street (she got boobs before all the other girls) nothing felt as good as tongue kissing that boy, though. No-thing.

Now, if his father had found him and Tommy humping like, well, teenagers, things would have gone differently. His dad did hold with no faggots, like he used to say, but Jeremy knew the old man would have preferred beating the shit out of his kid to listening to his devout Catholic wife preach on and on, day and night, about how gays were going straight to Hell. And her little boy had been condemned. Her. Little. Boy.

And no amount of his ma's preachin' or Father Anthony's fire and brimstone was going to change anything. Couple his mother's strict Catholic upbringing with an Italian on the warpath and Jeremy was not only going straight to Hell, but he was dead to his mother as well.

"You're dead to me," she'd said and then spat at his feet. He'd seen her do it often enough, and to so many different people, that it didn't bother him. Much. Her little boy, named after St. Jeremy himself, was a queer.

Now, the whole "May God strike you down" thing had been a little over the top in his opinion, but he hadn't said anything. He was a kid, what could he say?

He didn't even object when his ma sent him off to a private Catholic school out of state. How she thought locking him up with hundreds of other boys, half of whom were gay, was a good idea, he'd never know. He still secretly thanked her for that. Best time of his life.

AIDS? Not really an issue when everyone was fucking the same group of guys over and over again. Besides, he was invincible. Bad shit didn't happen to good little boys in a Catholic school, sucking and fucking whenever the nuns and priests weren't looking. Funny thing? The school didn't even have any of those "funny" priests so prevalent in the news today.

And now, after years avoiding God's wrath cast down upon him by his mother and Father Anthony twenty-five years ago, it looked like God was finally going to get his chance.

Now, a gay alcoholic lapsed Catholic, he was getting ready to enter the First Baptist Church. He leaned against the side of the building, staring at the sign. First. Lots of "firsts" all over the world. Made him wonder why there weren't any seconds. Like millions of churches calling themselves "first" would make them better than everyone else. Kinda fucked in his opinion.

But he was just stalling. Delaying the inevitable.

In his mind, rock bottom had always been this hypothetical, theoretical *thing*—more

conceptual than actual. People talked of “rock bottom” like this mythical event that occurred for the few and the many.

*He has to hit rock bottom, they’d say. He can’t climb up unless he’s gotten all the way down, he’d heard.*

Jeremy never imagined it as a place—a physical manifestation of not being able to travel any lower or deeper into the hole that had become his life. His rock bottom had come at the cost of his last few beautiful memories of his life with Peter and the only bit of his lover he’d had left. Craig.

It brought him to this place, this church, looking for guidance but not. Looking for the way back to normalcy or happiness or something better than the shit he’d fallen into, onto, within.

The pain? It still lived and swirled, digging into those tender spots. He’d resolved not to touch alcohol when that happened. He knew now. Knew that it doesn’t matter how good the burn feels or how easily the haze makes the hurt go away, it washes away all the good too. It was hard though. Harder than he thought it’d be.

So, he leaned against the brick wall, working up the courage to walk inside. Hardest shit he’s ever had to do in his life. A guy’s pacing the front porch, a cup of something steaming in his hand. Jeremy watches him out of the corner of his eye. The guy chats it up with this gal, that guy. Normal people.

They don’t look like drunks who’ve hit the floor and were climbing back up again. Chain smokers congregated at the other end of the building, short women and tall, reed-thin guys with shaking hands, and portly men who had to have been hitting the bottle for longer than he’d been alive.

As if they all heard a bell revealed only to them, they snuffed out their cigs and ambled toward the double doors. A soft, gentle glow of light poured from the doorway like the white light of Heaven beckoning lost souls to enter. He wondered if Peter went into the light. Wondered if he should follow them all...

“There’s chairs along the back wall. You don’t have to do anything but sit. Whenever you’re ready.” The guy had a deep voice, rough from years of drinking, probably.

Jeremy jumped, his attention darting from the beckoning entryway to the man staring down at him from the church’s porch. Kind eyes, a soft smile. Hot-cup guy. Jeremy nodded, letting the man know he’d heard him. Wasn’t sure what he’d do just yet, but he’d heard. Hot-cup guy just nodded in return and ambled toward the doors. He watched until the light swallowed the man whole, enveloping him.

The door clicked shut, leaving him to the gritty, cloudy afternoon. The sky looked like rain, gray and cranky, just like him. He’d probably get poured on while he rode his bike home.

Today wasn’t going to be the day.

\* \* \* \*

It took two weeks. Two weeks of riding his rusty bike to the First Baptist Church with a nice little bender tossed in there for good measure.

Getting fired could do that to a guy who only had a tenuous hold on sobriety.

He parked his bike next to the porch, locking it to one of the railing rungs. The same cliques he’d been eyeing were in their appointed spots. Jeremy dried his sweating hands

on his ratty jeans, and then shoved them in his pockets. His heart hammered like a freight train with each step he took toward the entrance.

Hot-cup guy spotted him and tilted his head in hello. Jeremy returned the gesture. He hadn't spoken to anyone since Hot-cup guy invited him in. None of the others even acknowledged his presence. They probably had enough of their own shit to deal with. No sense in trying to convince him to join their anti-shit storm.

Climbing those steps was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. The light that seemed so bright from outside was actually rather dim once he crossed the threshold. People loitered just inside the door while others meandered down the center aisle. He followed them, shoulders slouched, hands buried deep in his pockets. Didn't want to touch. Didn't want to make it all real or drive more memories away with the feel of other people's skin.

God *still* hadn't struck him dead yet. Seemed his mother and Father Anthony had been wrong. No big surprise there.

They traveled through a narrow corridor and another set of steps leading into an open room. Chairs formed a semi-circle in the center of the room, but the promised chairs lined the back wall as well. He'd ... he'd just watch for now.

He stroked the cool steel bracelet on his wrist, spinning it round and round and round again. People filed in, some taking seats right away, others refilling their cups with coffee from the small setup off to the side before filling up the chairs in the center of the room. Jeremy stayed glued to his seat. He'd just ... he'd just watch for now.

Hot-cup guy smiled and shook hands, patting others on the back as he made his way to the center of the circle. "Evening, everyone." It was the same deep voice Jeremy remembered. "Everybody take a seat and we'll get started." The room quieted immediately, and the man took a sip of his coffee before placing the cup on a nearby chair. "I see a few new faces." Hot-cup guy glanced Jeremy's way. "I'm Adam, an alcoholic and volunteer chairperson for this meeting. Let's start with the purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous and then we can recite the Serenity prayer."

Adam reached into his back pocket, pulled out a piece of paper and cleared his throat. "'Scuse me for reading off a cue card, but I'm sure you can understand that I've got a few memory issues."

Yeah, Jeremy could relate. Even without a drink in his belly, things were fuzzy sometimes. His recall had been recalled, so to speak, from the months spent in a stupor.

"Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other so that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

The cynic in Jeremy got "we'll help you for money" out of Adam's pre-written speech, but the desperate optimist in him wanted to believe that he'd get something, mainly sobriety, out of these meetings.

"Now, if you'll all say the Serenity prayer along with me."

Everyone else joined in, soft whispers mingled with booming bass. "God, grant me

the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Well, fuck. He’d walked into a money-grubbing, drunk-filled cult. And he was just desperate enough to stick around.



## Chapter Four

Jeremy walked out with a sponsor. Hot-cup guy. Adam.

The meeting dispersed after a repeat of the Serenity prayer. Like he thought—cult.

Everyone wandered out as they'd wandered in. Groups of people broke off for quiet chatting, the flick of a lighter and flare of the flame indicating that they'd lit up again. Jeremy couldn't really understand all that. Trading one addiction for another. He ... he didn't think he'd go that route.

"Hey, Jeremy?"

*Adam.* He turned toward the voice, the dim glow of the overhead security lights casting an odd yellow tint over everything in the parking lot. "Hey, Adam." Not much else to say other than "Hey, hear you're a drunk too. Small world, eh?"

"Here's my number." Adam slipped him a card. Kelly Construction. "Cell and home numbers are on the back, but you call me at work if you need to."

So sincere, honest, open. The man didn't look like he had a dishonest bone in his freakishly large body. Adam towered over him, with wide shoulders under a near skintight shirt that showed off his body pretty well. The package didn't really matter to Jeremy. The eyes mattered. They didn't condemn or scorn, and most of all, they didn't pity. He'd had enough of that lately.

Jeremy nodded. "I—" He swallowed past the lump in his throat. He didn't know how to *do* this. "I—my number—" A forty-year-old man can't get six words out of his mouth. Pathetic.

Adam handed him another business card and a pen. "Go ahead and write your number down. We can meet up for coffee, shoot some pool, whatever."

Sincere. Been a long time since he'd felt that from another human being. "Yeah. Yeah, okay." Jeremy used the trunk of someone's car as his table and scribbled the seven numbers. He didn't have a cell. No use when he didn't leave the house but to come to the meeting.

"Thanks." Adam took the card with a smile. "I'll give you a call, yeah? You want to talk, hang out, whatever. Just buzz me, K?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat, his voice scratchy from disuse. "Yeah, I'll do that." He hesitated, not sure what came next, and then figured the night was over. "I'll talk to you soon."

Adam held his hand out and Jeremy took it in a quick shake. Skin on skin. Another new memory pushing out the old, replacing it with new. Jeremy tried not to snatch his hand away, but it was hard, and he was pretty sure Adam noticed.

He didn't turn around, didn't want to see pity on the man's face now. The lack of light made it hard to see the numbers on the combination lock. It took Jeremy three tries before he finally got the bike free. He didn't particularly like riding at night, darkness made it hard for drivers to see, he knew that all too well. But it wasn't like he had a choice.

Jeremy walked the bike over the gravel lot, choosing not to hop on till he made it to the smooth sidewalk. A truck, big and loud, rolled up next to him. "Jeremy? Want a ride? We can toss your bike in the back." Adam again.

“Uh...” *Yes, no, maybe so...* “Uh, yeah, okay.” *Just don’t touch me.*

The clunk of the transmission indicated that Adam threw the truck into park. The big man jumped down from the dually, lights reflecting off the man’s bald head. “Here, let me take that.” Adam slung the bike over the side of the truck bed with ease.

He could have done that. He could. “Thanks.” He almost smiled. Odd.

“Hop on in.” Adam waved at the other side of the big red machine.

Jeremy nodded and moved toward the back of the truck, clearing the bed and almost knocking his knee on the hitch sticking out the back. He pulled the door open and hauled his sorry ass into the cool interior. Smooth leather seats were beneath him, cool sweet air came out of the a/c vents.

Adam popped the truck into gear. “Where we headed?”

“Uh, it’s close. Left out of the lot and down four blocks. Corner of Hibiscus and Begonia.”

The man whistled. “Ooh, nice area. Big old houses. Lots of character. You in the sweet old lady or the gruff old man?”

Jeremy furrowed his brow; he didn’t know how to answer that question. “It’s the brick house on the northeast corner.”

“Gruff old man, it is.” Adam must have seen his confusion because he kept going. “These houses around here are so old they’ve got their own souls, personalities. I call your brick house the gruff old man. Nothing’s going to take him down. Been there over a hundred years and will probably be there another two hundred. He’s determined, stubborn. You’ve got a gorgeous home.”

“Oh, oh yeah. It’s ... nice.” Empty, lonely, nearly abandoned.

“It’s a beaut. I do construction during the day, but I worship those old houses. Want to own one of those one day. Living in an apartment for now until I find the perfect one, though. Not something you can rush into. Gotta make sure those personalities mesh, yeah?”

Adam seemed to want a response. “Yeah.”

The truck pulled into the driveway. No lights on in the house, driveway empty save for Adam’s big red behemoth. The man threw the truck into park and didn’t wait for Jeremy to unbuckle his seat belt or follow him. The guy just hopped out as if taking alcoholic strangers home to a pitch-black house was an everyday occurrence.

By the time Jeremy got out and rounded the truck, Adam had his bike out of the back and was walking the thing up the driveway. “Where do you keep it?”

It took him a minute to find his voice. “Uh, alongside the house.” *Stop touching my things. Get off my lawn. You’re ruining it. Ruining it all and soon Peter’ll be gone for good and I’ll really be alone, and, and, and...*

Adam toed down the kickstand and left his bike exactly where Jeremy would have placed it. Exactly. The big man turned toward him with a smile on his face, a big goofy grin that looked out of place on a guy who could rip him in two even when Jeremy had been at his best. Big fucker. “All put away. See ya around, Jeremy.”

Adam clapped him on the shoulder and strode away. All Jeremy could do was stare at his bike, stroking the painted metal where Peter had held the handlebars the day he’d given Jeremy the bike.

The truck roared to life and the high beams nearly blinded him before Adam pulled the machine back down the driveway. Within seconds, the whirlwind of new was out of

his space and Jeremy felt like he could breathe again.

His keys got caught in his pockets, but he fought them free and went in through the side door, flipping the switch while he toed off his shoes. The kitchen was a mess. Takeout containers and frozen food boxes mingled on the counter. The sink filled with dirty dishes and leftovers. He needed to get to that.

Jeremy pulled Adam's business card out of his pocket and stuck it on the fridge with a magnet. Kelly Construction.

Could it? No, couldn't be, but maybe it could. Adam did sort of resemble the guy. Big as tanks, the both of them. Bald, but Jeremy assumed it was by choice on Adam's part.

\* \* \* \*

Brown, brown everywhere and not a color in sight. The saying lost its meaning when applied to the colors in a house. The bland and boring were grating on Jeremy's sober nerves at three in the morning. The couch wasn't made for a pudgy six foot (okay, five eleven) man. It was Peter's couch.

Jeremy couldn't sleep in the master bedroom, it'd been their room. Couldn't sleep in the guestroom. He'd ... he just couldn't.

The third room was an office, Peter's office. The basement was full of junk, furniture, that they were supposed to repair and revarnish for the house. All that left Jeremy with the couch—the only place where memories didn't drag him into despair or beat him with betrayal.

But the damned thing was small. And uncomfortable. Lumpy and narrow. He didn't give a flying monkey if it blended well with the wood furniture and fit in the perfect spot to give a balanced chi. Peter's feng shui garbage. He'd feng some shui.

Jeremy flipped over and stared at the ceiling. Even that was brown, or beige ... something *other* than white. Because Peter needed peace when he came home from a day of corralling munchkins whose idols shifted between Peter and Barney pretty regularly.

Fuck it. He wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight. Funny thing about quitting the drink, he didn't sleep nearly as much as he used to. A gallon of scotch could sure as shit put a man down for the night. Or day. Or day and night. Or fuck with his head enough until he was convinced that Craig was an angel, the devil and Peter all in one.

He buried his fingers in his hair. He wasn't going there. Not tonight. It'd been what? A week since he'd had a taste and those thoughts... Those thoughts would drive him over the edge in a heartbeat.

Jeremy rolled to his feet, padded into the kitchen and tugged open the refrigerator door. Nothing but soda, water and juice in there. Actual food was only in the freezer—if someone could call Hungry Man dinners food. Right now, he did.

He pulled out a soda and sat it on the counter and then dug around in the freezer. Tonight, this morning, seemed like a Salisbury Steak with mashed potatoes and veggies kind of morning. The freezer door closed with a whoosh and the green and white card on the door caught his eye. Kelly Construction.

He stroked it with his fingertip and swallowed hard. Should he call? The urge was there, always there where thoughts of Peter were concerned, but he didn't think Adam meant that he should ring him with each and every yearning for alcohol that he felt. Did he?

Jeremy pulled the card down and held it while he popped the meal in the microwave. The card was made of quality stock, a nice simple design and good play using the color green as a tie in to the name. He could have done better—if he still had a job with the agency. If he had the drive to work, create, period. If, if, if...

If Peter hadn't died.

Jeremy crumpled into the table, face cradled in his hands, eyes burning and card pressed against his cheek. He couldn't do this anymore, again, forever.

Round and round the mulberry bush and Jeremy was going to plug the weasel. Or himself. Whichever happened to run in front of the barrel first.

## Chapter Five

Adam practically filled out one side of the booth by himself. Big man. Hard to miss. There were two coffee cups on the table, one filled and the other empty. Adam was chatting up the waitress, and she seemed to be preening under Adam's attention.

She fluffed her hair and then bent over the table, arms pressed together slightly. Yeah, she was flashing some heavy cleavage from what Jeremy could see. And Adam didn't appear to care one way or the other. Made him wonder about the man even more.

Adam spotted him and waved, so Jeremy made his way across the diner and slid into the booth. The waitress narrowed her eyes at him.

"Coffee?" Seemed like she didn't want to serve him at all. Wanted Jeremy gone so she could flirt with Adam. Too bad.

"Yeah, thanks." He held his cup up for her and the woman stomped off as soon as the last drop splashed into his cup.

Jeremy caught Adam smirking behind his own bit of coffee flavored heaven. Since he'd quit drinking, he'd really come to appreciate a good cup o' joe. "What? You want me to leave so you and Miss Big Hair can pick up where you left off?" It'd answer the question lingering in his mind at least.

Adam's eyes widened and he choked on his coffee. "Uh, no. Just no."

"Not your type?" Searching, wondering. He wasn't interested, not really, he just wanted to know how honest he could be with the man. A homophobic hetero couldn't really help Jeremy get his life back on track, no matter how nice the guy seemed to be, simply because everything derailed with his lover's death.

Adam placed his cup on the saucer and propped his elbows on the table, hands folded together. "No, she's not. And if memory serves, she's not your *type* either, brother."

Oh. Oh! Okay. Now he knew, for sure, for super sure. "Memory?"

"I've seen you at The Hole. You and Peter." His smiling eyes grew serious. "I'm really sorry, Jeremy. Dad has only good things to say about you. He's been worried since you haven't been to the bar lately. AA's *supposed* to be anonymous, but I filled him in a little bit on you. I ... I hope you don't mind." The bass voice grew whisper soft, as if he'd expected Jeremy to be angry, but he couldn't find the anger or animosity within himself.

The thing that stuck out of all that wasn't Peter or that Adam had known or even that he'd told his dad about him. Nah, weirdest shit was that Adam's *dad* was Big Mike Kelly. Same last name, and they were both big fuckers. Bar owner, meet alcoholic. "*Big Mike?* That's..."

"Fucked as hell, right?" Adam took a sip of his coffee, eyes still trained on him. "He opened The Hole as a place for me and my 'friends' to hang out without getting the crap beat out of us. Problem was, I hung out a little too much. Took advantage of the family discount, so to speak."

"Wow." Jeremy didn't know what else to say to that. Sharing wasn't big on his list of things he liked doing. Wasn't on the list at all, as a matter of fact.

"Yeah, he loves running the bar, though, you know? Old man's made a lot of friends and I couldn't ask him to sell it." Adam's attention strayed to the passersby outside the

diner. “He holds dry events for the group. At least one a week, sometimes more. Hard to find a better dad. He’s always looking for a way to be involved, make it all better.” Adam smiled at him, looking sad.

“He’s a good guy. Scary as hell when he cuts you off and kicks your ass to the curb, at least that’s some of what I remember.”

Adam chuckled. “Yeah, I remember those days. Or rather, I *don’t* remember them. Hard to tell.”

Jeremy nodded. He liked hanging out with Adam. He was a talker, usually gabbed enough for both of them. Today was different, though, it was the first time he’d ever called him. Adam usually initiated contact between them. Coffee after the meetings. The drive home from the diner. A walk around the block if he happened to be working in the area. The man dropped by a lot, got Jeremy out of the house, made him face the world—which was good and bad.

Eight months since the accident and memories were growing scarce. He could barely recall the feel of Peter’s touch, the sound of his lover’s voice.

Nights on the couch hadn’t gotten any better, but they hadn’t gotten worse either. Jeremy had even managed to go into the master bedroom the other day to fetch some clothes. He’d been wearing the few changes of clothes Craig had brought to him just after the accident when Jeremy had hardly been functioning. Now he had more than two pairs of jeans and three T-shirts.

“Doing okay, Jeremy?” No pity, just concern. He could do that.

“I—” Adam knew, so no reason to sugarcoat things or hide any longer. “It’s our anniversary. Didn’t want to be home alone. Didn’t ... didn’t want to drink.”

Adam wove his fingers together. The man had started doing that after he flinched from his touch. “That’s why I’m here. You feel the urge, you call. Plain and simple, no recriminations, just understanding.” Adam toyed with his napkin. The man really had a thing about touching, and Jeremy could appreciate that he was curbing the urge so much. “My day’s pretty open, cleared my schedule when you called. What do you want to do today? A little pool at The Hole? Dad’ll open up for us and keep us topped up with all the soda we can drink. He’ll even keep the back room empty all day for us, no problem. We could drive over to the beach, do touristy things.”

“Um...” Tears. He thought he’d been done with those a long time ago. Grown men don’t cry and all that nonsense. “Whatever. Anything really, though I think The Hole, even the back room, is too much temptation right now.”

“He locks up all the liquor each night. Nothing’ll be out in the open.”

Jeremy shook his head. “No. Not yet, maybe not ever. Too many memories.” Yeah, he had enough memories about that bar to last a lifetime. Didn’t need to relive any of them, not today. “Touristy sounds good, though. The museum? The beach? I don’t care really. Just can’t be alone.” Fucking pathetic. Tears threatened and he covered it up with a cough and took a sip of his coffee, his attention focused outside.

“Sounds awesome. Let’s swing by your place and grab your suit, and then we can cruise to my apartment. Right by the beach. I’ll make up a picnic basket and we can chill, watch the waves, make fun of the real tourists.” Adam winked and Jeremy couldn’t hold back his grin.

He could do this; make it through the day without a drink or eating a bullet. He could. He would.

\* \* \* \*

Okay, maybe not. Adam was in his driveway, duely quiet, Jeremy's bike in the bed. And he'd somehow invited the man in. Inside. In his house—scratch that—their house. The house he'd shared with Peter, and no one had been inside since Peter's death except Craig. But now Adam would and Jeremy had to somehow get into the master bedroom and snag his suit while someone was in the house. And he just didn't know if he could.

"Jeremy?" Adam was outside the truck, halfway to the side of the house with his bike, putting it in its place. Taking care of him.

"Coming." He climbed out of the truck and dug in his pocket for the house keys. Jeremy brushed past Adam and unlocked the door. Thumping, thumping, thumping, his heart pounding in his ears. He left the side door open behind him. He couldn't actually invite Adam in. Couldn't make his voice work at the moment.

"Nice house," Adam called after him, and Jeremy's response was automatic.

"It's a bland house." It was. And it wasn't a betrayal of Peter's memory to say so. He kept repeating that thought with every step toward the master bedroom. He wasn't tossing Peter away by letting Adam in the door, in the house. Nope, nope, nope. Wasn't.

*Thumpity thump thump, look at Jeremy go.* "Jeremy" didn't have the same ring to it as Frosty, but whatever. And singing a kid's song didn't change the fact that his heart was trying to beat its way out of his chest.

Jeremy's hand froze on the doorknob, his head resting against the smooth wood of the door. Pathetic. No way around it. He closed his eyes, unable to stare at the cherry stained wood grain any longer. His life seemed to be coming together so well. Not really moving on, but dealing with it rather than medicating, and still he couldn't take the four steps into the master bedroom, snag his suit and then take four steps back out. Eight steps. Less than ten seconds, yeah?

The heavy thud of Adam's gait was drawing closer and Jeremy couldn't make himself move, couldn't "man up" and push away from the door. Couldn't stop acting like a pussy.

"Jeremy, you okay, man?"

He rolled his head to the side, forehead still connected to the door, and squinted at Adam. Open eyes meant that the tears forming would come pouring out. "Oh, yeah. Just dandy." He laughed. Forced. Hollow.

Adam leaned against the wall, arms crossed, bringing more of his body into Jeremy's view. "Yeah? Good." Quiet. Only the tick-tock of the clock at the end of the hall. "You going in sometime today?"

Pushy bastard. Jeremy closed his eyes again. "Not too sure right now."

"Yeah, okay. I get it. And I don't mean to sound like a heartless bastard here, Jeremy..."

"But?" Always a but lurking out there.

"But is it the room, the day or the memories?" Quiet, serious, the man was getting ready to lay down one of those epiphanies that somehow shot to the core of the matter. They also scared the shit out of Jeremy.

"I'll take all of the above for three hundred, Alex." He didn't laugh this time. The joke wasn't even funny, but it was better than the alternative.

"It's a room, man. An empty room. And if I'm guessing right, it's been empty for ten months, yeah?"

Jeremy nodded. A big old paw of hand landed on his shoulder, stroking up and down his back. He didn't flinch. Peter's touches had long since vanished.

"It doesn't hold the memories. It can't hurt you. Everything you're feeling, dealing with, it's all trapped in your head. It's not holding on to anything. This house? It hasn't gathered all those memories. It isn't keeping them locked in this room to torture you. *You* are, Jeremy." The soft touch slid up his neck and cradled the back of his head. "It's all in here and nothing in that room can hurt you."

Tears blurred his vision, but it didn't matter anymore. This man put up with his pansy-ass shit, his mood swings and depression. His grumbling about wanting a drink. Adam dealt with his reluctance to touch and all his other little quirks. He'd seen him at his near worst and still stuck around, helping him move through life, put things back together. A few drops of tears wouldn't change that now.

Jeremy swallowed, the lump in his throat growing right along with his tears. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."



## Chapter Six

In real life, everyday life, pink slips aren't really pink. They're not discreetly slipped into an envelope along with a paycheck. Nope, the sorry bastard who gets the axe is called into the boss's office and handed a white sheet of paper detailing the severance package.

Jeremy's package left a bit to be desired considering he'd been working at Holt and Henry Advertising for over fifteen years. The last five years as the Vice President of Graphic Design. HandH had been his first job right out of design school. He'd busted ass at the Art Institute and graduated early, only to be recruited by one of the top five ad agencies in the country. His dream job. And now it was gone.

First Peter, now HandH. What next? Considering the job market, there wasn't a huge demand for Vice Presidents of anything at the moment, least of all a guy pulling down six figures.

The house, Peter's house, drained his finances even with the salary he collected. Had collected. One month, maybe two, and he'd be on the streets. Homeless.

Jeremy leaned his head against the bus's window. The scenery crawled by at an agonizing pace. Cars zoomed around the laboring vehicle and still the bus lumbered on. Tittering housewives congregated toward the front, their kids kicking seats and screaming in children's impersonation of regular speech. Whispers were hoarse screams. Their giggles echoed off the walls, filling the space with a happiness he couldn't share.

The bus crept toward Apple Blossom Road now. A few more turns and he'd be home. Home, but not. Tears burned his eyes. A regular occurrence lately. That alcoholic money-grubbing cult didn't tell you that healing and self discovery comes with a shit-load of tears. He hadn't read *that* in the pamphlet.

Jeremy also didn't know that it'd be this hard. He didn't know that the thirst, the craving, for alcohol would follow him every day. Every. Fucking. Day. No matter where he went, no matter how far he traveled, it followed. Craving rode him hard today. The harder the day, the harder it dug its heels into his sides. Today was the hardest day ever.

He knew what he should do. He *should* take the bus straight home; let it drop him off at the stop near his house. Then he could call Adam, get some support, maybe go out for coffee, a walk ... something.

But that thirst sang a different song. Sweet and high, then deep and low, it struck all the right chords inside. It whispered, "Just one, take the edge off, it'll be all right." Seductive. Persuasive.

The bus turned down Apple Blossom, and he searched the street, knowing what he'd see in just a few feet. The longing knew too.

The discreet swinging shingle, a throwback to the days of old, glinted in the light. Looked like a dive, but Jeremy knew what he would find inside. Salvation. And maybe Big Mike. If he got lucky, Jenny would be working.

Jeremy reached up and pulled the line, ringing the bell to let the driver know he wanted off. The craving had won.

The door was unlocked, as if inviting him to come in. One quick tug and he was enveloped in The Hole's dim interior. Not many people inside, a few couples here and

there. A single guy at the bar, nursing a beer. Two steps inside and he froze. Big Mike was behind the counter, wiping down the worn wood. The man must have sensed his stare because he chose that exact moment to look up. Look at him. Time slowed, seconds ticking by as if they were hours.

He should have found another bar. Mike's face grew serious, angry. Jeremy should know, he'd seen the guy angry at him often enough. Jeremy was usually drunk by then and didn't care too much. He cared now.

When Mike's expression grew resigned, mouth relaxing, eyebrows lowering to just above his eyes and drawing together above the bridge of his nose, Jeremy approached the bar.

Mike didn't say a word as he slid onto a stool, one down from the solo man also at the counter. Jeremy watched in silence while Mike grabbed a glass from beneath the bar—a lowball. Three ice cubes clinked into the glass followed by two fingers of scotch. The good stuff, top shelf. Mike had to be feeling sorry for him. "This is a mistake," Mike said as he slid the glass across the wood.

The thirst grew to an uncontrollable level, tearing and pulling at his throat with the elixir of life so close. "Mine to make." Jeremy gripped the glass and stared at its contents. Amber liquid cradled the clear bits of ice, dancing and playing in their glass cage. His gaze clashed with Mike's. "Mine to make." And he tossed back the tawny, fiery drink, hissing while the burn traveled from mouth to stomach.

Mike shook his head at him, pity splashed all over his face. Damn, but he couldn't take pity. Jeremy flicked the glass toward the man and Mike filled it without a word. This time, he left the bottle. *Thank fucking God.*

God. Yeah, that money-grubbing cult would probably have something to say about this. Something deep and profound. Something that required a donation when they were done. Jeremy threw back another. Fuck that.

Thirteen, or was it fourteen, shots later and Jeremy found himself in the bathroom, leaning against the wall, the stool guy standing in front of him. Jeremy looked around and smiled, slurred, "I never let the water run, no, never let it run." Drinking. It buried Peter and at the same time, dug him up again. And again. And again.

Fingers stroked his face. "Won't need the water, baby."

Mmm ... baby. He covered those hands with his own, following the backs of the hands to the wrist, forearms. Silk-like skin kissed his fingertips. Adam had taught him to enjoy touch again. The palms on his face moved to his shoulders, pushing, urging.

Jeremy couldn't find the strength to care enough to resist. He slumped to the ground, fingers digging into his scalp. Directing, shifting, forcing. "Wait." Fog, fog clouded his mind, revealing and then stealing again. The pop of a button and a zipper sliding down. "No, wait."

Jeremy pulled away, trapped by the wall and sinks around him. Trapped in a world of his own making, his own personal hell. He searched, hunting for help. None was to be found.

"What the fuck, man?"

The head of a prick pushed at his mouth, a blunt tip searching for entrance. *No.* No, no, no, no, *no.* "No!" He pushed against the body blocking his path, arms weak, hands fat and fumbling. Cock still nudging at him, he whimpered. "No."

The stool guy disappeared and Jeremy slumped forward, catching his weight on his

hands for a brief second before crumpling to the ground—face pressed against the grimy tile, a new perspective on the world. Through blurry eyes he watched stool guy struggling with another man. Big man. Bald head. Mike. Good guy. He shouldn't have to clean up after Jeremy, but he was glad he did.

Big fists flying, Mike growled and cursed at the guy with every punch. "Fucking." *Punch.* "Asshole." *Backhanded slap.*

Stool guy got in a few of his own, and Jeremy winced for Mike. Well, as much as he could considering most of his body had decided to take a vacation. Immediately.

"Wanted it, man. Cruised me." Stool guy threw a punch and connected with Mike's chin.

The big man retaliated with another punch and kick to the groin. Mike fought dirty, but it got the job done. Stool guy wasn't arguing for shit anymore. "Prick." Mike spat on the ground at the guy's feet and then clomped toward Jeremy.

Black combat boots entered Jeremy's line of sight. Sort of reminded him of ... what? Hands pulled at him, yanked him to stand and Jeremy fell against the big body. Without a word he was led from the bathroom. Just outside the door, they stopped and Jeremy swayed on his feet. *Fun.*

"Should have called me sooner, Dad." The chest under his cheek rumbled.

Dad?

"He's a man. Man ought to be able to make his own choices, Adam."

Oh. Oh, shit on a stick. Jeremy raised his head and stared into a pair of light brown eyes. Eyes he knew well by now. "Adam."

Adam pressed him back against the wall, big rough hands framing Jeremy's face. "You are *better* than this. Your life is worth more. And no matter how much you mean to me, *I will beat the ever loving shit out of you if you do this again.* Do you hear me?" Jeremy nodded. "Life." Adam rested his forehead against Jeremy's, their breath mingling. Adam whispered, "Life is so much better than any drink can taste. Better than any drink can make you feel. You just need to live it."

"It's gone." All gone. Like Peter's blood flowing down the sewer.

"No. Nothing's gone. You've just got to man up and deal with what's thrown at you." Mike gripped the back of his neck, fingers digging in. "Fight, damn you. Fight for what you want. 'Cause right now, the drink is kicking your ass."

\* \* \* \*

It didn't stop kicking for days. Days. Hours. Minutes. Seconds. Jeremy counted each and every one of them, thankful for the pain his body made him suffer. Being dry for four months meant that the scotch had kicked that much harder, faster, longer.

Kick. Kick. Kick, kick, kick. Ring? Bang? Jeremy opened one eye just enough to look at the digital clock by his bed. Ten. In the morning. Didn't people know he was a man of leisure now? Okay, jobless.

The banging and ringing stopped. The kicking kept on going but he'd gotten used to it by now. He rolled to his side and pulled the sheets over his head to block out the sunlight. Wasn't time to get up yet.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* Apparently, the scotch had turned to stomping. As if Jeremy wasn't suffering enough. The thumping grew louder and took control of his senses. All he could think and hear was the resounding sound of his failure. So hard. He'd worked so

hard and now it was gone.

Jeremy shifted to his stomach, clutching his pillow as if it were his lifeline. Without warning, the mattress shifted, tilted, and dumped him onto the hard wood floor. He landed with a groan, his ass taking most of the impact. His attention immediately went to the bed and the man standing on the opposite side.

“You’re not done feeling sorry for yourself yet?” Adam dropped the mattress back in place. He didn’t even strain. The man had *a lot* of muscle.

“I’m not feeling sorry for myself. Asshole.” Jeremy flipped over and pushed up to all fours, moaning with each twinge of protest from his muscles. “How the fuck did you get in?”

Adam dangled keys from his right hand. “I brought you home, *sweetheart*, remember?”

“Yeah.” He crawled onto the bed, tugging at the sheets, ready to resume position. “Y’could have left ’em, though.” Tired. Still so tired.

“Don’t get comfortable. We’re going out.” Adam tossed the keys next to him.

“The fuck we’re going out. *We’re* not going anywhere. You’re leaving and taking your cult bullshit with you.” He couldn’t do this. Just couldn’t.

“Yeah, we are.” Adam wasn’t listening. Instead he went into Jeremy’s closet and started digging around. Pulling things, unfolding them, tossing them on the ground. His things. Peter’s things.

Jeremy jumped from bed and yanked Peter’s shirt from Adam’s hand. “No!” He snatched an old pair of jeans Adam’s fingers brushed. “We’re not. Just leave me alone, Adam. I’m a lost cause.”

“No, you’re sulking. Man up. You slipped.” He shrugged. “Get over it and get on with it.”

“With what?”

“Life, dumbass. I gave you two days to lick your wounds. Now...” Adam shoved clothes and shoes into Jeremy’s arms. “Put those on and let’s go.”

With that, Adam pushed past him and left the bedroom. Jeremy glanced at the destruction Adam had caused and couldn’t find the energy to get mad about it. In all honesty, he couldn’t feel anything. Not anger, self loathing, sadness—nothing. His clothes mingled with Peter’s, and for the first time in a long time, it didn’t hurt. Much.

Jeremy backed out of the closet and closed the door. A few quick steps brought him back to the bed and he dropped the clothes. Shorts. A T-shirt. Sneakers. Oh, God.

“Adam?” He couldn’t have gone far.

“What!”

“What are we doing?” *Don’t say it...*

The bedroom door swung open, and for the first time Jeremy noticed how Adam was dressed. Shorts, T-shirt, sneakers and sunglasses. He’d also put on a baseball cap. “We’re running.” Adam looked him up and down.

Jeremy had the urge to cover up, unsure of what the man thought of him. Since Peter, he hadn’t cared much about how he looked. Now, faced with Adam, that little part of him was waking up and taking notice—wanted to look good for a good-looking man. “Um...”

Adam took a bite of the apple he was holding. “You look like death warmed over. You’ve got a nice spare tire forming around your stomach.” He stepped closer to Jeremy, invading his space. “We’re going running. You’re gonna hate it, but you’re gonna do it.”

Jeremy swallowed and nodded. Big man, in his space. “Is this how you deal with all the guys you sponsor?”

Adam looked him straight in the eyes. “I’ve never sponsored anyone before you. Didn’t want to. And I think we’re a bit beyond a sponsor/alcoholic relationship. We’re friends. You can say it. And friends kick each other’s asses when it’s needed.”

Jeremy took a step back. “And I need it?”

Adam followed him, pushing into his space, running him up against the bedside table. “Damn straight you do.”

Oh. Well, okay then. A run it was going to be.

## Chapter Seven

Jeremy had turned back three times before Adam virtually carried him up the stairs and deposited him at the door. When the big man turned away, Jeremy snatched his hand. "You can't leave me."

"You can do this, Jeremy. Hell, you *wanted* to do this, remember? I shouldn't be here. I'll wait in the truck for you, just like we talked about."

Adam tried to tug his hand away but Jeremy refused to let go. "You're my sponsor, right? Then sponsor me and stay. I bet... I bet he's got lots and lots of beer. And scotch! And I just got back on the wagon and he'll offer and I'll accept and then I'll have to start all over again with the tokens and talking and shit. I only just got my one month back." He pleaded with his eyes. A forty-year-old man scared of a little twink. *God, grow a pair already.*

Adam sighed. "Fine. You're a manipulative son-of-a-bitch, you know that?"

Yeah, he kinda sorta did, but couldn't find one iota of remorse at the moment. Jeremy dropped Adam's hand and rapped on the door, and for the first time heard the music playing inside the condo. Fifties rock blared, muffled only by the steel door and insulation. Elvis telling the listener not to be cruel ... to a heart that's true. And Jeremy prayed that the man on the other side of the door would take the song to heart.

A muffled "Coming" sounded from inside the condo moments before the door swung open, revealing the owner.

"Craig." Rich green eyes, angular face, full lips. Dirty blond hair that just brushed his shoulders. He was shirtless, and Jeremy took notice of the thin body—a little too thin in his opinion—ribs showing right along with Craig's muscles. The same, but different. So close to Peter, but not. Tears built in Jeremy's eyes. Adam's hand slid into his and he squeezed the big paw. Rough calluses scratched his fingers, reminding him that his rock was nearby.

"Jerr." Jerr, always Jerr, never Jeremy.

Craig swallowed, and Jeremy followed the movement of his Adam's apple with his eyes. Elvis warbled in the background, singing about a hound dog, about not being friends. Jeremy wanted to rush to the stereo, turn it off—destroy it. "Can I come in?" His voice cracked, his throat ached, swelled shut.

Craig's knuckles turned white where he held the door, almost as if he feared Jeremy would bum rush his way into the condo. "Why? I told you—"

"Just to talk, Craig. Five minutes," he was begging. *Little bitch.* "That's all I'm asking for. Five minutes and then I'll disappear if that's what you want." He prayed that Craig wouldn't disown him entirely.

Craig nodded, a quick, sharp jerk of his head, and took a step back to open the door. It was then that he seemed to realize Adam was with him. He stopped short, attention darting from Jeremy to Adam, to their joined hands and back again. Now it was Craig's turn to become teary-eyed.

Jeremy opened his mouth to say ... what? He had a lot to say about the things they'd left unsaid. A lot to say about a lot of shit.

Craig turned on his heel, bare feet padding with the softest hint of a sound. Craig

brought his hands up to wipe at his face and then rubbed them on his paint-covered scrubs.

Jeremy released Adam's hand and took two steps to follow Craig before turning back to Adam. "You'll be okay?" he whispered, and Adam nodded.

"Know my way around, just go." The big man nudged him down the hall toward the kitchen where Jeremy could hear Craig puttering around. Craig liked to cook when he was stressed. And happy. And everything in between. The kitchen was his haven.

By the time he got his feet, moving enough for it to be called walking, and shuffled into the kitchen, Craig had set coffee out on the table in the nook. He was loading his cup up with cream and sugar, and Jeremy almost made his usual crack about coffee flavored milk, but he bit his tongue.

Jeremy slipped into the chair and cradled the coffee cup, letting the warmth seep into his hands while he tried to figure out what to say.

"Why are you here, Jerr?"

*So much for figuring things out first.* He should have probably brought his note cards. Adam, the bastard, made him leave them at home. It'd been eleven months since they'd lost Peter, five since he'd last seen Craig. Now, sitting across from him, he didn't know how to begin.

"If you're just here to fuck with me, you can leave. Take your new toy Adam with you."

Wait. "You know Adam? He ... he didn't mention that." Jeremy raised his voice, knowing Adam couldn't help but eavesdrop. "Ever!"

"Wasn't important, Jeremy!" Adam called back. "Now get to it, Craig's living room is giving me a headache."

"Close your eyes, asshole!" Craig joined in, a smile lurking near the corners of his lips. "He's a shit, isn't he? Says that every time he's been over."

Jeremy nodded and took a sip of his coffee. Yeah, he was, but he'd saved his life in more ways than one so Jeremy put up with it. Plus, he liked the guy. He ignored the "every time he's been over" comment. Wasn't important anyway. Plus, he didn't really want to know. "I'm sorry, Craig. Sorry for all of it."

Craig pulled his legs up from the floor and tucked his feet in so he could rest his chin on his knees. He looked so vulnerable.

"I've joined this cult. Sort of an alcoholic money-grubbing cult thing. With Adam. He's my sponsor."

Something hard beamed him in the back of the head. "Not a cult, dickhead."

Jeremy hadn't even heard Adam approach. Fucker could be quiet when he wanted. He bent down and picked up the silver aluminum chip. He'd gotten it at this week's meeting. He sat it on the table between him and Craig. "I got that this week. I've been sober for a month. It was four months sober before that, but..."

"And that has what to do with me?" Craig turned his head and stared at the flowery kitchen wall.

"It means... Look, I know I fucked up after Peter's death. I'm not denying it. I hurt a lot of people, but—" Jeremy stroked the AA token with his fingertip. "I hurt you most of all, Craig. And I'm sorry. I'm getting my head on straight. Adam's pissed 'cause I'm skipping a shitload of my twelve steps by coming here, but I couldn't *not* come. You were a big part of my life. I miss you. I don't expect you to forgive and forget like it was

nothing, but I'd really like it if you'd consider letting me call every now and again."

Craig turned his head and stared at him, grass-green eyes lined in red, tears threatening to spill. "He was my other half, Jerr. I mean, I know that you loved him, that you two were committed. But he was *physically* my other half, genetically identical. We'd spent twenty-eight years together. He knew me better than anyone. And he loved you. So I loved you. Simple as that." A tear slipped down Craig's cheek and dripped onto his hands. "And ... I lost you when I lost him. I wasn't mourning the loss of one person, but two. You changed, Jerr, and I don't know how to *do* this."

"I don't either," Jeremy whispered. "But I want to figure it out. Because I loved him. So I loved you too. But right after his death, seeing you was too much and I drank and got confused and fucked up. But I still needed you. I needed you and pushed you away except when I was drinking. I'm sober now and I'm praying that I haven't pushed you away forever."

Craig reached out and fingered Jeremy's token, stroking the ridged metal before picking it up. "I'm keeping this. This and every other one you get. As long as you keep collecting them, I'll try to be there for you. It can't be what it was, but it can be something different. Something for just you and me."

"I can do that. *Want* to do that. I've missed your smiles and practical jokes. The house is bland without you running through it." Jeremy smiled, remembering all the times he'd come home to Craig and Peter arguing over whatever new decorating technique Craig had decided to explore in the house. Though honestly, coming home to the colorful mural of two men making love across the living room wall had been the best. Peter had painted over it the next day.

Craig returned his grin. "How is the old house?"

"Boring!" Adam yelled from the living room.

"You know, he really *is* a dick." Jeremy's smile turned into a big assed grin. "The house is good. Bland. I haven't changed anything. Still the same. Won't be for long, but—" He shrugged. "That's okay too."

"What, you're going to redecorate? About damned time."

Jeremy shook his head. "No, losing it. I..." It was fucking hard to admit total failure to anyone. "I got fired for the drinking, how I acted when I was drinking. Haven't found anything new. Market sucks and there's not a huge demand for Vice Presidents of Graphic Design. Drank the money, lost more in the market. Made a lot of stupid decisions." He shrugged. "So, I'm probably going to lose it one way or another. Foreclosure or a short sale from what the bank says. I'm making peace with it. Can't say it doesn't hurt to lose it, but it's just a house. Adam reminds me all the time that the memories won't disappear if the building does. They're all up here." He tapped his temple.

"But..."

Jeremy nodded. "I know. But it'll be okay. I'll be okay. Adam said he'd put me up until I found a job and a new place."

"But, I—"

"Pizza's here!" Adam bellowed from the front of the condo.

"Wha—wait. I didn't order pizza." Craig unfolded from the chair.

"Yeah, but that's Adam's drug of choice. He doesn't drink, but the guy can down a pie like nobody's business." Jeremy laughed and stood, holding out his hand for Craig's.



The smaller man bypassed his outstretched palm and walked into his arms, laying his head against Jeremy's chest. Different, but that's what made it good.

## Chapter Eight

The Hole. Didn't think he'd ever be back. Not after and after and after... It felt ... different. Not bad, not good. Different.

Dry events. Like the place was normally wet and rainy. Jeremy loitered outside the nondescript building, waiting. For what? Pool, bullshit and root beer started at seven and yet he remained outside. Waiting and wondering. Could he, should he, would he. The temptation to hunt up a drink within toyed with him.

Big Mike was a good guy. A good guy for supporting his kid. Bar owner, father and alcoholic welcomer. Didn't seem right, yet it did. The story of Jeremy's life of contradictions. Everything evolved and moved, shifted with the sands of time, right? Only Jeremy didn't have any sand, only concrete. Hard as a rock and it hurt like hell to land on. He'd been traveling for far too long, lingering near the cement of rock bottom for ages and ages.

"Hey, Jeremy!" He'd know that voice anywhere.

Jeremy turned toward the shout and waved at Adam as he approached. A grin he couldn't and didn't want to hide tugged at his lips, forming a smile that he hadn't felt in almost a year. "Hey, yourself." Almost a purr and it didn't feel like betrayal.

"Going in or are we heading across the street for coffee and the best apple pie in town?" Adam gave a goofy grin, a smile reaching his eyes, and not for the first time Jeremy wondered...

"No, I'm going..." Sometime, anytime, hopefully soon.

"Dad will be happy to see you."

"That a guilt trip, Adam?" 'Cause he might let himself fall for it, just because he wanted to spend time with Adam. It'd been happening more lately. More and more and more again.

"If it works." Adam's smile grew wider and it suddenly dawned on Jeremy that he was flirting. Flirting with Adam and it felt good, bad, right and wrong and something in between but the desire he'd been holding in check seemed to have a mind of its own. Jeremy didn't know if he wanted to tamp it down or nurture those feelings.

Betrayal. One word with so many feelings tied to it that he couldn't get any other words out. His throat closed, his heart raced. The desire didn't lessen. Jeremy grabbed Adam's hand, a friendly hold, no fingers interlaced, and tugged him toward the door of The Hole. He opened the door, half held it open for the other man and stalled two steps inside. The place looked different with the lights on, the bar shelves empty. True to Adam's word not a bottle was in sight, and the taps behind the counter had been removed and replaced with soda logos.

"See, nothing to be afraid of."

Adam. He'd forgotten about him in his surprise. He smiled at the soothing tone. "You're right. Nothing to be afraid of." He wasn't sure, knew apprehension tinged his voice, but it wasn't like he could do anything about his feelings. Feelings were feelings were feelings. Valid, regardless. Courtesy of the alcoholic, money-grubbing cult.

This time it was Adam tugging him, pulling him toward the back and the pool tables. Surprises of surprises greeted him. Craig in his painted clothes glory was playing pool

with Big Mike. The large man smiling and laughing with the cute twink. Jeremy's Peter, but not. Each passing day brought new revelations, new reasons why Craig wasn't Peter, and new reasons to love the man, but not *love* the man. That was saved for ... someone. Someone he prayed returned the favor, but Jeremy wasn't sure. Who could love a fucked-up excuse for a man like him?

"Pool?"

"Yeah." Pool.

They approached the tables, Big Mike waving and Craig bouncing and laughing around the table, waving. The small man launched himself at Jeremy and he caught the guy with ease. Big hugs. Craig had always been a hugger. Peter, not so much.

Big Mike frowned at him, frowned at the joined hands while Jeremy hugged Craig, and Mike just all around frowned. Jeremy laughed at what he thought was jealousy while he lowered Craig to the ground.

Adam pulled him toward his father and Jeremy went willingly, realizing for the first time that they were holding hands with their fingers intertwined now. Like a real couple. "How about a game, Dad?"

Big Mike nodded and began re-racking the balls. Craig danced around the table to the beat of the music, rolling balls toward Mike, a flirty wiggle to his hips.

Jeremy and Adam went to snag some sticks, and Adam whispered to him, "You okay?" Jeremy nodded. "*Really* okay?"

Jeremy paused, faced him. "Yeah, really okay."

"Okay then."

They really needed to find another word.

Jeremy, Adam, Big Mike and Craig played pool late into the night. Guys trading jokes and fun and stories. Jeremy even managed to tell a few involving Peter. Not the bad ones. Not the ones that tore at his heart and made his throat clog with tears. But stories of Peter just the same.

## Chapter Nine

It was Jeremy's last night in the house, and Craig found him in the living room, paint still wet. He'd been up all night, twirling and swirling colors. More and less and then a little more to create the perfect shade of Lonely. Heartache.

Watching paint dry was an underrated pastime. The volatile chemicals grasping at fluidity while the air snatched away each atom, cares be damned. Air ebbed and flowed, sometimes driven sometimes not, and those tiny atoms didn't stand a chance against the chaos. Paint and life, so different yet the same.

Lonely covered him from head to toe, splashes of reds and blues and white and yellows. The rainbow flag of death and life and something in between were splattered on the walls, the furniture, him. A mix of Peter and more filled the living room. Still too much Peter. Not enough more.

Jeremy stared at the opened paint cans. Maybe the answers lay within them, hidden and hiding, waiting for him to discover their truths. Today, tomorrow, the next. Lips pressed into a thin line, he reached for the can marked Happiness, hand shaking.

"Jerr?" Not Peter.

Jeremy lifted the can, cradling it to his chest, eyes burning. "Will it be blue? Or green? Or brown?"

Craig took a step toward him and Jeremy took a step back. Craig was a hugger, tactile. "What?"

"Happiness." Obvious wasn't it? It'd be blue and bright. Alive and colorful and wonderful and not at all a match for Lonely or Heartache. Not at all. Or maybe green. Not the devil-made fiery green, but green grass after a spring rain. And that color he couldn't bear to see. Not ever again, not in that way.

"It'll be brown, Jeremy."

Another voice this time and his heart didn't dare to hope or pray or want, but he couldn't help the feelings bubbling inside him. Too long and not long enough he'd waited and prayed and hoped and now... "You sure?"

Adam stepped into the living room. He'd stayed. And he'd slept. Where? "I'm sure."

"Brown like dying grass or new cut wood. Like ancient bark or burnt embers."

"Love can be brown. Any shade," Adam assured him

Jeremy hugged the can tighter. The mauve of Heartache lightened in the mixing bucket at his feet, paint drying, life passing by. "Can it, Craig?" He would know. A painter, an artist would know.

Craig nodded, feet carrying him around the room, glances touching on the splotches and splatters of Jeremy's first attempts at art, at a new life. "Of course. Brown is a lot like black. They balance. They can give life to a painting or tether it to the ground so it won't float away." Craig dragged his fingers through a drip on the north wall, adding vertical stripes to Jeremy's horizontal swipes.

That's what he needed. Balance and tethering and life. Just life.

Adam stroked his shoulder. He'd somehow made it across the room. "Let's open the can. See what Happiness looks like."

Jeremy lowered into a squat, the can resting between his spread knees. With the

flathead screwdriver, he pried the top off the can, but didn't lift the lid. He stared into Adam's eyes, not looking at the color within as he raised the covering. "It's brown."

Adam didn't look down either. "You're right. It's brown. Let's add it to Heartache and see what we get."

Jeremy shook his head and fumbled the lid back into place. "Don't need to mix any more paint to see things." He stood and held out his hand for Adam. Adam slipped his hand into Jeremy's palm and he tightened his hold on the larger man. "Is it really brown, Adam?"

Adam rolled to his feet and tugged Jeremy into his arms, lips against his temple. "For almost a year it's been brown, Jeremy. For almost a year."

"Yeah." He wrapped his arms around Adam's waist. "Craig? It's okay that it isn't blue ... or green." It's okay to love again even if it isn't you? Even if I killed Peter and now love another man?

Craig's lithe arms wrapped around him from behind, that small body so different yet so similar pressed against his back. "It's perfect."

## Chapter Ten

It took two months for Adam to finally ask. Two months of dating and taking things slow. Of loving without loving, and finally... "Tell me."

Two words, a plethora of meaning. *I love you. I killed him.*

Two answers. One to solidify the future, another to destroy. Which did he choose? One or none or both and pray. It was in the tone, though. The deep, serious rumble. Not demanding, just firm. *Tell me.*

"Driving home." He swallowed and swallowed and swallowed again. No tears or pain. Couldn't let that out. Needed to be matter of fact not fiction. Truth and consequences. "Driving home and..." And it was all his fault. "And a truck crossed into our lane. Head on..." Drunk driver. Funny how he'd become what killed his lover. Ex-lover. "I swerved." And spun and turned and fought and died. "And we hopped a ditch. The tree. Big old oak. Trunk half as wide as the car and Peter's side struck..." The unforgiving wood. Cut the car... "Cut the car in half. My side kept going and Peter..."

Round and round the mulberry bush, pop goes the weasel.

## Chapter Eleven

It was time. Beyond time. They lived together, but didn't. Dates and sneak peeks and kisses. Touches, but not. Love, but not loving. Jeremy wanted, needed, had to have. Yesterday, tomorrow, now.

Jeremy didn't wait for the invitation that had been coming daily from Adam. He crept from his bed, tired of waiting. Kisses at the door weren't enough any longer. Six months was long enough to suffer and wait and torture his body and mind. Now was the time. Dressed in boxers, he cracked the door, wincing at the creak.

"Jeremy? You okay?" Adam sat up in bed, propped by his shoulders, sheets dropped to his hips. Low. Showing the lean body Jeremy knew, but didn't.

Adopting a bravado he didn't necessarily feel, he approached the bed, steps forced, but anxious. "Fine. In a minute." Jeremy sat on the edge of the bed, hand toying with the silken sheet, fingers skimming Adam's chiseled abs, that little indentation at his hips. Hard.

"You sure, baby?" Baby. He loved that endearment. Loved it coming from his soon-to-be lover.

"More than."

"Don't wanna..."

Jeremy stroked Adam's chest. "You won't." He swallowed. "Loving you doesn't mean I didn't love him, Adam. Just means that..." *Just tell him.* "I love you." There was nothing else to say.

Jeremy leaned forward and Adam met him halfway, cupping his cheek, lips brushing, opening. Tongues stroking and discovering things that hadn't been there before. A new urgency energized him. He wanted and needed and desired and couldn't wait.

He stretched out next to the larger man, bodies aligned, hard pricks rubbing together with hints of cloth separating them. Adam fought and tugged on his boxers, and Jeremy helped to remove the annoying clothing. They wanted, and he needed, nothing between them.

Nude, Jeremy reached for Adam's dick, finding it as hard as a rock, the tip wet with pre-come. He stroked and rubbed. Adam did the same to him, the foreign fingers petting him, urging him. He arched into the touch, moaning and groaning with the squeeze on the up stroke. Pre-come was used as lube while they masturbated each other, pushing orgasms closer and closer and closer still. Truly loving.

"Gonna." 'Cause he was. Soon.

"No."

"Not much choice." He chuckled. Adam stopped. Jeremy whimpered.

"No. Want you."

He wanted too. "You know. I've never..."

Adam kissed him. Softly, sensually. "I'll take care of you."

He trusted. Trusted with his love, his life, his body. "Kay." In moments, warm fingers covered in slick stroked him, eased him, filled him and cared for him. He relaxed into the caresses both inside and out. He clenched and shuddered around the intrusion, enjoying the feelings foreign to him. Jeremy rocked and pushed against Adam, begging

for more and aching for less. "Please. More please." Jeremy needed like never before. Not with... And not since. "Please."

The blunt head of Adam's prick replaced his fingers, rubbing and stroking. The same, but not. Pushing and pulling, rocking his hips. The head of his shaft massaged Jeremy's prostate, shoving his orgasm closer with every caress. Again he felt the pleasure, the ecstasy of coming easing closer with every advance and retreat.

Tingles and prickles of love lit his nerves from head to toe. The feeling ebbing and flowing like the sea, dancing close and then spinning out of reach. They gathered at the base of his spine, traveling through and wrapping around his groin, centering on his prick. More and more Adam gave, panting and moaning, stroking and filling.

"Soon." Too soon and not soon enough. Between one breath and the next, Jeremy came, his body clenching and spasming around Adam, prick pulsing with release, breath held while he gave over to the pleasure of loving, of being loved.

Gasping, he let his feelings loose. The building and burning too much to contain. "Love you."

He'd gone from rock bottom to the highest heights.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Celia would have loved to have written her own biography, but she just didn't know what to say. In a fit of desperation, she turned to me, her most trusted confidant and friend. I realize you're asking yourself, "Who is this?" I am Cali, her cat. I also go by a few other names, but those may be too strong for your delicate ears. Suffice it to say my mommy is very creative and not just with writing.

My mommy, Celia, began writing in August of 2006. I know this because it was around that time our meals started coming later and later in the day. As months passed, she spent more and more time in front of the boring screen. Though it was fun to chase the little arrow around every once in a while. You should hear her scream! But I digress.

She's worked hard to give readers sexy, quirky heroines they can relate to. And you better damn well appreciate it. All I got was late night feedings. And I didn't even make it into one of her books by name! That damn kitten, Katie O'Meghan, did. Bitch.

Well, enjoy her writings and if you want to praise her for her work... don't. I'd like to get fed at some point, people.

Fine. If you must contact her, her website is at [www.celiakyle.com](http://www.celiakyle.com) or you can send an email to [celia.kyle @ gmail.com](mailto:celia.kyle@gmail.com). But when I go hungry, I'll blame you all!



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